



The Duke Risks it All (The Gambling Dukes #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: Peregrine, Duke of Markham, is not a man to trust.

And that's exactly what my friends have done. The other three members of the Gambling Dukes, they trusted me—and now I'm thrown out, lost, alone, and desperate.

So what do I do? Avoid the gossip sheets, hide from Society?

No. I've found a beautiful heiress, certain that I can trick her into marriage and save myself from financial ruin.

Precisely why I allowed Lady Briar Weatherford to get under my skin—and under my clothes—I couldn't say...

When a duke risks it all, only one person can win: and it's got to be me. If I risk everything and lose, I'll lose myself to Lady Briar Weatherford...

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ONE

Briar

I wasn't looking for a complete knave. But then, who was?

The ballroom was hot, and sticky, and crowded. Normally, that would be mildly acceptable—it was rare that I didn't know at least half a dozen people at Almack's, and I was usually asked to dance by at least two gentlemen.

But tonight, for some reason, it didn't feel right.

“Hullo there!” shouted a gentleman as the musicians finished off a piece with a flourish, the dancefloor rammed with a large set.

I sighed, and tried to smile at the gentleman who'd made his approach.

In a way, I couldn't blame him. I was here, wasn't I? And clearly alone—at least, my friend Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, had been pulled into a conversation with another acquaintance, so I looked alone.

“Let me retrieve you a drink!” the gentleman said pompously, with that sort of grin that showed me I should be grateful.

My smile sharpened.

Men . They were all the same. A brief smile, and they thought they were God's gift to

women.

He did not know me, of course. Anyone who did would have known it was foolish attempting to offer to gain my good favor for the night.

“No, thank you,” I smiled tightly, adjusting my tight red gown that had seemed a perfectly good idea when I’d been getting ready in my townhouse just hours ago.

The gown had been Georgiana’s idea. A bad one, as it turned out.

“Then maybe you should retrieve a drink for me, Lady Briar Weatherford,” he said with a leer. “After all, are you not the most eligible young lady in London—heiress to your uncle, the Duke of Stanlow!”

Try as I might, my smile faltered.

Yes, that was all I was good for, wasn’t I? My money. Why were all men the same? Why did none of them bother to look past myself, who I was, the name and the wealth?

The gentleman had not introduced himself and had leaned forward most suggestively. “I can show you the greatest night?—”

“I highly doubt that,” I said curtly, stepping back. “Please, leave me alone.”

He opened his mouth as he looked at me closely, then froze. “You—really are—I was just kidding, I just thought you looked like her! You’re not?—”

“Yes, I am Lady Briar Weatherford,” I said wearily.

It always happened. At least in this case it was a good thing—being recognized as

one of the greatest heiresses in Britain typically had this effect on gentlemen. It was useful when being accosted in Almack's or approached awkwardly at a private gathering.

I pushed aside the nasty thought that rose.

And it was very unhelpful when I was actually trying to make a connection with a person.

Lady Briar Weatherford, heiress to the Duke of Stanlow.

I'd seriously considered changing my name, but it was hardly the sort of thing one did—besides, the press would get hold of that, wouldn't they?

No court records were safe from them, and soon I'd be just as hounded as a Sarah, or a Rachel, or whatever name I chose.

It wouldn't change my wealth.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't?—"

"It's fine," I said, my heart warming to him. Poor man, he'd had no idea he was leering at a woman who could quite literally buy Almack's and, likely as not, everyone in it. "Have a lovely evening."

He probably wished me the same. I didn't know, he retreated so fast I didn't hear what he said.

"What did you do to him?"

I turned round and grinned at my best friend as the musicians began another piece

and couples scrambled forward to join the set.

“Oh, you know,” I said airily over the noise as I took the glass of wine from Georgiana. “Being Lady Briar Weatherford. Terrifying him out of his wits.”

“All in a day’s work for you, then,” grinned Georgiana. “You cannot be in earnest, though—he didn’t know who you were?”

My smile, again, became stilted.

She meant well. And Georgiana understood it, in a way. She was almost as wealthy as I was, though she’d actually earned her money. We’d met at one of those fancy hotels in Switzerland—she was on a gambling trip, and I had been taking the waters.

Georgiana, the late wife of the Duke of Cartice, recently married to a Mr. Fynn Monroe, was the sort of rich most people dreamed of.

Enough to live on in luxury without ever having to worry, she was had an income that she generated with an actual job.

Well, professional gambling thanks to that Gambling Dukes club of hers.

No inheritance for her.

Honestly, I hadn’t approved when she’d first told me about it. Earn her own living?
As a lady?

No, it couldn’t be borne.

But Georgiana was adamant, and she’d found some friends to assist her, and—well, it wasn’t my place to argue with her.

A good thing I hadn't, too, because she'd been a marvel. The Gambling Dukes took on the sorts of wagers most were far too afraid to touch—and they won.

Last I heard from Georgiana, she was able to draw an income suitable to her rank, and looked to purchase a competency if they were able to gain additional members. In the end, she hadn't needed her late husband's money.

Not like me. My relatives made the royals look poor.

I know, I know. Rich heiress complains about being rich, right? What a bore.

But I was tired of it. Tired of always been viewed by my bank balance, tired of nice gentlemen running toward me with hopes of townhouses and racing horses and jewels, or running off just because they saw the pound signs as a threat. Tired of never being treated like a person, just an income.

"I think it's time for me to leave," I said, handing Georgiana back my drink.

Her dark eyes widened in surprise. "What, you're not going home? It's not even ten!"

"I just...I'm not feeling well," I said with what I hoped was a cheery smile.

Not after the day I've had. I should never have allowed her to convince me to come out in the first place, but she was almost impossible to say no to.

But after being spoken down to by my accountant, laughed at by one of my bankers when I had the audacity to actually ask about my property portfolio, and told sweetly that I shouldn't 'worry my little head about it', I was done.

Done with Almack's. Done with being Lady Briar Weatherford. Done with all of it.

“He jested about your purchasing something for him, didn’t he?”

I nodded with a shrug. “That’s all gentlemen ever want.”

“You’ll find a man who actually values you for you, I promise,” Georgiana said with a beaming smile. The smile of a woman who had already found her happily ever after. “You really will.”

“You just keep believing that,” I said above the noise. “But honestly, I’m going to leave.”

“Your carriage is waiting for you? You aren’t going to walk home, are you?”

Georgiana looked worried, and I tried to reassure her. “I’ve got the carriage just round the corner, but I may well drop into a gambling den for a few minutes. I’ll be fine.”

Her glare was stern. “You won’t stay there too long, will you?”

Honestly, the hypocrisy! The woman earned a living through gambling, and I couldn’t have a light flutter?

I saluted as Georgiana rolled her eyes. “Yes ma’am!”

Her fist careered gently into my arm. “You know that I just want you to be safe.”

“I know,” I said, embracing her swiftly and making sure not to spill either of the drinks in her hands. “Now, take those fine drinks and enjoy yourself. Where is that dashing charming husband of yours?”

Georgiana lifted a teasing eyebrow. “You think he’s dashing charming?”

“Do I have eyes? Of course I do,” I shrugged, adjusting the sleeve of my gown and taking a deep breath. “At least one of us has their happily ever after.”

The London air was sticky, but thankfully not as warm as inside Almack’s. I took a deep lungful of air, desperate to find my equilibrium again.

Tomorrow, everything changes, I promised myself as I strode down the street toward Ferncombe's Gaming Hell, the one Georgiana had introduced me to months ago. Tomorrow, I would be the new Lady Briar Weatherford. Responsible, insightful, involved in her own affairs.

No longer leaving life to be lived through my ‘people’.

Ferncombe's Gaming Hell was busy, as I expected, but the barman recognized me immediately.

Of course he did.

“No tables I'm afraid, Lady Briar,” he said conversationally, as if I’d already spoken. “Perhaps you could find someone to share with?”

“I'm just here for a glass of wine,” I said, leaning on the bar and glancing about the place.

As expected, Ferncombe's Gaming Hell was filled with people who looked as though they’d stepped momentarily out of St. James’. Elegantly coiffured hair, gorgeous jewels, and a few gentlemen with more chiseled jawlines than I’d seen in Rome in a museum of classical statues.

Most people my gaze flickered over looked back, just the once. The recognition was almost immediate every time, though the reaction was different.

My cheeks heated as I took in the stares, the swift looks away, the muttering, the whispering.

And this, I reminded myself, was why I so rarely went out into Society these days. No wonder Georgiana had to convince me. It was like being in a zoo, but I was the only exhibit.

Every single person I saw was the same. The same reaction, the same?—

Perhaps not everyone.

He was tall. At least, he looked tall. He was lounging in a way only the very wealthy or the very selfish do at a bar; all over a chair at a corner table. Despite his broad frame there was strength, not heft in his build. A light dusting of dark stubble outlined his taut jaw, and his eyes?—

I looked away quickly as the barman brought over my wine, my heart racing, my cheeks surely crimson with the heat.

Which was ridiculous. It was just a gentleman, looking at me.

Just a handsome gentleman. Looking directly at me, no shame, no darting gaze when he realized who I was. No, that man had just looked at me, a teasing smile on his lips, his eyes dancing with a wicked delight.

Now that was different.

“You happy here?”

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I blinked at the barman, who had to repeat his question before I realized what he was asking. Focus, Briar! “N-No. No, I think I’ll go find a seat. Join someone’s table, like you said.”

Whatever had possessed me to say that was now propelling me forward, as though there was nothing better in the whole world than going up to a random stranger and asking to join their table.

What was wrong with me?

Even before I turned around and started walking, I knew where my feet were going to take me. That gentleman in the corner table. There was something enticing about him, something utterly different from every other gentleman who I had ever met.

He...he hadn’t known who I was.

I was standing before him far sooner than I had expected, and I hated how my voice cracked as I said, “M-May I join you?”

The gentleman’s lips tilted into a broader smile. “I won’t stop you.”

It wasn’t precisely the resounding endorsement I had expected, but it wasn’t a no.

This was the time to be bold, I told myself. How often, after all, did I have the chance to sit and chat with a gentleman who had no idea who I was?

“Are you waiting for someone?” I said, as lightly as I could manage.

Was I as transparent as I thought, cheeks burning? It wasn't so direct as to ask if he was married, was it?

The gentleman grinned. "Markham. And no, I'm not waiting for anyone else. I was waiting for you."

On the lips of almost any other gentleman, that line would have been absolutely ridiculous. I would have rolled my eyes, given a cutting remark, and strode out of there.

Yet somehow, spoken by this Markham...it was different.

Honest. As though he had somehow predicted I would be here, and all he'd done was ensure he was in the right place to meet me.

"And you are?"

A shiver rushed down my spine. Not being recognized...it was something I thought I'd have to go abroad to achieve, and even in Boulogne, the local magistrate had followed me within days.

Unknown. Anonymous. Able to do anything without this Markham knowing I was one of the richest women in Britain.

It was heady.

I sipped from my glass of wine. "My name is Briar."

"Briar? Unusual name," Markham said, his dark eyes flickering over me.

Oh, hell. I should have used a fake name.

Well, it was too late now—and besides, he clearly didn't know who I was, or he would have disappeared as quickly as all the other gentlemen.

This may just be the most interesting man I have ever met.

Markham

She was the most interesting woman I had ever met.

Well. I hadn't exactly met her. I'd spotted Lady Briar Weatherford, heiress extraordinaire, the moment she walked into this place.

You just didn't expect to see people of her caliber in a place like this. Our caliber, I supposed. Oh, I didn't have access to the fortune I was due, but then that was my own damned fault.

Steal from the Gambling Dukes club, get thrown out. It was a tale as old as time.

Except it had been something I'd built, something I'd loved—and I'd betrayed my three closest friends in the process.

"You heading out or heading home?" Lady Briar asked, gazing out at me through delicate lashes.

My stomach stirred.

Right, fine. Not my stomach. A little lower than my stomach. Still, something stirred, and I hadn't excepted it.

She was pretty. Beautiful even, if she could ever bring herself to look at me properly. How did a woman with such fine eyes and such swelling curves become so...shy?

I shrugged. “Not heading anywhere in particular. Just seeing where the night will take me.”

Lady Briar raised a dark eyebrow and I tried to focus on that, and not the way her breath hitched in her throat. Or the way that breath caused her breasts to rise, just for a moment.

Something quivered down the back of my neck. I swallowed. I was not going to let this woman see just how swiftly she could affect me.

“Seeing where the night will take you?” Lady Briar repeated. “Sounds like you don’t have anyone to see, Mr. Markham. Sir Markham? May use your first name?”

Try as I might, I couldn’t quite keep the grimace down.

Peregrine, Duke of Markham. I was notorious, I knew, and not for the reasons I had hoped this time last year.

We—my friends and I—we had formed the most exciting new club. A gambling club, only open to widows or widowers of a certain pedigree who were willing to earn their keep through bets and wagers.

Everyone bet. We almost always won. We each took an income from the pot.

But I’d wanted a little more. All I needed was a little excitement. Who could blame me? It was our club, after all. Who cared if I took a little off the top, just while I was getting on my feet?

Everyone, as it turned out.

I swallowed, then turned on the charm that I knew so well. “Just Markham, if you

don't mind. What's life without a little mystery? They call me the duke who risks it all, after all. May as well live up to that."

Lady Briar laughed, her gaze darting down to her hands grasping her glass of wine, then back up to me through long lashes. "Mystery, I see? I suppose you don't want to know my surname either, then?"

Leaning back as nonchalantly as I could manage, I took in the sight of the tight red gown, the stained red lips, the way she was evidently trying not to look directly at me.

My God. Lady Briar Weatherford.

I'd heard about her, of course. Who hadn't?

One of the richest and most untamed women in London—that was the gossip.

The newspapers said that she had a whole crowd of advisors round her because she couldn't make her decisions.

The gossip columns said that she had never considered matrimony because those same advisors never let her.

Yet here she was, alone and clearly assuming I'd know who she was.

And I did. Obviously.

But she didn't have to know that.

"Briar will do," I said with a grin. "Having a good night?"

There it was—the surprise, the dissonance in her eyes. Evidently, Lady Briar couldn't believe I had no idea who she was.

And that was just fine by me. I didn't want any notoriety, any attention turning my way. I've only just lived down the scandal when my friends threw me out of the Gambling Dukes. The last thing I need was more speculation about what I was up to.

Drinking at Ferncombe's Gaming Hell had become a habit, I suppose. Not doing anything was a habit.

But this woman? This woman was different.

“You know, you're very handsome man, aren't you?”

I blinked.

“But then you do know that, don't you?” Lady Briar said, her lips tilting into a curved smile. “Who is your family?”

Who is your family?

It was the question everyone asked in London. The swiftest way to categorize someone. Worth knowing, worth buttering up, worth leaving behind.

“I have no family,” I said, not quite telling the truth. My friends were my family. “I am in London to invest.”

It wasn't a complete lie. Kineallen—the Duke of Kineallen, my oldest friend and leader of the Gambling Dukes—had been good about that. He'd given me a payout which had far more zeroes than I deserved, and freedom to stay in my townhouse.

More than most people would have ever given.

Lilah—Delilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick—had suggested hanging, drawing, and quartering. Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, whose husband had left her penniless, had agreed with Kineallen.

Which wasn't great. Kineallen had never been the same since his late wife, Georgiana's sister, had died in childbed along with their babe.

Understandably so, he was rarely in a good mood. Me thieving from the Gambling Dukes...that hadn't helped.

"Invest?" Lady Briar repeated.

I tried not to look at her lips as she took a sip of her wine. Dear God, did the woman have any idea that the whole place was staring at her?

Or did she know, and simply not care?

"It's not as boring as it sounds," I said, a strange desire to impress rising in my chest. "It's actually?—"

"Oh, I know investors," Lady Briar said dismissively. "I suppose you're one of those people who mark up a person's worth just by looking at them."

A wicked smile crept over my face. Two could play at that game. "I sure can. Take you, for example."

Lady Briar brought a hand to her chest. I took the chance to look at it, clean fingernails and gold rings, pressed against that firm, soft skin.

Christ.

“Take me?”

“Don’t tempt me,” I growled, losing control just for a moment. Clearing my throat, I continued, “You’re wearing the most impressive silk, the gold on your fingers is real?—”

“You can tell?”

“And you didn’t pay for your wine,” I finished, tilting my head slightly. “That tells me you have a tab here—and only the very wealthy have a tab at Ferncombe’s.”

Lady Briar flashed a smile. “Or I stole it.”

“I doubt that.”

“Or I gained it through my feminine wiles,” she countered, leaning forward. A necklace swung between her breasts, tempting me to look down again.

I wasn’t going to give in. Probably. “I doubt that even more.”

Damn it was a thrill, teasing this woman. Had anyone ever spoken to the great Lady Briar Weatherford like this before? Perhaps I was the only one to treat her like anyone else. Was she getting the same thrill, the same rush that I was?

“You don’t think I could get a glass of wine just by smiling at a man?” Lady Briar said, her words oozing sensuality.

My traitorous heart skipped a beat. Well, now I could believe it. How did she do that—just turn on the charm so swiftly?

However she managed it, I couldn't allow that to distract me.

This was my chance.

For months, I'd waited to meet someone like her. Someone with more money than sense, someone who could bankroll my life in a way that I could never hope to dream. Even if they didn't intend to.

Perhaps my luck was finally turning, now such a gorgeous opportunity had opened up. Plenty of money, and a beautiful woman, too.

"I don't know how good these feminine wiles are," I said teasingly, leaning back. "Why don't you show me?"

"Show you?"

I swallowed. Lady Briar's voice had changed. There was a darkness there now. A darkness I had not expected.

Perhaps I had gambled too far. This was Lady Briar Weatherford, after all, the heiress to some duke who was constantly one of the most fabulously wealthy in London just by...existing, as far as I could see.

"You really don't know who I am, do you?" she said softly.

The place was heating up as the night progressed, more people pouring through. You could hardly hear the roll of the dice for the noise of the crowd trying to get the barman's attention, but I'd only just noticed.

Lady Briar was intoxicating. Just by shifting ever so slightly in her chair, she gave me an even greater view of herself—and damn, it was a view worth seeing.

I ensured my smile was calm. “I know you’re Briar, and that you stole a glass of wine. I’m still trying to work out how.”

Something was fizzling in the air between us now. The challenge wasn’t a great one—Lord knows, I’d used better lines in my time. Probably.

But I could tell pretending not to know who Lady Briar was had irked her—or thrilled her, I couldn’t be sure. Either way, I’d got a reaction.

It wasn’t the one I expected.

“Well in that case, let me show you how I did it,” said Lady Briar with a smile that promised hot honey and kisses against a wall.

I swallowed. I’d never been particularly good with women. No, that wasn’t true. I’d never been particularly good for women.

Good with them? Definitely. But after my arranged marriage had ended in the death of my wife mere months after our wedding, I’d never kept a mistress more than a few weeks. They got bored of being treated like something I could come back to whenever I was bored, apparently.

I’d certainly never had a woman look at me across a table like Lady Briar Weatherford was right now. Her eyes were liquid lust, her lips slightly parted, begging to be crushed under mine —and the way she’d put her elbows on the table, crushing her breasts together to give me the perfect view...

“You see, Mr. Markham, I’m in a bit of a bind,” Lady Briar said, her voice low.

I leaned forward. To hear her better, obviously. No other reason. “You are?”

She nodded, curling a lock of her hair behind her ear. My gaze flickered from the soft vulnerability of her wrist to the curve of her neck, the way her lips arched into a smile.

“You see, you’re right. I did steal that glass of wine, and the barman is going to come over here any minute and ask me for the money,” Lady Briar continued in a low, fearful tone. “And I...I don’t know what to do.”

There was a vulnerability in her voice I hadn’t expected—a pain, a panic.

Something twisted in my chest. “You don’t?”

Lady Briar shook her head slowly. “If...if only there was something who could help me out. I’d owe a pretty large favor to that person.”

My mouth was dry, and my manhood was hardening in my breeches. “You would?”

A favor from Lady Briar Weatherford. If I wasn’t in such desperate need of money, I’d know precisely how I’d want that favor to be repaid.

Lady Briar, naked, underneath me, begging for?—

“I don’t suppose you’ve got a pound note on you,” Lady Briar whispered. How had she moved so close to me? She was seating right beside me, one of her hands on my leg. My damned quivering leg. “I can make it...worth your while.”

I swallowed, fingers scrabbling at my pocket. “I think I’ve got?—”

“And that is how I used my feminine wiles,” said Lady Briar, her voice rising as she moved back to her original seat. “Or I just put it on my tab, which Michael always knows I pay.”

I blinked. The place stopped spinning.

Lady Briar was laughing. “Damn, I am good!”

I breathed a laugh. “Yes. Y-Yes, you are.”

God in his heaven, I hadn’t expected that. Lady Briar Weatherford was, by all accounts, dim. That was what everyone said.

But this woman was sharp as knives and had me as clay in her hand within sixty seconds.

And she was rising to her feet.

“You’re leaving?” I said hurriedly, getting out the booth.

Lady Briar glanced up at me through dark eyelashes. “Of course. Do you want to come with me?”

“Come with you?” I breathed. This could not be happening.

She nodded, taking me in, her gaze flickering from head to toe. “I need a...distraction. Do you think you could come back to my place and be suitably distracting, Mr. Markham?”

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TWO

Briar

“I need a...distraction. Do you think you could come back to my place and be suitably distracting, Mr. Markham?”

It was a stupid thing to say. I never did anything like this. What sort of young lady invited a gentleman back to their home to utterly lose their innocence?

It appeared that I did.

I could see the lust in his eyes. Mr. Markham desired me, wanted to bed me the moment I caught him staring at my breasts.

Well, it wasn't like I was expecting a great emotional connection. I was tired, I'd had a bad day, and there was only so much pleasure you could get by yourself. No one would ever know, there would be no scandal—so there would be no consequences.

So I was using him. Wasn't he using me for the same thing?

“Go with you? Yes,” Mr. Markham breathed.

I grinned, turning on my heels. “Come on then.”

It didn't take long for us to get back to my townhouse. When you own a block in Mayfair, you're never that far from home.

“Hell’s bells,” breathed Mr. Markham as we entered the hallway and I slipped off my shoes.

I tried to play the nonchalant card, though I wasn’t quite sure how I was managing it. I’d never brought a gentleman back here, after all.

“Make yourself at home,” I said, slipping off my rings and necklace, and pooling them together onto the console table by the front door.

Mr. Markham was staring around with wide eyes and I tried to repress a sense of smugness.

Well, if money couldn’t be enjoyed this way, how could it?

“Is that a Herbin fountain pen?”

I nodded. What an odd thing to notice. “That particular fountain pen is a limited edition. Only ten made.”

My eyes didn’t leave the tall, dark gentleman as he meandered around the hallway and glanced up the staircase.

“And what’s up there?”

“That,” I said firmly, forcing myself to walk up the stairs without glancing behind me, “is my bedchamber.”

I don’t know whether he was expecting it. Perhaps he was. All I knew was that I was tired, and being around Mr. Markham for more than five minutes had made me warm.

Warmer than any man ever had.

There was a teasing sort of rakish quality about him, but I had obviously underestimated him. As I approached my bedchamber and then turned, ready to lean up and kiss him, Mr. Markham moved swiftly—far quicker than I could.

My hands were pinned against my bedchamber door by his own, my hips pressed against his, and I gasped as Mr. Markham swept his lips down my neck to press a burning kiss just above my left nipple.

“You wanted this, did you not?” he growled, moving to burn a kiss above my other breast.

I couldn’t help it—the ache was growing now between my legs. “Y-Yes.”

“Anything else in particular you wanted?”

I whimpered. I couldn’t help myself. Most men crumbled into dust when they knew who I was—I’d never had a man speak to me like this before.

Like he was my equal.

“No full names, no expectations, no hearts getting involved—definitely not broken,” I breathed, straining against his hold, my back arching with repressed pleasure as he held me tightly. “And I don’t want to see you in the morning.”

“What, you want me to leave like some rake who just came here to pleasure you?” Mr. Markham breathed.

I would have replied—if his mouth hadn’t meandered to one of my gown straps, tugging it down from my shoulder with his teeth.

“That’s exactly what I want,” I muttered, finally breaking free of his hold, forcing

Mr. Markham against my bedchamber door, the corridor empty of all servants.

His eyes widened. “What the?—”

“The question is, what do you want?” I asked, hardly knowing where this boldness had come from.

Did every woman feel this? Had I ever let go like this, cast all cares to the wind, given up all expectation and just lived in a moment?

Mr. Markham groaned as my fingers made hasty work of his shirt and waistcoat buttons. “Damn woman, you seem to already know what you want.”

I breathed out slowly as I pulled his shirt from his body, dropping it on the floor. “You know, I think you’re right. I think I’ve found it.”

On the last word, my fingers found the top button of his breeches.

That, apparently, was too far. I cried out as Markham’s hand found not me as I craved, but the doorhandle. He fell back, I fell forward, as the door to my bedchamber opened.

The room where no man had ever been.

Oh, I’d had men court me. But I’d always welcomed them downstairs in the morning room. It was less...intimate that way. When I tired of them and they realized I wasn’t going to simply give in and hand them all my money, I could retreat here, to the one place I felt safe.

The place I’d now brought a stranger from Ferncombe’s.

“Damn, Briar,” Mr. Markham breathed.

I glanced about my bedchamber. I’d tried not to get too wild in my decorating. Everyone—at least, I thought everyone—already knew about my wealth. I didn’t need to exactly advertise it. I’d gone for chic, elegant, rather than flashy.

“It’s just—” I stopped as I realized he wasn’t looking at my bedchamber. He was looking at me.

I probably looked a state. Hair mussed, no jewelry, lips parted, and...

Oh, God. My gown had fallen so low on one side, my breast was out.

“You’re not even wearing a corset,” Mr. Markham growled, moving toward me. “Well, you don’t need this any longer.”

I gasped as his nimble hands tugged at the other strap of my gown. The silk pooled by my feet, leaving me?—

“Christ, Briar!”

“What, you thought I was wearing any underclothes?” I tried to smile as boldly as other women would in this situation. “Now get on the bed. No, wait.”

Mr. Markham has hesitated, a teasing smile on his face. “You don’t know what you want, do you, Briar?”

It was the same old thing I heard day in, day out. Everyone thought I was an idiot. Dim. Just a woman with money.

Although of course, in this one area I was entirely innocent. No man had ever seen

me like this, and I was careful not to quiver with the weight of his gaze. But I wanted this. I wanted to do something for myself, for once, without my advisors knowing.

I smiled sweetly. “Oh no, I know perfectly what I want. I just wanted to make sure you took all your clothes off first.”

Mr. Markham’s dark eyes widened, but the desire in them only increased. He almost fell in his efforts to pull off his shoes and socks.

“And the rest,” I breathed.

My voice didn’t quiver, thank God—but it was a close thing. Markham grinned just as he revealed...

It was my breath that hitched as he dropped his breeches to the floor.

Damn. Had anyone ever looked so good? How had I managed to find London’s most delicious gentleman?

“Ready for me?” he said, tilting his head with that mischievous smile.

If I could have pooled onto the floor and melted before him, I would—but I couldn’t let him see just how damned attractive he was. He knew that. He didn’t need someone like me telling him that.

“Ready,” I said, hating how stupid I sounded.

It didn’t matter. All thoughts that self-censored, worried about how I sounded, thought about how I looked: they were all blown away by a single kiss.

Oh, God, Mr. Markham knew precisely how to kiss. His lips burned into mine as

though I'd been waiting all my life for him. My fingers pressed into his shoulders, his muscles fighting back but I held on.

I could do nothing else.

His tongue parted my lips, scalding red hot lines along them until it met my own. They melded together, sparking pleasure throughout my body, tingling from my nipples down to my inner core.

Hell, I wanted him.

Before I knew what was happening, I was clinging to his neck as my left leg lifted to encircle his waist. His hands weren't idle either—his palms splayed into my buttocks, lifting me up.

The kiss he was burning into me didn't end as Mr. Markham lifted both my legs around him. His manhood was pressed hard into my inner thigh, and its wetness matched the aching wetness between my legs.

I wanted him. He wanted me.

For the first time in my life, something was going to be simple.

“You're strong,” I gasped, breaking the kiss to look into Mr. Markham's eyes.

His grin was half teasing, half threat. “You haven't seen anything yet.”

With a strength I could feel in his arms, Mr. Markham lifted me just a few inches—and I knew in that moment what he was going to do.

“What the...” I breathed as he lowered me, slowly, onto his manhood.

Oh my, he filled me so well, even I stretched to accommodate him, a slight burn the only pain I sensed before pleasure overwashed me. Mr. Markham breathed heavily into my neck as he tried to control himself, but I could sense his wild abandon.

I flexed ever so slightly and I watched the color drain from his face.

“Oh, Briar,” he moaned.

And then we’d fallen onto my bed, and I was still in him, and Mr. Markham was above me, moving deeper into me than I could ever have imagined. The ripples of ecstasy were more than I could bear, and I threw back my head as Mr. Markham’s mouth captured my nipple.

“Markham!”

“Come for me,” he moaned as he sunk himself harder into me.

I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t have stopped the peak if I had wanted to—and by God, I didn’t want to.

It crashed over me like nothing ever had. I came hard and I felt Mr. Markham pour into me, seemingly unable to help himself as my guttural cries filled the bedchamber.

I looked up, breathless, satisfied yet somehow aching for more.

Mr. Markham was grinning. “Ready for round two?”

It was the sunlight that woke me. Even this late in the summer, dawn was early enough to rouse me, even after a late night.

I opened my eyes. I was in bed. It was empty.

Just for a moment, regret washed through me. I'd never experienced a connection like that—something so instant, so powerful. The way he'd touched me, like no man ever had. It was like Mr. Markham knew just what I wanted. How I needed to be pleased.

I sighed heavily into the silence. “Well, that was nice.”

It was nice. And it was over. I hadn't even got the man's full name—and he certainly didn't know mine.

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True, it was a scandal to have lost my innocence in such a manner—but I was tired of being controlled by my advisors, of being told what to do and where to go and who to speak with.

For the first time in my whole life, I had done something for me.

The teapot was gently steaming on the table in the breakfast room as I came down, and I yawned as I waited for it to brew my first cup of the day. I had so much to do, and it wasn't like I could spend all day thinking about?—

“You're strong.”

“You haven't seen nothing yet.”

I shivered, pulling my silk shawl tighter around me.

Time to think of anything except Mr. Markham and his delicious body, I told myself firmly. Time to?—

Something muttered in the back of my mind. For a moment, I wondered what it was. There hadn't been any movement in the breakfast room and I wasn't expecting any visitors—certainly not this early in the morning.

I hesitated, my gaze flickering around the room. What was it?

It took me a moment but the instant I realized, my heart sank.

Of course. Of course I had to be taken for a ride. What an idiot I was.

I rose and stepped out into the hall, glancing at the console table by the door.

The pile of my jewelry which I had placed there?

Gone. So was my reticule which had been filled with a ten pound note, a habit I'd never managed to break.

And so was the golden fountain pen on its holder by the door, and a small jade figurine.

All gone.

All stolen.

"Markham," I breathed heavily.

Well, I'd never asked, had I? It wasn't like you normally asked for a statement of respectability from a rake you found in Ferncombe's and took back to your townhouse to bed you.

I returned to the breakfast table and slumped in a seat as my teapot continued to steam. "Well, damn."

Markham

I shouldn't have done it.

I felt the truth of it with every step, the fountain pen in my pocket along with her rings.

Lady Briar Weatherford's rings.

Damn. What was I thinking?

It had felt so obvious. I needed money, she had buckets of it. What heiress would miss a few bits of jewelry? Lady Briar Weatherford certainly wouldn't. She'd probably wake up, thank her lucky stars she'd been bedded by such an excellent lover, and?—

I couldn't even fake it to myself. I continued walking along the mostly empty London streets and hated myself.

Excellent lover . I was a damned idiot. I'm almost completely fallen apart the moment I'd tugged at that gown strap with my teeth.

I hadn't meant to lose myself like that. Try to show off by lowering her onto my throbbing manhood. Try to make her come again, and again, and succeed every time.

I'd been trying to impress a woman. When was the last time I'd tried to do that?

The streets were starting to fill. People heading out to do their jobs. People in work clothes, laborers and apprentices forced to be up early.

I probably looked as tired as them—arguably, for a different reason.

A woman approached me on the pavement, walking in the opposite direction. She was attired in that delightful sort of gown that I adored on a woman: all form fitting and highly suggestive. How anyone could concentrate passing her on the street, I did not know.

Which was precisely the point, I supposed.

She caught me gaze. She grinned.

I knew what I must look like. Clearly dressed in yesterday's clothes, I wasn't even sure whether Lady Briar had left her mark on my lips. Or my neck. Or anywhere else...

I shivered. The woman evidently thought that was a sign. She moved over to me.

“Want a good time?” she said in a low, delicious voice.

At least, I suppose it was. Despite her obvious beauty with a hint of blusher on her cheeks, I felt...

Not nothing. But definitely not what I should have felt.

Lady Briar's face below me, crying out as she came for the third time, flashed through my mind.

“Hello?”

I blinked. The woman was waving a hand before my eyes. “What?”

“I said, do you want a good time?” she said, pouting slightly. Obviously I hadn't responded in the correct way. “But I guess you don't.”

Any other day, I would have grabbed it. A woman like that, offering herself to me? Who would say no?

But it turned out that I would. After Lady Briar Weatherford, it was hard to see any other woman without thinking of her. The warmth of her skin. The silk of her gown pressed up against me—but not for long.

“Sorry,” I said awkwardly.

I’d never been one to deny myself a new mistress. Wrong footed by a woman that I’d just stolen from? Who was I kidding?

The woman shrugged. “Wife? Or a loverboy—you know, it doesn’t matter. Have fun with them.”

I bristled as she turned to go. “I haven’t got?—”

“Tell that to your face,” she said with a grin as she approached the corner. “Have fun with them.”

Before I could tell her just how wrong she was, she’d gone.

I swallowed, shifting uncomfortably as I stood there in the cold morning air. Wife? Not a chance. Lady Briar had been an opportunity, one I’d gambled on—and lost.

If I hadn’t been so stupid as to take those trinkets, I could have called on her again. Taken her out in a carriage ride. Wined and dined her, asked her for the investment, then lost myself in her embraces again.

As it was...

I was an idiot. I hadn’t been kicked out of my friends’ club for nothing. We, the Gambling Dukes, had built something from the ground up, from nothing, and they hadn’t taken too kindly to discovering I’d been helping myself from under the counter, as it were.

No, they were well within their rights to kick me out.

I was a knave through and through. It hadn't changed me.

I sighed as my footsteps took me onwards, approaching my townhouse. Something weighed heavy in my pocket.

A golden, limited edition fountain pen by Herbin.

"Damn it," I muttered under my breath.

I got a few dark looks on the street, but I brushed them off as I strode along. Guilt had eaten me up so long, I barely knew what an existence was without it. The idea that I could in some way live without it was ludicrous.

This was who I was now.

As I stepped along the London pavement, I caught a glimpse on myself in the reflection of a shop window and cringed.

I looked like every stereotype you might have for a rakehell. Mussed hair, clearly hadn't shaven in a few days, shirt rumped. I was clearly not coming from an early morning engagement. I'd just bedded the most delectable woman I'd ever met, and taken her back to?—

Fine, so she'd taken me back to her townhouse.

A lazy grin crept across my face as I started toward home. I could never have imagined that Lady Briar Weatherford of all people frequented that gaming hell—and though it had been difficult not to show any recognition, it had benefited me in the long run.

Dear God, what a woman.

Someone jabbed me in the chest. I groaned as I looked up at the face. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” came the dulcet tones of my friend Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice. “But I have to. Hence this impromptu visit.”

“Visit?”

“You weren’t at home,” she said darkly. “I knew it would only be a matter of time before you returned from whatever woman’s bed you’ve crawled from. We need to talk.”

“I thought you’d rather get it all in writing, to protect yourself,” I shot back as I tried to ignore the curious glances of passersby. “Isn’t that more your style?”

I could almost hear Georgiana roll her eyes.

That was the trouble with close friends, I had once told her. We know exactly how to annoy you.

Yes, you do, Georgiana had shot back. But only you choose to do it.

The remark had hurt at the time. Well, there were four of us in the Gambling Dukes. I couldn’t be the worst of the bunch, could I?

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” said Georgiana, Chief Legal Counsel of our club and the world’s greatest rule follower. “Because yes, I would rather have everything down in writing but not...not this conversation.”

Now that was interesting. “Why?”

“Because I'm going to say something that I shouldn't,” came Georgiana's crisp reply. “You need to get your life in order.”

I smirked as memories of Lady Briar begging for my fingers surfaced in my mind. “I'm not sure about that.”

“Your life is out of control, Markham. I've seen the loans you've taken out,” said my friend sharply. “I know you're massively overdue on your bills, and I know you've taken out a third loan. What did you think you're doing?”

My shoulders tensed. “You shouldn't have seen?—”

“You put my name down as collateral, you dolt!”

I winced. Fine, perhaps that wasn't the smartest idea in the world. Not after it was Georgiana's new husband, a Mr. Fynn Monroe, who had discovered I was the one stealing from the club. Stealing from Georgiana, Kineallen, Lilah...all three of them.

It was a miracle Fynn didn't go straight back to his boss with the story. It was an occupational hazard, your friend marrying a journalist.

“Look, I probably shouldn't have done that,” I said quickly, my pace increasing as my heartrate rose. “It's just—I had this idea, and?—”

“I am not going to bail you out, Markham,” interrupted Georgiana, her voice cold. “You lied to me. You lied to all of us. You betrayed us, cut us deeper than I think you know.”

I swallowed down the regret. I was the black sheep of the family—always had, always would be. What was the point in fighting it? “That's the past, Georgiana. It's my future I'm thinking about?—”

“Oh, I’m glad you can think of nothing but yourself,” came her snapped tones as I turned a corner away from the crowd of gawkers. “Markham, for anything you could think up, you’re going to need serious money. Where are you going to get that from?”

As I walked, I could feel the heavy jade figurine I’d stolen from Lady Briar in my pocket. That had to be worth at least thirty pounds, right?

That would be a start.

“I’ll make some friends,” I said cheerfully.

My friend’s scoffing was painfully loud. “Don’t give me that, Markham. You never made a friend you couldn’t use. What, are you going to gamble someone else’s money?”

Christ. She always knew how to see right through me. It was a wonder I’d been able to keep my stealing from her for so long.

“Look, Georgiana?—”

“No, you look,” she said firmly. “Take my name off your loan requests and either stop spending money like water, or find some damned employment, won’t you?

Perhaps marry a girl you won’t lie to within five minutes.

Just...just sort your life out, Markham. And don’t expect to see me again. We don’t want to see you.”

“You’re the one who accosted?—”

Georgiana had already turned, stepping into a carriage which had been waiting for

her. The driver hardly waited a second before she had snapped the door shut before pulling away.

I looked at the back of the carriage. In that sat one of the few people who actually knew me: knew Peregrine, Duke of Markham, and liked him.

At least, she had.

Biting my lip, I turned on my heels and kept walking. Well, I couldn't go back to my friends for help, and the little money I had had run out. I needed an investor, or to marry extremely well. And as soon as I got home, I'd start going through Society to find one.

The bulk of my stolen treasures weighed heavy in my breeches.

Well, at least I would never have to worry about her again, I thought as I turned the corner onto my street. Lady Briar Weatherford could swiftly go back to being that name I saw in the papers, usually because one of her decisions had gone terribly wrong.

And I could keep those memories to myself. Memories of her gasping for more, of her pushing me up against that door, pulling my shirt off, of?—

Damnit. My manhood was hard again, and it was damned hard to walk with a heavy manhood throbbing between my legs.

I turned the corner onto my street and thanked God I was almost home. My townhouse may not have the trappings of luxury anymore, as I sold furniture piece by piece to keep the roof over my head, but it would at least give me the privacy to sort myself out.

There was no way that I could go through my day like this without?—

I pushed open the gate leading up to my townhouse. Lady Briar Weatherford was standing on my doorstep.

I blinked. No, it was a trick of the light. It was because I was thinking of her—because I felt guilty. The woman just looked like Lady Briar.

The woman who looked identical to Lady Briar caught my gaze. A look of fury covered her face as she strode forward.

I halted, heart hammering. There was nowhere to go. She was feet from me.

Lady Briar stopped inches from me, hands on her hips. “Markham. The Duke of Markham—the disgraced duke. I should have known.”

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THREE

Briar

“Markham. The Duke of Markham—the disgraced duke. I should have known.”

I spoke as harshly as I could. I just had to hope the handsome gentleman with the lazy, lopsided grin that broadened as he saw me couldn’t hear my heart thumping so wildly in my chest, I thought it was going to push past my ribcage.

He—I couldn’t—how dare he!

Trouble was, the words echoed around my mind as I stood there, hands on my hips like an idiot, in his building’s lobby.

He stole from me. He stole from me? Who did that?

Worst of all, he was a duke—a member of Georgiana’s Gambling Dukes. How could I have been so stupid?

“Ah,” said the Duke of Markham, his smile only slightly fading. “Hello.”

“Hello?” I said, taking a few steps closer to him and immediately regretting it. “How can you just say hello to me?”

Try as I might, I couldn’t quite stop myself from shaking.

I'd never been robbed before. You'd think, someone like me, it would have happened before. A jewelry robbery sounds like the sort of thing a pathetic heiress would experience all the time.

But in the words of one of my advisors, I usually have people for that. People to guard my possessions, man the boundaries, ensure that nothing happens.

I was the idiot who actually invited the burglar in.

And given him my innocence.

And I hadn't even realized that he was my best friend's co-conspirator. That was going to be awkward. Georgiana had mentioned several of her friends but she liked to keep her adventures with the Gambling Dukes private from her friends. The Gambling Dukes was business. Friends was fun.

Not any longer.

Oh, what had I done?

But that wasn't the point right now. I couldn't get angry at myself. I had to get angry at him.

"You realized my true name, then," said the bastard.

He knew that he looked handsome smiling like that, didn't he? He was doing it on purpose to distract me. And it wasn't going to work.

Probably.

"It wasn't too hard," I said lightly.

And it wasn't. I was only furious I hadn't done so before. What woman in this day and age takes a gentleman back to their townhouse without even knowing their full name?

In a way, I had it coming.

"You don't look anything like your friend, by the way. I would never have known you were part of the same club."

That got his attention. The Duke of Markham's face immediately fell. "My friend? You know?—"

"Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, yes," I said wearily, trying to prevent my shoulders from drooping. "I was with her last night at Almack's, actually."

"And she had never mentioned me?"

It was a strange thing to focus on. I brushed it aside immediately.

This gentleman had to pay for what he'd done to me.

"A quick search in the books on the peerage and nobility—Markham is hardly that common a name," I said as airily as I could manage. "I should have known a man who would invite himself back to my townhouse?—"

"From what I remember, you were the one inviting me to your townhouse," said the Duke of Markham, his smile slipping slightly. The intensity in his eyes and his sheer presence, however, only increased the man's allure. "That's what I remembered, Lady Briar Weatherford."

I flinched.

Well, it looked like I hadn't been the only one reading up on nobility. It was ridiculous, really. It had been incredible to be anonymous with him for just one night. I shouldn't care that?—

"I knew who you were the minute you stepped into Ferncombe's," the Duke of Markham said easily, shoving a hand in a pocket. "Lady Briar Weatherford, the heiress."

I blanched, despite myself.

Oh, God. He knew me the whole time?

I hadn't thought last night could be tainted. I thought it was the perfect meeting of two people who found each other attractive, and took their pleasure.

What had I said?

"No full names, no expectations, no hearts getting involved—definitely not broken."

And here I was, standing before a man who had not only known who I was the entire time, but had stolen from me. He was a knave.

"It doesn't matter how we ended up in my bed," I said in a rush, hating how my cheeks burned at my own words. "The point is?—"

"I stole from you. Yes," he admitted, tilting his head to one side and making himself completely adorable.

Adorable? Infuriating, he was infuriating!

"Is this what happens now you've been thrown out of the Gambling Dukes' club—for

stealing?

” I pointed out, trying to make my voice as harsh as I could manage.

“There was quite the scandal, from what I remember reading. Georgiana wouldn’t talk about it with me, she was too upset.

Hundreds of pounds, when you were already drawing an income.

And you’re a duke, did you not already have a substantial income? ”

My heart was racing and for some reason I didn’t know what to do with my hands. What did people do with their hands, anyway? Just allow them to hang down by their sides, like an idiot?

“Yes, substantial,” said the Duke of Markham quietly.

My lips parted, but I halted my words as someone walked along the pavement and strode past us. I may not like the fact that I had raced over here to find him, but of the two of us, it was the Duke of Markham who had committed the bigger crime.

Only when the footsteps had faded away did I speak. “You are a duke with your own income—and you were stealing money from your friends?”

“Look, I’ll give you back your possessions, all right?”

If I wasn’t mistaken, I’d said something to truly offend the man. Strange, considering all I’d done was repeat the truth back to him.

He was a thief—and he was a duke. It didn’t make any sense. Why would a man who had a position at the very height of Society ruin everything, just for a few thousand

pounds?

“Here,” said the Duke of Markham roughly, not quite meeting my eye.

He thrust his hands out, a glint of gold between his fingers. Almost too late, I realized what he was doing.

“Oh—thank you,” I said awkwardly, holding out my own hands.

My fountain pen and the rings I’d been wearing last night cascaded into my hands. Only worth about five hundred pounds in total, but still. It was the principle.

That’s what I told myself as his fingers slipped past mine and a warm tingling heat rushed through my palm.

The principle. Yes. I was furious. I couldn’t forget that.

“You really thought I didn’t know who you were?”

All my fury melted away into awkwardness as I stood there, holding my belongings. I glanced down at my reticule and fumbled with the fastening as I poured in my belongings.

Perhaps I wouldn’t have struggled with the clasp so much if I didn’t need a few seconds looking away from the Duke of Markham’s bold expression.

How dare he look at me like that! Like I was a fool to think...well. Perhaps I was.

When I straightened up, I had an icy glare carefully prepared for him. It melted immediately in the face of a man that handsome.

Damnit.

“You said you didn’t know who I was,” I pointed out, trying not to allow my irritation to seep into my voice. “Why would I distrust you?”

“I don’t know, because I was a random gentleman you met at Ferncombe’s?”

I flinched. Well, Lady Briar Weatherford does it again. Another dim witted, idiot way to behave. No wonder my advisors constantly told me I had to leave all the decision making to them. If this was the way my decision making went...perhaps I was better off just letting them.

“I read that profile one of the newspapers wrote about you,” the Duke of Markham said with a wolfish grin. “More beauty than brains. Wasn’t that the tagline?”

I glared. “You think that offends me? I hear it all the time, Lord Markham, I know what the world thinks of me.”

“And you’re trying to convince me that description is wrong?”

“You should have told me who you were,” I said, desperate to score a point.

The Duke of Markham’s face darkened. “What, because you would never have allowed yourself to be bedded by a duke?”

“I wouldn’t have allowed myself to be bedded by you!” I shot back before I could stop myself. “Lord Markham, you’re practically a byword for untrustworthy, you must know that!”

The words echoed around the garden, my words repeating over and over again just in case there was the slightest chance that the Duke of Markham hadn’t heard me the

first time.

“Lord Markham, you’re practically a byword for untrustworthy...practically a byword for untrustworthy...byword for untrustworthy...untrustworthy...”

I swallowed. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

My coachman had known the building where the disgraced duke lived and had been able to get me there in record time.

I’d been certain, however, that the Duke of Markham had already been here.

I’d confront him, get back my belongings, and leave. All in the privacy of his home.

I hadn’t intended this.

“Well, that’s put me in my place,” the Duke of Markham said. He spoke lightly, but even he couldn’t hide the pain in his eyes. “And if that’s all, my lady?—”

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped as he moved toward me. He was now only a few feet away, and his sheer proximity was doing something strange to my lungs.

Constricting them. Making it difficult to breathe. The bastard.

“Look, I gave you back your belongings, didn’t I?” said the Duke of Markham, stepping forward again.

For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. It was wild, stupid, idiotic—he didn’t even get that close to me.

But he got close enough to breathe him in. That scent, that warmth that was pure

Markham. That closeness we had shared only hours ago relived in my senses.

And then just as his lips were approaching mine, he turned away and walked straight past me to the front door. “We’re done here.”

I blinked, half dazed by what I had thought was going to happen. Not that I wanted it to happen.

Turning on my heels, I glared at the man as he lifted a hand to open the door. “Oh, we’re not done here, Lord Markham. I’m going to make you pay.”

Markham

“Oh, we’re not done here, Lord Markham. I’m going to make you pay.”

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Dear God, did she have any idea what she was doing to me? What she was doing to any man within a five mile radius?

Lady Briar Weatherford was standing there, obviously attempting to be as bold as brass, a quiver in her voice and hesitancy in her eyes, that light blue gown completely unable to hide her curves...

And she thought she was giving me the ultimatum?

Even as the front door opened behind me, I ignored it. How could I focus on going inside when there was this delight right before me?

God, I'd never been so attracted to someone. Never seen anyone speak to me like that—at least, not to my face. I was sure there were those in London who thought I was the rogue the newspapers made me out to be. Cold blooded, greedy, I'd seen all the articles. Agreed with a few of them.

But none of them had said those words directly to me, looking me in the eye, waiting for my response.

“Lord Markham, you’re practically a byword for untrustworthy, you must know that!”

Until her. Until Lady Briar Weatherford.

“Goodness, I am?” I said as calmly as I could manage while my stomach did a flip.

There was no one else here. Paying for servants had become rather a chore, so I shifted for myself. I'm sure if something happened, the singular footman would be here in a moment, but to all intents and purposes, we were alone.

I could grab Lady Briar, pull her into the house, kiss her against the?—

“You can't think that you're just going to get away with it?” she said, lifting an eyebrow. “What you did was a violation!”

I swallowed. The memory of last night rose in my mind, unbidden, delicious, tempting more.

“Oh no, I know perfectly what I want. I just wanted to make sure you took all your clothes off first.”

“I'm not sure I'd call it that,” I said in a low voice. “From what I remember, you consented to everything we?—”

“I didn't mean—I meant the stealing, Lord Markham, you know I did!” Lady Briar said in a rush, blushing furiously.

I grinned. Damn, she looked good all riled up. It was almost tempting to do it again. On purpose, this time. “I gave you the jewelry back—not high quality, as it turned out. I probably would have posted it back to?—”

“Not high—Lord Markham, it's worth over five hundred pounds!” Lady Briar said with outrage dripping from every tone.

I shifted on my feet. If she wasn't careful, her words wouldn't be the only thing soon dripping.

Dear God, she was everything I wanted. Rich, of course, and beautiful. But so...so outraged over the smallest thing. So desperate to please, yet at the same time, desperate not to be misunderstood.

Now that, I could understand.

“The point is, you have it all back,” I said, gesturing at her reticule. “I don’t see what the problem is.”

“That is because you don’t seem to have a decent bone in your body,” Lady Briar said, taking a step toward me.

I couldn’t help it. I grinned. “You liked one of my bones just last night.”

Oh, it was crass, I know—but it was worth it to see Lady Briar flush so pink, her cheeks almost matched her crimson lips.

Perhaps she was just as pink down?—

“An apology.”

I blinked. All the delightful images my mind had been conjuring up— Lady Briar, naked under a waterfall, Lady Briar, naked in my bed, Lady Briar, naked and lying on the corner cable of Ferncombe’s...

They all disappeared. What remained was a Lady Briar glaring at me, hands back on her hips.

“I beg your pardon?”

Lady Briar frowned. “You heard me! I want an apology, Lord Markham. And I want

it now.”

I was in half a mind to close the gap between us and tell her if she asked for it nicely, I’d give her anything she wanted. Just a little tease. The stairs were only feet away. We could be upstairs in my bedchamber, repeating the pleasure that had kept us up half the night in no time.

But as I reached out for her, Lady Briar flinched.

I froze.

Flinched? Was I truly that bad? Were my financial indiscretions enough for a woman to literally flinch from me.

Damn.

“Look, I’m sorry,” I said quietly, and found to my horror I actually meant it. “I didn’t mean for—I thought...well. That you wouldn’t notice.”

Somehow, my heartfelt confession did not have the impact I thought it would.

Lady Briar’s frown deepened. “So...you’re sorry that you got caught?”

“I mean—no,” I said hastily, seeing the outrage in her face. Damn, when did this apologizing thing become so difficult? “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I took your jewelry. There. Happy?”

Try as I might, I couldn’t quite keep the petulance from my voice. Hell, when I had become such a child? Here I was, a duke, born from one of the noblest houses in all England!

But there was something about the way Briar was looking at me. As though I'd offended her. Personally.

Which I had.

God, I was such a mess. Stealing, really? It was different when it was just withdrawing a little cash from the Gambling Duke's accounts. I mean, it was so little that my friends didn't even notice it, not for months.

But taking a woman's possessions from her own home?

That was low.

The moment I allowed myself to feel the self-loathing I usually kept so closely wrapped into my chest, pain rushed through my abdomen and up my spine.

I took a step back from Lady Briar. I couldn't be near her—I didn't deserve to be.

The most intriguing woman I've ever met, and I had to go and blow it on some jewelry.

What was wrong with me?

"Well. That's more of an apology than I thought I was going to get, I admit," said Lady Briar quietly, her serious eyes flickering over me.

How did she do that? Tear down all my defenses in one swoop? I met this woman not even four and twenty hours ago, and now I was giving her the apology that really belonged to my friends.

Pushing through the pain, I forced the self-loathing, the self-hatred, all of that, back

down inside. Deep down. I didn't want to have to face that again. Not for a long time.

I smiled, and hoped to God it looked sincere. "Well, you know the way home, so?—"

"I'm not finished with you yet," said Lady Briar, moving to block my path into my own home.

My heart skipped a beat, but perhaps more importantly, heat rushed to my loins.

Did she mean—well, a repeat of last night wouldn't go amiss. I was feeling a bit tense?—

"I want payback," Lady Briar said clearly.

I snorted. "Lady Briar, I just gave you back all your jewelry! What more do you want from me?"

"A lot more," she said quietly, stepping closer as though to whisper a secret in my ear. "A great deal more."

A smile curved my lips. Now, that was more like it. I knew Lady Briar was far more interesting than half the women in this city. So, she wanted to make me pay for my crime, did she? Well, I could think of worse things than?—

Lady Briar whacked me, hard, on the arm. "Not lovemaking, you idiot!"

"What? Lovemaking? I wasn't thinking of that," I protested, rubbing the place on my arm where she'd hit me.

Damn. The woman had a strong right hook.

The fact that she was completely right was neither here nor there.

“I want you to work for me,” she said coldly.

My grin didn’t entirely disappear. “As?—”

“Not like that—honestly, is that all you have on the brain?” Lady Briar said darkly.

I swallowed. Yes, when I look at you, I wanted to say. Who wouldn’t? You’re beautiful. Despite all this cold and crusty exterior, when I had you in my arms last night, you were wild, and free, and everything you thought you couldn’t be.

Though I didn’t say any of that. I had some sense of self-preservation, after all.

“I hate to break it to you, but I could...well. I could use some of your insight,” Lady Briar said stiffly, as though it physically pained her to admit to as much. “With my work.”

I frowned. “Work?”

Lady Briar Weatherford didn’t work. She was one of the few people in the world who, as long as she continued to play her cards right, would never have to work a day in her life.

I could have been one of those people. Eventually. The Gambling Dukes would be worth tens of thousands soon, and I could have drawn my income and?—

“Yes, work,” said Lady Briar curtly. “Even a duke understands the word, I suppose?”

A flare of irritation worked its way from my stomach to my chest. “You know, just because I stole a little money doesn’t mean I don’t understand?—”

“You’ve done literally nothing since your friends cut you from the Gambling Dukes, as far as I can make out,” Lady Briar pointed out calmly. “Unless you’ve been doing something that good, above board business doesn’t know about?”

I bit my lip. How did she know this, anyway?

Then my eyes caught her gaze...which was fixed on my bitten lip.

Well, she still wanted me. That could not be more clear. But not more than, apparently, working for her. As what?

As though Lady Briar could read my mind, she said, “You’ll be one of my advisors. One of my many,” she emphasized, “advisors. For a month.”

“An advisor?” What on earth was she talking about? I couldn’t advise her. It wasn’t like I’d made good decisions.

“I need someone who will tell me how it is,” Lady Briar was saying, not just meeting my eye. “My advisors...they just tell me what I want to hear. I need someone who can be direct. Just a month, that’s all I ask.”

A month. Well, it would give me time to regroup, time to think. With the income from advising one of the richest women in London, I could?—

“For free.”

“For free?” I spluttered, startling a couple of gentlemen walking past. “You have got to be jesting.”

I’d thought the strength in my voice would have persuaded her. Being a duke usually worked its magic.

But not on her. Lady Briar looked up at me coldly, and smiled.

“Yes, for free. Because I could go to the Bow Street Runners right now and make a declaration that you have stolen from me. Who do you think they’ll believe?

A duke’s niece, or a renowned knave who has already stolen from his own friends? ”

I swallowed. Hell’s bells. I hadn’t thought of that.

“This way, you just have to assist me,” Lady Briar said lightly. “So. Do we have a deal?”

I groaned, but stuck out my hand. There was nothing for it. “Fine. I’ll be your advisor for a month.”

Lady Briar flushed at my words, but took my hand. Hers was warm, her skin soft, and it made me question everything. “We have a deal.”

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FOUR

Briar

I flicked through the report, but didn't take in a single word or figure. I couldn't.

He was late.

"And your new advisor," said Mr. Stephens delicately. "He'll be arriving...?"

I hated the way the man always asked a question like that. He didn't actually ask outright. He didn't have to. All he had to do was start a sentence, allow it to trickle on as though it were the most natural thing in the world, then look at me and expect me to finish it.

As if I knew!

"When he deems fit, apparently," I said as icily as I could manage.

A murmur rustled through my advisors. The actual words were spoken so quietly, I couldn't actually hear what they were saying.

I didn't need to. I knew precisely what my advisors were saying.

We'd met at Weatherford Place. It housed the headquarters of my trust, and I spent quite a lot of time here in meetings.

Meetings.

No one thought about meetings when they inherited a fortune, or started a business that became successful. They thought they'd be sipping brandy on their estate all year round.

Perhaps some of them were. When it came to me, however, I tried to be responsible with my wealth. Ensure it was invested in the right places. Not just to make money, but to do good.

My advisors, on the other hand...

I looked along the long table. Made of the most elegant mahogany, it currently had twenty people sitting at it. I wanted new ideas, fresh perspectives. The trouble was, they all seemed to think the same.

Play it safe. Long term, low risk. Don't do anything your father wouldn't have done...

I swallowed, and glanced down at the report I'd been handed twenty minutes ago.

I knew it almost off my heart. They'd delivered a copy to me ahead of time, as I requested, and had poured over the graphs and percentages, determined to come to this meeting with something useful to say.

And I did have useful things to say. Page 9, for example. The rates were far too conservative, and if applied correctly, investing in the new more efficient cotton mills was clearly better.

Or take page 46. Absolutely all of those companies employed children—children!—so I didn't want to invest in them, even if their returns would be

12% above the average.

And yet despite all those thoughts, here I was, sitting in the large boardroom...saying nothing.

“Lady Briar,” one of my advisors said delicately. “All we need for you to do is approve?—”

“All we need you to do is trust us,” Mr. Stephens interrupted, glaring at the man on my left. “Please don’t worry yourself with any of the details, Lady Briar. We are here to make decisions for you, worry about the consequences for you. You don’t even need to?—”

“This is my money, Mr. Stephens,” I said shortly. “And I will play a part in how it is spent.”

He muttered something careful and respectful, I was sure, but I wasn’t listening. Not to him.

No, I was focused on the door behind me. Had it opened?

Where in God’s name was Lord Markham?

I thought we had a deal—I thought we understood each other. Once we’d got past the unnecessary misunderstanding about how I could take him as a lover to pay off his debt, the idiot.

I shifted uncomfortable in my seat. Not that it hadn’t been tempting.

But I needed him the most here. I’d been most clear about the time, date, and location of the meeting. It had been only three days ago that I’d told him—I’d even had one of

my footmen send over the report ahead of time.

So where was he?

“It appears Lady Briar is too tired to make decisions today,” I heard Mr. Stephens murmur in a carrying whisper. “Poor dear. Perhaps we should just?—”

“Yes, let’s adjourn,” I said, rising to my feet.

All twenty advisors stared at me, agog with astonishment. It was probably the most direct thing I had ever said to them.

“A-Adjourn?”

I nodded, trying to fill myself with the confidence I knew I had, somewhere. Where had I found it last time?

“You’re leaving?”

“Of course. Do you want to come with me?”

My stomach lurched. Fine, perhaps that wasn’t the best example.

“Same time tomorrow, if that works for everyone,” I said sweetly.

I didn’t need to say that. I knew perfectly well that for each and every person around this table, I was their primary source of income. If I told them to come back to the board room at midnight wearing the formal wear of the Dutch in the 1700s, they’d somehow make it work.

Not that I would. But still.

I inclined my head graciously to my advisors as they rose and left, muttering between them words that I desperately wanted to hear, but couldn't. Within another minute, I was alone.

Alone.

Yes, that's about right, I thought as I stepped away from the table and across to the window.

From here you could see almost all of London, and the river. The Thames continued on, slowly but surely, as it had done for millennia.

And here I stood, alone.

No one to talk to. No one to confide in. No one to trust.

"Nice table," said a voice I knew all too well.

I couldn't help the glare as I turned on him.

The Duke of Markham.

"Where did you get it?" he said lazily, stepping out of the doorway and walking toward me, hands in pockets. "I just met a crowd of people, by the way. So boring."

My glare deepened, but still I said nothing.

How could I? The man who had just entered the room was...

Well. Delicious. He was not just late, he was disheveled, in that way a truly handsome gentleman could be.

His stubble was still there, but neatened up a little around the jaw to emphasize his cutting physique. The breeches he was wearing looked the same as before, and a blue waistcoat was pulled taut across abs that wouldn't quit and his arms?—

Arms that had held me, close, and made me feel...

I swallowed. "You're late."

"And you look good, Lady Briar," Markham said, as though that was any way to reply.

I hated him. I hated how he was late, how he clearly didn't value or respect my time.

I hated the fact he hadn't bothered to wear a cravat pin, or even a hat.

And most of all, I hated how damned attractive he was.

How I was pulled to him, my body aching to be closer to him.

How I had missed him while facing my advisors.

How could a man I just met days ago have this impact on me?

"It doesn't matter what I look like," I said, stepping away from the glass and toward him. "You're late."

"Well, I'm not exactly on time," the Duke of Markham began.

"You're not on time, so you're late," I snapped. "You just missed the entire meeting, Lord Markham, and I asked you to be here early so that I could get your thoughts on the report I sent over!"

“Haven’t read it,” he grinned.

I halted at the end of the table. Perhaps it was better I kept the heavy mahogany table between us. Right now, I could scream at the man for being so infuriating.

Hadn’t read it? Had he listened to a word I said?

I tried to take a deep breath. “And why haven’t you read it?”

“Lady Briar, I never read those kind of things—they’re the sort of thing people write to make sure no one asks them any difficult questions,” said the Duke of Markham, leaning on the table with a grin.

I did not look at his buttocks. I did not. Almost.

“If you really want your advisors to work for you, then you need to get them to tell you, in a minute or less, what you should do next,” the Duke of Markham continued with a knowing grin on his face. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you this, Lady Briar?”

I swallowed, the pain ricocheting through my shoulder blades and into my chest.

No. No, they hadn’t. Who would? I only had my advisors to tell me what to do, and they were hardly going to give me insight into how to deal with them.

This was precisely why I had wanted the Duke of Markham to work with me.

For me.

Even if he was a complete ass.

“I still don’t get why you want me here anyway,” said the Duke of Markham quietly,

his face a little more serious. “I mean, you’re an heiress, right? Your father left you a significant income, and you’re the heiress to the Duke of Stanlow, aren’t you?”

I nodded. There was no point in hiding it. The whole of Society knew the truth.

“So why not just do whatever you want? Why not...I don’t know, travel around the world?”

I snorted. “Travel the world? Really? Do you know how expensive such an endeavor would be?”

“No! And neither should you,” the Duke of Markham said, his grin returning. “You have all the money in the world. You’re literally wealthier than the royal family. What do you care about the expense?”

I swallowed, but I couldn’t keep going without explaining. Though I hated to look so weak before anyone, let alone an idiot like the Duke of Markham, he had a point.

“Because...because everyone already thinks I’m stupid,” I said quietly. “I inherited a heap of money, and I am a woman—so people assume I have nothing going on between the ears.”

“You’ve got plenty going on between the legs,” the Duke of Markham said softly.

Flushing hard, I stepped around the table. “See what I mean? You’ve known me less than a week, and already you’ve reduced me to an object. One designed to give you pleasure. But I want to be taken seriously—I want my advisors to actually listen to me. I’m not as reckless as everyone thinks I am.”

Markham

Oh, cry me a river.

What, she thought the worst thing in the world was to inherit money?

I couldn't stop myself from grinning. "I'm sorry, is this the part where I'm meant to feel sorry for you because you've never worked a day in your life?"

I didn't wait for an answer—I knew what it was going to be.

Right on cue as I walked over to what looked like a drinks cabinet at one end of the room, there were splutterings of apoplectic rag going on behind me.

Looked like I had truly offended Lady Briar. Again.

"You can't say that to me!"

"Why not?" I said, opening up the drinks cabinet and pulling out a bottle of whiskey.

"You just complained to me that no one ever listens to what you say—but I think the problem is that no one ever says anything to you that you don't want to hear."

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I pulled the cork of the whiskey out and lifted the neck to my lips. Sweet heather honey and fiery blend of peat and moss. Delicious.

“That’s my whiskey!”

“I’m an advisor of yours,” I said, leaning against the drinks cabinet and glorifying in the way Lady Briar glared at me. “This is part payment.”

“I never agreed to?—”

“Why would you put a drinks cabinet in this room if you didn’t intend your advisors to drink a little?” I pointed out, swigging at the bottle again.

But I didn’t drink any.

No, this was just to rile her. To prove a point. The last thing I needed was to lose my head here. I was already intoxicated by something far deeper in this room.

Lady Briar Weatherford herself.

She was wearing the most elegant gown I’d ever seen on a woman: sharply tailored while her curls were piled high, pinned exquisitely. The spencer jacket was cut so tight around her waist and breasts, I was astonished a single one of her advisors could even think in her presence.

Perhaps that was why they’d sent that godawful report. It was so dry, I was astonished she’d even read it.

I had. Not that she would need to know that. I had an image to protect, after all.

“Stop drinking my whiskey, and stop offending me!” Lady Briar said sharply.

I fake swigged again, just for emphasis. “No. Because you are a little heiress, and you have never worked. You think this sort of place is just handed out on silver platters?”

I swept a hand around the room.

Damn, I’d never seen anything so impressive—and that was even taking into account all the shenanigans I’d partaken in as part of The Gambling Dukes.

Some of the people Kineallen had been courting had to be just as rich as Lady Briar Weatherford—but even they hadn’t created a room so opulent as this.

The floor was parquet, the best that the world could offer. The window panes surrounding three sides were immaculate, and the furniture? I could half believe that Lady Briar had somehow managed to obtain it from the royal collection. The room was a masterpiece.

And here she was, complaining that no one took her seriously.

“Oh wait, of course you think this sort of building is handed out on a silver platter,” I said with a dry laugh. “Because for you, it was!”

There was such a look of shock on her face, I wasn’t sure what Lady Briar was going to do. It was galling, being so direct and yet getting no response in return. What was she thinking? Did she?—

“I wouldn’t have described it that way,” she said curtly. “In fact?—”

“In fact, I would say this sort of ‘work’ as you call it, is beneath me,” I said, leaving the whiskey on the bar and stepping toward her.

“Beneath you?” Lady Briar repeated.

It had been the wrong thing to say. To be sure, I had wanted to rile her up—but only because Lady Briar riled up was far more beautiful than the serene woman she was evidently trying to be.

But this wasn’t riled up. This was outrage.

“I don’t even know why you bothered to bring me here,” I said, walking past her to the other end of the table. It took a great deal of self-control not to reach out for her, but I managed it.

God, did she know how tempting she was?

“I asked you here because I thought you might actually be useful,” said Lady Briar, turning to follow me. “You never know, you might like it. It’ll be a change for you.”

I winced, but only slightly.

How did she manage it? To speak to the very innermost of my being? To point out the things I hated most about myself?

And she did it with such sweetness, too. It was galling.

“I think you just wanted me close to you,” I said with a grin as I reached the window. It was so clean, such high quality, you could almost forget it was there. Almost imagine you could fall through it at any moment. “I think you’re desperate for me, Briar, and so made up this request?—”

“You can’t speak to me like that,” Lady Briar said, close by my shoulder as I looked out of the window. “I’m a lady, and you’re a cad. And if you can’t handle that?—”

I don’t know what made me do it.

Fine, I knew. She was far too intoxicating and I had to get the woman out of my system. One way or another.

I grabbed her, but her little gasp of astonishment didn’t fool me. Lady Briar wanted me to touch her. Well, now she had her wish.

Time for mine.

“Markham!”

“You can shout all you want, but I don’t think anyone’s going to come, do you?” I murmured, pressing her against the window.

Behind her, the expanse of London cascaded around. Did she feel it too, this strange giddiness at being on top of the world? It almost looked as though she could fall at any moment.

Perhaps that was why Lady Briar’s eyes were so wide.

“I think your advisors leave you well alone, and they wouldn’t even think to come barraging back into this room after you told them to leave,” I said, my hands pinning hers to the glass.

Lady Briar shivered, and I was almost undone immediately. God, she felt incredible, pushed up against me, every part of her warm—but it wasn’t just how she felt.

No, it was the passion in her eyes that did it. How she could look at me like that, as though I was the worst person in the world...and the only one she wanted in her bed?

Did she know she was doing it? Was this all a ploy?

“I could have you on that table in minutes,” I breathed, lowering my head to hers, leaving my lips just an inch from hers, teasing, working her to distraction. “In another ninety seconds, I would have you calling my name.”

“You think for one minute I would let you do that?” Lady Briar said, her voice low.

I chuckled darkly. “You would. And you’d be glad you did.”

I shifted slightly against her and almost crushed my lips to hers, I couldn’t hold back any longer.

Lady Briar’s lips slipped into a grin. “I think you underestimate me, Lord Markham, like everyone does.”

“You—”

“I think I would be the one putting you on the table,” she said, cutting across me with a wicked glint in her eye. “You’d be the one on your back, waiting for my touch. You’d be the one calling my name.”

My breath hitched in my throat as the image burst into my mind. My manhood twitched. Damn, I would like that.

Not that I was about to admit to as much.

“But I won’t, because I don’t think you deserve it,” Lady Briar said softly.

My smile disappeared, even as my manhood hardened. “Deserve it? At least I’ve worked for something in my life, Lady Briar. At least I know what it is to put hard work and effort and ideas and creativity, blood sweat and tears into something. I’ve failed, and failed again, but then I succeeded.”

“And stole?—”

“At least I had built something worth stealing,” I breathed, my eyes darting to her lips. Oh God, how I wanted to?—

Just as I thought she was going to kiss me, break the connection, end this torture we’d given ourselves, Briar did something entirely unexpected.

She slipped from my grasp, stepping away from me with a coolness of expression that I had never thought possible after such an encounter. I could barely stand up.

“Well if that’s all, Lord Markham, I’ll see you tomorrow for a discussion about the report that you will have read by then,” Lady Briar said smoothly, as though I hadn’t just had her pinned up against a window, about to make her weep with pleasure.

“That will be all.”

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FIVE

Briar

“Blast it!” I scowled at the ledger before me, as though that would help.

A snort came from the other side of the room.

“I don’t need that sort of attitude from you or my ledger,” I said testily.

Despite telling myself again and again that I wouldn’t allow myself to get annoyed by this sorely annoying man, he’d managed it—and within ten minutes of stepping into the room.

“I can’t help laughing if you’re going to act like such a wildcat,” said the Duke of Markham, yawning on the sofa opposite me.

It hadn’t been my intention to talk about the problem aloud. The Duke of Markham was here, in my words, to work. In his head, that obviously meant look fine as hell and lounge about with a duplicate of the ledger in his lap.

Closed.

I focused on the offending line of numbers. The whole thing was a mess. Despite there not being a thing wrong with any of the calculations, it was spouting gibberish. Half of it didn’t add up properly, and what was left was nonsense.

Ugh, it was so frustrating. I didn't want to go to any of my advisors about it—they'd just tell me not to worry about it and get an accountant to do it. I was determined.

I'd fix it myself.

The Duke of Markham sighed with mock seriousness as he rose to his feet. "What's the problem then?"

I clutched the ledger closer to me protectively, on instinct, as the Duke of Markham meandered around the room. "Nothing."

"Liar."

Flushed cheeks were a habit around this man, I was discovering. But that didn't mean I was going to give up so easily. "It's just a set of calculations."

"Ouch. Looks pretty bad," said the Duke of Markham airily as he walked behind me.

I would not give him the satisfaction of turning round. That's what he wanted. Well, I was going to stay calm and?—

"There it is."

I blinked. Somehow the Duke of Markham had lowered down onto his haunches behind me, and was peering over my shoulder.

At my breasts.

Well, no surprises there. What was surprising was that he seemed to be looking beyond my breasts at the ledger before me.

“Where what is?” I said testily. Ledgers did that to you.

The Duke of Markham jabbed a finger at the paper. “There. The miscalculation—you’ve derived a percentage point over a two year annum?—”

“Which is precisely what I meant to do!” I said hotly.

Who did this man think he was? I hadn’t asked him to look at the ledger. He hadn’t even given me the courtesy of reading the damned report I’d?—

“And in that damned report of yours,” the Duke of Markham said, once again giving the most disconcerting impression of being able to read my mind, “you said you’d be selling in francs. Not pounds.”

I blinked. My stomach lurched uncomfortably as I stared at the ledger.

Damn, he was right. It had been staring me right in the face, the problem I hadn’t been able to unpick for days. A simple currency mistake, and the whole thing could be solved.

Heart in my mouth, I opened up my notebook and made a few calculations based on the most recent exchange rate that my man of business had informed me of. My pen—my Herbin fountain pen—hesitated for a moment. But everything had adjusted. All the columns made sense now.

Damn.

I stared up at the man who was far too close for me to concentrate. I cleared my throat. As though that would help.

“How on earth did you do that?” I said quietly.

I'd expected the Duke of Markham to make an off-hand remark. Something cutting about my inability to see something obvious, perhaps, or laugh about how he was one of the greatest untapped minds in London.

Something that would align with the Duke of Markham I was pretty certain I knew.

Instead, the tall man shifted back onto the sofa opposite me. Alost as though he was...uncomfortable?

The Duke of Markham?

"I just did," he said quietly.

But I shook my head. "I'm not going to let you off that easily. You just spotted something that not a single one of my advisors would manage to—and with just a cursory glance over my shoulder."

"It wasn't what I'd started looking at."

Though I knew my cheeks would redden, I did not drop my gaze from his. "You can stare at my breasts all you want. You spotted the mistake."

The Duke of Markham shrugged, his muscles knotting then loosening underneath the shirt as he stepped out from behind me, and to the sofa opposite. "I saw an error, big deal."

"Lord Markham," I said quietly. "What—may I call you by your first name?"

His eyes glittered. "I rather wish you would."

Bother. Now I hardly knew what to do. "What aren't you telling me?"

He caught my gaze, all dark languid eyes and teasing smile. And as I held it, longer and longer, the smile disappeared but the intensity of his gaze remained.

There was something about this man. Something deeper than I had seen, something perhaps the Duke of Markham rarely allowed anyone to see. What could it be? What could be so shameful, or so strange, that no one could know?

“You’re not the—doesn’t matter,” he said quietly.

I leaned forward, hardly caring that his eyes flickered—as expected—to my breasts for just a moment before returning to my face. “What were you going to say?”

The Duke of Markham looked up at the ceiling while blowing out a long breath. “Lady Briar, just leave it, won’t you?”

Leave it? Like hell. There was a deeper layer to Peregrine, the Duke of Markham than I had thought, and I wasn’t going to stop until I’d worked it out. Worked him out.

“What was it you called yourself when we first met? A rogue?” I grinned. “Perhaps you were right. Perhaps?—”

“You’re not the only one who’s constantly called foolish,” the Duke of Markham said in a rush.

I blinked. That was definitely not what I thought he was going to say. “I beg your pardon?”

He sighed, obviously regretting letting just those few words slip out.

“What you said the other day—that people just think you’re stupid.

Well you're not alone, you know? My friend Kineallen, he was the leader of our little club—the Gambling Dukes.

I'm the youngest of the four of us. The youngest. My friend Georgiana, even Lilah, the Dowager Duchess of Kineallen—all my friends.

They treat me like I'm a complete idiot.”

The Duke of Markham, an idiot? I couldn't think of anything less true. The man had worked me out in a heartbeat and played me like a fiddle.

A knowing smile slipped over his lips as he leaned an arm over the back of the sofa. “You don't believe me.”

“You just spotted a problem over my shoulder in a report you haven't even read yet,” I pointed out. “You're a certified genius.”

“And what did I use those brains for, Lady Briar?” the Duke of Markham almost spat the words, but the hatred wasn't directed at me.

If I were to guess, I'd say it was all self-inflicted.

“I stole from my family. The family I had made—indeed, Lilah was...is my sister-in-law. My late wife was her sister.”

I swallowed. Late wife. I had not known he was married—but of course he had been, one only had to look at the man to know that he had been wed. The way he had touched me...

So he had loved and lost—or at the very least, lost.

I'd thrown those words at him last week before his townhouse, calling him a thief, expecting him to put up a fight, laugh it off. At the time, he had.

Turned out, those words had gone deeper than I'd thought.

"I used my genius, as you call it, to make sure my friends had no idea I was raking off the top," said the Duke of Markham bitterly. "How's that for genius?"

Though I wanted to speak, I wasn't entirely sure what to say. How did you go about comforting someone who had made one of the worst decisions of his life—and got caught?

"You could have used your brains for anything," I said, the words slipping from my mouth almost without conscious thought. "So why did you do it?"

His dark eyes bored into me, and I knew there was an answer deep beneath them. It just wasn't one the Duke of Markham was willing to share with me, and I had to respect that, even if it was irritating.

This was a man, it appeared, who didn't share much. He hadn't mentioned a mistress, and I knew there was no longer a wife. Try as you might, you just can't keep that sort of thing out of Society. A quick question to Georgiana had confirmed the truth.

So what was his approach to life? Meaninglessly bedding women all the time?

My heart contracted painfully. Was I just one of many? Had he already taken a mistress since we?—

"I...I had my reasons," the Duke of Markham said evasively, dropping his gaze to his hands. "Trust me, Lady Briar, you don't want to know."

I'd leaned forward before I'd even thought about it. "You presume a lot about me, you know."

He snorted. "I've been right every time."

True. Not that I was about to admit to as much. "Look?—"

"I don't have to tell you anything," said the Duke of Markham with a breezy air as he rose to his feet. "I'm not an employee, Lady Briar, I'm here because you're forcing me to."

I flinched. That was harsh, even for him.

"I mean—I didn't mean, oh hell, you know what I mean," he said wearily, tugging a hand through his hair. "I just meant I didn't come here for a lecture. If I wanted that, I'd go to one of my friends."

"And I," I said softly, "am not one of your friends."

I shivered as the Duke of Markham looked at me. Oh, no. Friends did not look at other friends like that. Like he wanted to unwrap me like a present, then touch?—

"Definitely not," the Duke of Markham said darkly, before sighing and dropping back onto the leather sofa. "Fine. Throw me that ledger."

My fingers tightened automatically around the ledger. "Why? What are you?—"

"I'm going to do something I haven't done in a long time," he said, holding out a hand and not meeting my eye.

My grip didn't loosen. "And that is?"

The Duke of Markham sighed heavily. “Work.”

Markham

I’d surprised her.

That was rare. Not surprising Lady Briar—she clearly had such a bad image of me, it wouldn’t take much to redeem me even a little in her eyes.

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Not that I wanted to be redeemed. Obviously.

No, it was more than that. Lady Briar obviously thought there was something deeper in what I'd done to my friends. To the money I stole. The lies I'd told.

How could I tell her that it was just...me? Getting bored, wondering whether I could do something, and seeing if I could. It had become hard to stop once I'd realized how little attention my friends were paying me.

It got out of hand, to be sure. But I wasn't a bad man. Even if the world thought I was.

She was watching me. I didn't need to look up to feel Lady Briar's gaze on me. The back of my neck was prickling with the intensity of her gaze.

Here we were, in another one of her drawing rooms. It was hard to believe this whole side of the street in Mayfair belonged to her. Didn't she see that? Didn't she realize she could never look at a ledger again for the rest of her life, and she'd still be richer tomorrow than she was today?

I glanced up. Lady Briar was studiously looking at a book.

Oh. Well, fine. She wasn't looking at me. Good.

I looked back at the ledger, and spotted another two mistakes. Smaller this time, so small they wouldn't immediately register as errors. But these advisors of hers would have had a field day.

“When did you learn to use ledgers like this?” I muttered.

I could almost hear the heat pouring off her.

“I didn’t—I was never taught how to?”

“Yes, I thought so,” I said darkly, picking up a pencil to make the lines more coherent. “I’m just going to fiddle with it, you understand?”

Movement. Lady Briar had risen from her sofa and was somehow now on mine. Next to me.

She wasn’t touching me, yet I could still feel her warmth. It exuded from her as her perfume did, subtle yet entirely impossible to ignore.

I swallowed. I wasn’t here for a lay—I was making up for a mistake. Try as I might, I still couldn’t convince myself that I didn’t care that I’d hurt her.

I’d violated her possessions, and now she was making me pay...through ledgers.

What kind of sadist was Lady Briar Weatherford?

“You’re clever,” she said quietly.

I laughed darkly, focusing hard on not glancing over at her, despite the temptation.

“That’s what no one tells me.”

“And yet you still stole.”

My breath hitched in my throat. I hadn’t been exaggerating; my friends were excellent at lectures, and I’d received more than my fair share once the truth had

come out. One of them over an arbitration meeting, our lawyers sitting awkwardly on either side of the table.

I never wanted to go through anything like that again.

“I told you, you don’t want to know,” I said, as impressively as I could.

Perhaps she would fall for it. Perhaps Lady Briar would believe there was some secret, important reason I couldn’t, wouldn’t tell her the truth.

Not just that I was pathetic. That I craved attention, and the only way I knew how to do that in a club of people who always did the right thing, always made the correct decision, was make the wrong one.

“There,” I said shortly, handing her back the ledger and trying not to think of the way my fingers brushed her skirt. “Sorted.”

The trouble was, now I was turned toward her, I couldn’t help it. I watched as Lady Briar’s eyes flickered across the changes I’d made to her ledger.

Her mouth fell open. “But...but this solves all of it. Even the questions I hadn’t even thought to ask yet.”

Something strange bubbled in my stomach. At first I thought it was an unpleasant feeling, but then I realized it was something much worse.

Pride.

In myself? When had I last felt that?

“It’s just a ledger,” I said awkwardly.

Putting my hands behind my head had felt like a really clever idea at first, but now I just felt like an idiot.

How were you supposed to sit near a woman like this?

One who seemed to draw from me everything I didn't know about myself.

Who wandered about the world expecting it to be easy, because it always had—yet searched for a challenge?

I almost yelped as Lady Briar leaned into me. Her scent filled my nostrils, my mind, making it impossible to do or say anything. God, how did she?—

“Are you looking?” Lady Briar said, pointing to the ledger. “See here, I can't quite work out?—”

“Don't you have people for this?” I said, leaning back against all my instincts.

After all, I wasn't a total rakehell. It wasn't my style to press kisses onto a woman's lips unless it was abundantly clear she would welcome them. And Briar had made it perfectly clear, when I'd pressed her up against that window in that room, that she wanted it. Wanted me.

But not enough to do something about it. And that was enough.

Lady Briar was glaring. “Haven't you been listening to a single thing I've said? I told you, everyone assumes I can't do this?—”

“Perhaps rightly, looking at your ledgers,” I grinned.

There must be some of the old Markham charm still left in me, because Lady Briar

flushed, grinning through her eyelashes.

“Fine, I'm not completely on top of it all yet,” she admitted, her grin turning wry. “But it's just...I never attended university, did I? I am a woman, it would be considered scandalous. I never even went to school...or had a governess.”

My eyes widened. “You didn't?”

Damn. I had just about the best education that could be found, and even then I'd spent nearly a decade shaming my name and title. Lady Briar may think I'm a genius, but it was only after making all my mistakes that I could see hers.

And she didn't even have a governess?

“How did you start this ledger, if?—”

“Oh, I poured through my father's ledgers after he died,” Lady Briar said with a shrug, as though it were totally normal for heiresses with no problems bigger than which country estate to purchase next to read ledgers. “It's just—you're looking at me.”

I swallowed. Had she seen the desire in my eyes? “Of course I'm looking at you, we're talking.”

Lady Briar shook her head slowly, her curls shaking. “No, I meant...you know. Looking at me. You know.”

I did know. And I was absolutely not going to let her know it.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I said aloud.

The trouble was, my traitorous body wasn't in agreement. Despite all my best intentions—perhaps because of them—the arm I'd left languidly on the back of the sofa dipped, ever so slightly.

My fingertips brushed along her shoulder and sparking heat, sparking need rushed through me. Surely she felt it, surely she?—

“Cut it out, Markham,” said Lady Briar, leaning away from my hand with a scowl. “You know exactly what I meant. Can't you just focus on what you're actually here for, for more than a minute?”

Probably. If she hadn't been in the wrong, it would be easy.

“I told you,” I said automatically. “I'm the duke who risks it all?—”

“I don't know who told you that, but you should sue,” said Lady Briar with a wry smile. “They got you all wrong and they managed to convince you of it, too. You can't use it as an excuse any longer. Not with me.”

I stared.

No one had ever said anything like that to me before. It was always harsh words or laughter, exasperated eye rolls or frustrated groans.

And that was just my friends.

Kineallen, Georgiana, and Lilah. They'd always been there for me. The fool of the club, the one who was expected to do nothing and so...did nothing.

Besides, it wasn't an excuse. Not really. I was the duke who risked it all: never making the right decisions, always upsetting people. Even when I didn't mean to.

There was a sarcastic streak in my soul, that's what my friend Georgiana always said.

It was true. But there was a harshness in me, I knew. A darkness. One I pushed to the sides as much as possible, but crept out when I wasn't looking.

Lady Briar was still staring at me, though, so I had to say something. If only my tongue could behave for more than five seconds.

"I...I don't know," I said, trying to smile. "Honestly, it's just a ledger."

"You don't value yourself, or your skills," Lady Briar said vaguely. Her attention had drifted back to the page, and I still wasn't sure whether I minded. "But then you don't seem to value much. Privacy. People's possessions."

I snorted.

"Your friends," she said pointedly, glancing over at me.

Now that was very close to a line that should never be crossed. "I won't hear a word said against my friends."

"I wasn't going to give you one," Lady Briar said airily, crossing out something on the page then snapping the ledger shut. "You're the one who has disrespected them, not me."

I opened my mouth in outrage, but my mind managed to stop my tongue before I really embarrassed myself.

Well. She had a point.

"Now, I need you to attend a dinner tomorrow."

Lady Briar had risen, her gown gathered around her hips. She shook it out, and I tried not to look at how the hem waved in the air. Just aching to be lifted?—

Then my gaze focused and it snapped up to Lady Briar, who was smiling.

“A dinner?”

“A very important one,” she said lightly, slipping the ledger onto a table behind the sofas. “Don’t be late, and please for the love of God, wear something appropriate.”

I glanced down. “What’s wrong with?—”

“My butler will send over the details, and I’ll make sure there’s a note attached about how a cravat should be tied,” Lady Briar said with a teasing smile. “You really are a duke?”

Swallowing hard, I tried not to think about the dwindling numbers in my bank account. “I am.”

“Well dress like it,” Lady Briar said with a grin. “And don’t be late.”

SIX

Briar

“When you said dinner?—”

“You didn’t expect this?” I said with a nervous smile.

We’d been seated swiftly. Of course I had. I owned the Queen’s Head—or at least, had a controlling stake in it. The menu had been sent to me ahead of time, as usual, and I had made a few alterations to ensure the night would be perfect.

I had felt ridiculous the moment I sent the note.

This wasn’t two people courting, or anything close to it. Just two people having dinner.

Two people who’d made love. Who almost kissed, twice, in meetings that were supposed to be about work. Two people who didn’t couldn’t be in the same room as each other without wanting to...

I licked my lips and looked down at my wine glass. I could see the Duke of Markham watching me, and it made tingling prickles skim across my thighs.

“You said dinner, I assumed it was a dinner meeting,” said the Duke of Markham, looking about the place in wonder. “Not...not this.”

This was one of the most beautiful restaurants I had ever seen. It was why I had pushed my advisors to sign off on the investment—one of my rare moments of grit.

The design was simple. Elegance and decorum, French furniture with a light green paint on the walls and the most splendid paintings of the pantheon of Greek gods on the ceiling. A string quartet sat to one side and played quietly, and there were ferns in marble pots and pillars?—

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Markham with awe.

I looked back at him, pleased to hear him impressed. It was only when I saw his gaze was fixed not on the spectacular achievement of the restaurant’s layout, but at me, that my cheeks burned.

I looked down at my wine.

Perhaps this had been a mistake. I’d wanted to get to know him better—as he was advising me, I told myself. So that we could work together better. So I could understand the Duke of Markham, get into his head.

Get into his bed.

Not get into his bed, I thought firmly, pushing the idea aside. Probably. Definitely.

“I’ve never managed to get a reservation at the Queen’s Head, even when I was—I mean, when I was a member of...even before,” said the Duke of Markham defiantly, as though he hadn’t just referred to his time at the Gambling Dukes.

I chose not to pursue it. “It helps if you own forty six percent of the shares.”

“I would imagine it does,” the Duke of Markham said with a grin. “Your choice, I

take it? Against the counsel of your advisors?”

How on earth did he?—

“I can see it in your eyes,” he said quietly, the grin fading but the warmth it contained remaining. “You like this place—not just because of its beauty, but because of its worth, its value. What it represents, what it can offer you. You’ve got a good business head, Lady Briar.”

I swallowed. “You think so?”

No one had ever told me anything like that. No one had ever thought that about me, as far as I knew.

“I do indeed, Lady Briar,” the Duke of Markham said lightly. “And I think, given the circumstances, it would only be right if you were to call me by my name. Peregrine.”

Peregrine. It was a charming name, a roguish one. It suited him perfectly.

“And I’ve never been courted more assiduously,” Peregrine said smoothly, that cheeky smile returning.

“This is not—I am not courting you, the very idea!” I returned hotly, my grip tightening around my wine glass. “This is?—”

“Oh, you are courting me.”

I laughed, hardly able to believe the man’s arrogance. “Peregrine, I am not?—”

“Lady Briar, how many of your advisors have you taken out to dinner?” he said lightly.

Damn him. He knew the answer, could probably see it on my face. And I didn't want to answer, because to answer would be to admit...

"None of them, obviously," I said as airily as I could. "Because I already know how they think. I've worked with them for years. It's you that I need to figure out."

Peregrine leaned his elbows on the table, folded his hands together, and rested his chin on it, all the while never taking his eyes away from me. "Figure out, you say? And what do you have so far?"

Thankfully we were distracted by the arrival of our starters; langoustine with an a la Nage and fennel base, a ballotine of duck liver with damson and pistachio sauce, and a Dorset crab stuffed with almond and samphire rout. Food I had ordered ahead of time.

Peregrine's eyes widened. "I don't get to choose?"

"Ah, you see, I am not courting you," I said smoothly with a wry laugh. "This is a business meeting. Which just happens to be catered by a restaurant."

His glance shot fire through my chest. "You believe that if you want. I know how you feel about me."

Did he? I hardly did. One minute I wanted to throttle the man, the next I wanted him to pull me across the table, order everyone else out of the restaurant, and?—

"My Lord Markham. Good evening."

A beautiful woman with raven hair and a pearl necklace that trailed all the way down to her navel had stopped by our table.

Heat seared through my chest that I had not expected. It wasn't embarrassment, or confusion. It was jealousy.

Jealousy.

Oh, they clearly knew each other. The way Peregrine was carefully avoiding the woman's eye, they obviously had shared something intensely intimate. Something had happened between them, for there was a faint flush on the woman's cheeks, and when she spoke, it was stilted.

"Didn't think I would—you're doing well. I suppose."

"Very well," said Peregrine quietly, his gaze still not meeting hers. "And you are, I suppose."

It wasn't a question, but the woman nodded.

I knew I shouldn't stare, but I couldn't take my eyes from them. There was something...something magnetic between them. Their history seeped into their silence, and I felt rage pour through me that made absolutely no sense.

Jealousy wasn't something I typically suffered from—maybe because I had never been courted seriously by any suitor to make it a feature of my life.

But this? Peregrine had entirely lost sight of me. All he could focus on was the beautiful woman by our table who obviously wanted to leave, but didn't know how.

"I'd...I'd better?—"

"Yes, of course," said Peregrine quietly to his starter. "I'm sure I'll see you soon."

“I don’t know,” said the woman just as quietly. “I don’t know, Markham.”

She walked away, her hips delicately swaying. She did not look back.

Only when the restaurant door swung behind her did I realize that somehow, I had been holding my breath.

“Wow,” I said quietly. “You two must have had some encounter.”

I hadn’t intended to speak aloud, but obviously I had.

Peregrine flushed. “That was my friend. One of my previous club members. Lilah—or rather, Delilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.”

“F-Friend?” I repeated.

Oh. Well, that certainly explained the awkwardness, though its source was far from what I had expected.

Peregrine’s cheeks were still pink as he continued. “I haven’t seen Lilah since...well, since the news broke of my thieving. She didn’t take my betrayal particularly well.”

No wonder she had looked so uncomfortable.

“I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, Markham.”

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean for that to get awkward,” Peregrine said with a forced cheerfulness even I could spot. “Didn’t want it to ruin our courtship.”

I frowned. “You know we are not courting, Peregrine. You...you must feel intensely odd after seeing her like that.”

“What was I supposed to do, ignore her?” he shot back.

I must have flinched. I didn’t intend to, and wasn’t aware of doing it, but he sighed and shook his head, a look of frustration on his face.

“Sorry, Lady Briar,” Peregrine said, pushing his food about his plate. “It’s just...yes, seeing Lilah like that made me feel pretty awful. She isn’t...wasn’t the friend I was closest to, but my friends are all I have. All I had. Seeing her look at me like I’m a stranger in a restaurant makes me...”

His voice trailed off and his head hung low.

Prickles of discomfort were curling around my heart. I’d never intended to intrude on Peregrine—on the Duke of Markham’s history. If he hadn’t stolen jewelry from me, I probably never would have gone after him, even when I realized who he was.

Whenever he’d referred to his past, it was always with a grin or an aside that made light of the situation.

But he couldn’t do that now. The awkwardness between him and his friend had been palpable, and there was a look of genuine hurt on his face.

Was there any contrition there? Did he feel the weight of what he’d done? Was Peregrine, the Duke of Markham finally realizing what it was to be estranged from his closest friends?

“At least you have friends,” I said, trying to lighten the mood as I took a bite of my Dorset crab. “I’m an only child.”

“At least you don’t have anyone to disappoint,” Peregrine said, meeting my gaze with a dark one of his own.

I tried to smile. “Yes. That’s good.”

It was awful. Being alone in the world, not having a single person I could trust? No parents, no siblings, no husband to rely on? I was solitary, isolated, and Peregrine had a whole raft of friends he could turn to if something really awful happened.

“I think I broke Lilah’s heart when it all came out,” said Peregrine unexpectedly, breathing out slowly.

“Not just because she’s my sister-in-law, either.

Bad for the club, yes, but also terrible for her.

She...well. She was betrayed in the past. A lover after her husband died, I think, she never talks about it much.

But it was rough. She trusts deeply, does Lilah—but then, all of them did. ”

He hadn’t taken a bite of food, as far as I could see.

Was this repentance from Peregrine, the Duke of Markham?

Markham

The last thing I wanted was to be here.

Not because a dinner with Lady Briar Weatherford was some sort of hardship. Hell, teasing her about courting me had revived me in a way I could never have predicted.

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Because it was a courtship. No matter what Lady Briar said, I saw the way she kept glancing at me. She was wearing a new perfume, one that made me breathe deeply and think of the elegant curve of her back as she?—

Well. That was in the past, I was pretty sure. Lady Briar wasn't stupid enough to bring me into her employ as an advisors or whatever it was she was doing, then bed me again.

Even if I wanted her to.

But Lilah's sudden appearance had taken all the wind from my sails. The aching gap in my chest was reopened and with it, all the memories of the arguments we'd had.

“You completely betrayed ? —”

“Betrayed is a little strong, don't you think?”

“What would you prefer, Markham? Lied, stole, undermined...”

I swallowed, and tried to plaster the smile I had practiced onto my face. All I had to do was fake it for another hour. Then I could go back to the townhouse I was about to lose and think in the cold dark about all the mistakes I'd made, all the things I wished I could go back and change.

But until then...

“You don't have to stay, if you don't want to.”

I blinked. Lady Briar was staring with those light blue eyes of hers, piercing, as though she could see the pain in my chest. As though she'd heard every thought that had scattered through my mind since Lilah had been so cold to me.

"I don't know what you mean," I said automatically, looking at my starter. It was cold.

Lady Briar chuckled lightly. "I may not always be able to read you, Peregrine, but I'm not an idiot. You feel pretty awful, am I right?"

I glared up at her, unwilling to say anything. I wasn't going to admit to—

"If you just want to head home?—"

"You said this was a business meeting," I said, trying to hold onto that fact and not about how delicious Lady Briar's breasts had looked in that gown she'd arrived in. "I wouldn't walk out of a business meeting just because of an awkward moment. That's all it was. An awkward moment."

It was so much more than that. But I wasn't going to admit it.

Lady Briar's smile suggested she was well aware of that, but apparently that was good enough for her, for she took a bite of her own starter and swallowed before speaking.

"You don't always have to be the tough man, Peregrine."

I swallowed.

Damn, how did this woman manage to unravel me with her kindness? I could defend myself against blows, against hurtful accusations—had laughed them off, time and

time again.

But kindness? For that, I had no defenses.

“Why did you want to meet here?” I said abruptly. That was it, change the topic entirely. Lilah who? “This place in particular, I mean. The Queen’s Head.”

And there was that shift. I don’t think Lady Briar was even conscious she was doing it, but whenever she was asked her opinion, her shoulders slumped and she became somehow...

I don’t know, smaller. Younger, even. She could not be more than one and twenty, but whenever she was asked what she thought, the woman seemed to retreat into herself.

“You don’t like it?” she said quietly as I wolfed down my starter as swiftly as possible.

Christ, it was delicious. Perhaps that was the answer after all—the food was just really good.

“I like it,” I said, sipping my wine. “It’s one of the best restaurants in London. What I don’t understand is why you chose it for tonight.”

Because it was...romantic.

Hell, I couldn’t court Lady Briar Weatherford. She was not only a debutante, but an heiress twice over, a woman of the best stock of England. I had nothing, was nothing. Had nothing to offer but increasing debts and a terrible reputation, was nothing but a liar and a thief.

And she knew that.

Briar could do so much better than me. Surely she knew that?

“I wanted your opinion of it.”

I raised an eyebrow as our plates were cleared. “Why, thinking of bringing a future spouse here?”

Her face flushed immediately. “No! I don’t even—that doesn't matter.”

Had there ever been murmurs of an alliance between Lady Briar Weatherford and another house? I assumed there had been talks at one point—a young lady of such beauty and such wealth surely could not be left alone. There must be bachelors all over the place who would dearly love to wed the woman.

How on earth was Lady Briar not snapped up? She was beautiful, rich—and despite all that, she was a good person. Far better than I was.

“I wanted your opinion,” Lady Briar said doggedly, evidently deciding to ignore the heat in her face, “because I was thinking of buying it. Outright, I mean. With full ownership, I could develop it. Perhaps open another just like it—maybe several.”

And that was when my heart sank.

Oh, if only I could lie my way out of this one.

There was usually a lie I could fall back on, it wasn’t difficult—but this was essentially a yes or no question, wasn’t it?

Do you think it’s a good idea for me to buy this restaurant, that is special specifically

because there is only one of it, and then make more?

Heaven help me.

“I wouldn’t,” I said shortly as our mains were placed before us.

My eyebrows raised. I’d looked at the menu before we’d arrived. Cornish turbot with a cucumber and oscietra caviar, fallow deer with a smoked beetroot, walnut, and juniper purée, and roast vegetables that were crisped to perfection.

And she wanted to franchise this? Put one on every street? Was she mad?

“You wouldn’t?” Lady Briar said, picking up her cutlery as she started to eat.
“Why?”

I did everything I could not to roll my eyes. Well, I just had to be calm and direct. Keep it simple. Ensure I didn’t talk down to her or offend her.

How hard could that be?

“It would be a bad idea,” I said, taking a mouthful of the turbot.

God, that was divine. “The whole attraction to this place is that it’s unique, right?

There’s only one place in London like this.

That drives up its desirability, makes it far more interesting.

Keeps prices up, keeps profits up. And you want to make more?

You’ll immediately divide the customer base in half. ”

Lady Briar nodded. “Yes, but?—”

“Say you had this one, and then one—oh, I don’t know, in Piccadilly,” I said.

It was crucial she understood. “You’re going to lose half your customers by definition, and you’ll have twice the running costs.

But you’ll also devalue the name. You’ll make it less attractive, your clientele quality will go down.

They won’t be able to afford the prices of these menus.

You’ll end up lowering the quality of the food to match their pocketbooks, and then?—”

“Peregrine,” Lady Briar said quietly. “I?—”

“Before you know it, it’ll be like any restaurant that you can find in every town in the country,” I said heavily. “Lady Briar, I’m sorry to be so blunt. But your idea? It’s terrible.”

Well. So I probably overegged it a bit there. But this was who I was, and I couldn’t sugarcoat it.

Even for someone like Lady Briar.

Despite my harsh words, Lady Briar was...smiling.

“You are correct,” she said quietly, taking a sip of wine.

I blinked. That was not the response I had expected. “You...you’re not offended?”

“Why would I be?” Lady Briar said lightly. “I’ve already had all those thoughts. That’s why when I said open up another Queen’s Head, I meant beyond London.”

Beyond London.

My eyes widened. “You mean?—”

“One in York, one in Bath, one in Edinburgh,” Lady Briar said, ticking them off her fingers, diamonds sparkling from the bracelet around her wrist. “I think starting there would be best. Then we could think of a few in the northern, maybe a Paris one?—”

“One in Wales, perhaps,” I said, enthusiasm rushing through my veins. “One per country, so you have to go to that one place to experience it.”

“Slightly different menus in each one—a signature dish,” Lady Briar said, her smile broadening. “Appeal to the wealthy crowd, encourage them to visit all of them. One in Lyon. One in Marseilles.”

I leaned back in my chair.

Well, damn. The woman had brains, and I had massively underestimated her. Again.

The idea was a good one. No, a great one. If I had just allowed her to get a word in edgeways, I wouldn’t have spouted my mouth off about the wrong idea—one she had already discounted.

“I’m impressed.”

Now it was Lady Briar’s turn to be shocked. “I beg your pardon?”

“I mean it,” I said with a laugh. “I underestimated you, and you showed me up.

You've got a good brain, Lady Briar."

She rolled her eyes at that. "Of course I do."

Where had this uncertainty come from? There couldn't be many people with her intellect and beauty who thought so little of either. What had happened to make her so...so insecure? So tentative?

I found myself playing with my fork, my plate cleared, the food was so delicious.

This Lady Briar Weatherford. There was something about her. A depth that wasn't hidden exactly, but certainly not in plain sight. It took a few conversations for her wit to come out, for her boldness and shyness to meld together into the true personality she had.

Damn. She was...interesting.

Not something I typically looked for in a woman. But then, I'd only been interested in one thing from them in the past, and once I'd got it, I'd moved on. There was nothing else to interest me.

And then something dawned on me. "That's why you had that ledger with half the thing in francs!"

Lady Briar smiled. "I've actually spent some time on this. I think it'll work."

"You are not just a pretty face," I said slowly.

Lady Briar flushed. "Yes, well?—"

"I mean it." Did the sincerity in my words not translate? I leaned forward. "Your

ideas are good—and I think they'll work. You've got the funds to invest, why not do something international? Why not go to Paris yourself, travel? I'm still not really sure why you aren't doing that now."

I watched her smile, watched the flush creep up her chest highlighting the tightness of her gown.

Lady Briar was something different to what I had expected. I'd talked nonsense about the desirability of this place, but it was Lady Briar I was swiftly starting to see was the real investment.

One day, a gentleman would come along and notice her. Really notice her. See the qualities in her that had taken me weeks to spot, and value them as they ought to be. He'd make her smile, make her happy.

Envy shot through me. And I'd hate him for taking her away from me.

I started, physically reacting to the thought, it was so strong. Where had that come from?

"Peregrine?"

I blinked. Lady Briar was examining me with a furrowed brow.

"Are you quite well?"

"What—yes, of course I am," I said, shaking my head lightly as though ridding water from my ears. "Why wouldn't I be?"

I tried not to notice the lilt of her lips.

“Good,” she said quietly. “Well, as this is a business meeting, and not a courtship...shall we talk numbers?”

“Numbers,” I repeated blankly.

Numbers? What numbers?

Lady Briar smiled. “Investment. This restaurant. International domination. Remember?”

Oh, yes. Because this wasn’t a courtship. This wasn’t a chance for me to try to put my best foot forward, forget all the mistakes in my past, pretend they didn’t exist. This was my repayment to Lady Briar for stealing her possessions.

Something Lady Briar wasn’t going to forget.

I forced myself to nod. “Numbers. Great.”

SEVEN

Briar

I was not going to get angry. I was not going to get angry. I was not going to?—

“And is there anything else, Lady Briar?” Mr. Stephens said smoothly.

Tempted as I was to glare, I knew it wasn’t his fault. I’d been clear to Peregrine, the Duke of Markham precisely when and where this meeting was going to take place, and he wasn’t here.

Why was I surprised?

I don’t think Peregrine had been on time for anything. Certainly nothing I’d requested him to be at.

The table was full of people staring at me, and I tried to smile as I shuffled the papers in front of me. “Anything else?”

The proposal I’d put together with Peregrine’s help to buy out the Queen’s Head slipped beneath the board’s report.

I was ready, I knew that. If I wanted to I could pitch it to them, try to get them to see that I had the vision to take this forward.

My heart was beating fast, my palms sweating. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat

and wondered if they could hear the panic growing in my lungs, tighter and tighter.

He wasn't here.

What had happened? Something must have happened—I'd been clear with him just how important this was.

And I couldn't do it without him.

It was stupid, how quickly I was starting to depend on Peregrine's insight, his sharp wit, his ability to cut through the noise and get to the problem. Or the solution.

It was my idea. I'd put together the proposal. And?—

"Lady Briar?" Mr. Stephens said quietly.

Oh, hell.

"No, nothing," I said brightly, rising. Everyone else around the table rose too, some of them hastily closing notebooks. "That will be all, thank you."

Within ten minutes, I was holed up in my own private study on the third floor. I never permitted anyone else in here, making it my home away from home when I was at Weatherford Place. I was lying on the long sofa, legs dangling over the edge, my shoes slipped off, eyes shut.

This was supposed to be my sanctuary. Wooden paneling, leather sofa and armchair suite, a desk that had been my father's. And his father's. And probably his father's as well.

The paintings on the walls were Restoration, my favorite period, though I had a few

Gainsborough landscapes too, all chosen to help me stay calm and collected.

They weren't working.

I should have said something. I should have just shared my ideas. The proposal was ready, and I couldn't understand why I hadn't been able to?—

“There you are,” said a voice I knew. It was buoyant. “Your butler or someone said I shouldn't come in here, but I told them?—”

“Get out,” I said quietly.

Peregrine's footsteps moved toward me, but I didn't open my eyes.

I didn't want to see him. I couldn't depend on him, of course I couldn't.

What had I been thinking? This was the man who betrayed his own friends, for goodness sake.

It was ridiculous that I'd thought I could...

not change him. Find a part of him that was different.

More fool me.

“Get out? I wanted to hear how it went with the board,” came Peregrine's cheeky voice. “Come on, spill!”

My eyes snapped open, and I glared at the man standing over me. “What about ‘get out’ do you not understand?”

“The general sentiment,” he said, that irritatingly handsome grin curling. “I thought you wanted to—hey!”

I ignored his yell as I suddenly sat up, pushed past him, and strode to the door. I opened it. “Get out.”

“I don’t get it—you’d put so much work into that proposal, I thought you’d be desperate to tell me all about how it went,” said Peregrine, rubbing at his chest where I’d shoved him.

I swallowed. Men like Peregrine shouldn’t be allowed to say words like ‘gagging’ in public. “I didn’t tell them about it, sorry to disappoint you. Go away, Peregrine.”

My voice faltered, but only slightly. I wasn’t going to let this man upset me. I wasn’t going to?—

“Why on earth didn’t you present it?” Peregrine said, leaning on the end of the sofa and folding his arms with a quizzical expression. “I thought you really believed it in. You put in all that work.”

The reminder of just how hard I’d worked stung, and I shut the door smartly before glaring. “Because I needed you there, you imbecile!”

I hadn’t actually meant to say those words. Though heat scalded my chest, I did everything I could to keep my glare focused.

On Peregrine, the Duke of Markham.

He was staring at me with wide eyes. “You—why on earth would you want me there?”

The truth wouldn't be useful. I wasn't going to tell him just how his lateness, his absence drove a wedge into my heart. Why my fingers had curled around my chair with every minute that ticked by and he hadn't appeared. Why it was increasingly impossible to—

“You were late!” I said, hating how my voice broke. “I told you ten o'clock, Peregrine, and you?—”

“I thought you were just informing me of when it was, Briar,” Peregrine said slowly, not moving from the sofa. “You never actually said that you wanted me there, did you?”

I opened my mouth, cast my memory back, then closed it again.

Well, bother. I hadn't. I'd just...assumed.

“I thought something had happened to you,” I blurted out.

Hell's bells.

Peregrine frowned, no ire in his expression. “You thought...why? Because I didn't turn up to a meeting?”

It would be easy to brush this off—to pretend I'd just overreacted, that I was annoyed about something else. That it wasn't a problem.

It was a problem.

And though I rarely revealed this to anyone, though it hurt with every fiber of my being to admit this, the truth I'd promised myself I wouldn't reveal came tumbling out.

“My parents were late, once. They were often a few minutes late, but once they were...they were really late.”

The room was spinning, and I wanted to take back the words, but I couldn't. Peregrine was staring at me like I was out of my mind. Perhaps I was.

“Come and sit,” he said quietly. He held out a hand.

It was strange to think that Peregrine and I had made love, but never held hands. That was a kind of intimacy I just didn't do.

But I couldn't ignore the gesture. Though I didn't take his hand, I did walk away from the door and toward the sofa, dropping into it and hating how vulnerable I had just made myself.

And in front of Peregrine, of all people.

“They were late,” he said quietly, moving to sit beside me. “I'm sorry they hurt you by being late, but I don't see why?—”

“They were late because they were dead.”

I cringed at my own words. Why did I just say that straight out, without any sort of explanation?

Peregrine's face was a picture of horror. “What do you mean?—”

“They...there was an accident. They were both killed, and I waited for them for...for a while.”

For hours. I wouldn't tell him just how long I waited. I still didn't know to this day

why it had taken so long for people to contact me—I had been eighteen.

Old enough to lose the only two people in the world who truly meant something to me.

“Oh, I hate that I'm telling you this,” I said with a dark laugh, brushing my hair out of my eyes then looking defiantly at Peregrine, whose face was impassive. “There, you’ve found another one of my weaknesses. When people are really late, it makes me...it takes me back to...” I swallowed. “I don’t like it.”

Silence hung between us in all its awkwardness. Botheration, I should never have said anything. I should have just thrown him out and?—

“I'm really glad you told me.”

I blinked. Peregrine looked...serious. “You can’t tell me that a morbid fear of being late is an attractive feature.”

“Not in a friend nor in a mistress,” Markham said with a wry chuckle. “You’re not the latter, and I'm not really sure if you’re the first. But you’re human. You’re allowed to have flaws, Briar.”

I tried to take a deep calming breath, but all that I managed was a jagged intake of air. “I have enough faults—and people assume the worst of me on top of that. You’d think a little tardiness wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“After what you’ve suffered? I think you can be forgiven,” said Peregrine, his look sharp. “If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

Markham

“After what you’ve suffered? I think you can be forgiven,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

Just when I thought I’d managed to make up ground with this woman, I managed to destroy it all.

The night we’d shared at the Queen’s Head—it had opened my eyes to a part of Briar I had been foolish enough not to see. And now she’d revealed something to me that she should never have felt like she had to.

Just because I got a kick out of being late for everything.

When had it started? I didn’t know, honestly. Being late was something of a power move used by my friend Kineallen sometimes, but only with outsiders. We would never have tolerated that sort of behavior from him in the club.

They tolerated me, though. Never able to get anywhere on time, the idiot that got it wrong.

There were things inside me I didn’t even realize was there. And they all came spilling out when looking at Briar, her wrists crossed and her perfect finger nails chewed raw.

She’d been biting them. How come I’d never noticed that before?

“I’m...I’m so sorry,” I said lamely.

God, I was an idiot! What had I said to her at the restaurant, just days ago?

“At least you have friends. I’m an only child.”

“At least you don’t have anyone to disappoint.”

Oh, I was the worst kind of person. Did I honestly think I was the only one in the world who had ever suffered? What was wrong with me?

“It’s nothing,” Briar said, shaking her head.

“It’s not nothing—damnit, Briar, it’s not nothing,” I said fiercely, turning to her.

I hadn’t really noticed how close we were sitting. Until now. But though I was conscious of her beauty, of the way my body responded to her, I was surprised to find I didn’t want to act on that impulse.

Not in this moment. The last thing Briar needed was someone forcing intimacy upon her. She needed...I don’t know. Comfort.

Trouble was, she had me.

“You must miss them,” I said quietly.

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Briar nodded, and took a deep breath before saying through a false smile. “No more than anyone would miss their parents, I guess.”

I nodded. “I...I understand.”

“You can’t?—”

“No, really, I get it,” I said quietly. “I...I lost my parents ten years ago. Carriage accident.”

I hadn’t meant to tell her. I didn’t like to talk about it. But she’d been so open, she deserved something from me, didn’t she?

She was staring. “Truthfully—the same as mine?”

I shrugged. “Yes.”

“You must miss them.”

What was I supposed to say to that? Yes, of course I did. They were my parents. But it had been so long now, I tried not to think of them.

Thankfully, Briar was still speaking.

“They believed in me, and when they were gone, it was like everyone in the world had gone who actually thought I could do something with my life,” Briar said, her confession tinged with pain. “I know it probably sounds foolish, but?—”

“It doesn’t sound stupid,” I said, my throat dry. “It makes total sense.”

And it explained why Briar had been so frustrated when I hadn’t even bothered to turn up to the first meeting.

Why my attitude toward family, toward my friends must surely rub her up the wrong way.

Why she must have looked at me and Lilah, basically ignoring each other, and wondered what on earth we were doing.

Here I was, estranged from the only family I had left. And she had no one.

“No wonder you have a frustration around being taken seriously,” I said in what I hoped was an upbeat tone. “Though I’m sure you’re mistaken about those advisors of yours. I’m sure some of them?—”

“One of them tried to explain that France had a different currency to England,” Briar said with a laugh. “You think they believe I can make decisions about important investments?”

I had to laugh at that. “Probably not.”

My gaze raked over her. Yes, she was beautiful, but she was more than that.

Strong. How many people lose their parents as young as her and keep going?

She could have become a recluse or spent all her fortune.

Yet here she was, teaching herself accounts and wondering whether to open international franchises of restaurants.

What was it that drove this woman? A need to prove herself? A desire to live out all the dreams that her parents never did?

And why was I finding it so difficult to just...ask her?

“I envy you.”

I laughed, assuming Briar had to be jesting. I saw her expression. “Don’t envy me.”

“Peregrine, you have everything that I want,” Briar said, leaning so close to me her knees touched mine. Thank God I was wearing breeches of a thicker weight of wool.

“You cannot be serious,” I said, tasting the tension in my mouth.

“You have money, but you don’t have any responsibility anymore,” she pointed out, as though that was something to celebrate. “You have family! You have choices, freedom. I have...the trust. The advisors. And no one.”

I hesitated. It wasn’t in my nature to be vulnerable. It wasn’t a Markham habit, and I had always done well in business because of it.

But this wasn’t business. For all Briar talked about how this was payback, that this was strictly a business relationship...well, I’d never had anyone be this open, this vulnerable with me before.

It seemed to...to demand more of me.

“I have family, but they’re not speaking to me,” I said with a dry laugh. “You saw Lilah.”

“She spoke to you?—”

“Barely.” I tried not to think about the way we’d once been. God, I missed them. I’d never said it aloud, but I missed hanging out with my friends. All of them. Even Kineallen, the permanent killjoy. “And I don’t have any responsibility because no one trusts me with it.”

“Peregrine—”

“And rightly so,” I said, trying to keep my head high. “I was lousy with it. I shouldn’t be trusted.”

Briar looked deep into my eyes, and her smile was hesitant but warm. “I trust you.”

Something lurched in my chest. Desire, greed, lust—something more. Hope. A need to be trusted, to be loved.

I pushed it all aside. I needed to get my life back on track, not lose my heart to some woman.

“You shouldn’t,” I said quietly. “I’m...I’m completely out of funds, Briar. I don’t have money, I’ve spent it all.”

She blinked. “But—the townhouse where I found you?—”

“Rented. Well, I say rented. Is a place rented if you haven’t paid three months’ worth of rent?” I said lightly.

My tone belied my pain, but I wouldn’t let her see it. I wouldn’t let anyone see it. That was a part of me no one got to see, not even myself. Examining myself wasn’t something I wanted to do.

Briar’s lips had parted in astonishment. “You’re about to lose it? How long do you

have?”

I shrugged, as though I hadn't just spent the entire morning trying to work out a plan. I truly had intended to come to the board meeting this morning, I just...lost track of time.

Lost track of the ways that I'd managed to bury myself in?—

“A few days. A week, if I'm lucky,” I said with a grin. “I could sell a few things—pieces of art, that sort of thing. Most of the furniture is gone. But it wouldn't last long.”

“You could work,” Briar pointed out.

I rose from the sofa. Being close to her as I said this?

Nope, wasn't possible. “Who's going to hire me, Briar?”

I'm a duke, I hardly have much experience in trade. It would be a scandal for me to take on employment—it was bad enough being a member of the Gambling Dukes. And I'm thief.

No one in their right mind would hire me, and I wouldn't blame them. ”

Perhaps the self-loathing was audible as I paced around the room, trying not to notice the little trinkets about the place that could have me out of my debt in twenty minutes. Damn, this woman lived well.

“You have made mistakes, that's for certain,” Briar said quietly, leaning back into the sofa as she watched me. “But you have family—and you were a part of the Gambling Dukes. Don't you have...I don't know. Property? Other investments?”

I halted. I did have a townhouse in Bath. Funny. It had never occurred to me to even think of selling them.

“I won’t sell,” I said quietly. “It...damnit. That house in Bath is the only connection I have left to my friends.”

My weakness was laid bare for her now, but Briar didn’t scrunch up her nose or laugh. She could have. Plenty would.

But instead, she was looking at me closely. As though trying to see through me. As though all the words I’d said were just a smokescreen for how I truly felt, and she was trying to delve deeper.

Who knew? Perhaps she could.

“So in about a week, you’ll be homeless. Is that what you’re telling me?”

I shrugged. It seemed ridiculous, a homeless duke. I didn’t want to sell the Bath townhouse. My debts were bigger than my assets. I had no way of making money—not real money.

“I could...train horses. Drive the stagecoach.”

“Do you even know how?” Briar said quietly.

I shrugged again, discomfort settling in my chest. “I could learn.”

I was just being petulant now, but I hated this. I hated how I managed to get myself into this idiotic situation, and now I couldn’t find my way out. Oh, I had ideas about investment, but that needed capital. At least four thousand pounds. And where was I supposed to get that?

“Well, I don’t see any other option,” Briar said finally. “You’ll have to move into my townhouse—as my guest.”

Her voice had been level, but there was a deep emotional richness to it I couldn’t understand.

How could I? My heart had skipped a beat as she spoke and I almost tripped over my own feet as I staggered back to the sofa.

“Don’t mess with me, woman.”

“That’s no way to speak to your landlord,” said Briar with a grin.

“I’ve got a few empty guest bedchambers in my townhouse.

I keep it for...well, nothing, really. I have no family to visit, all my friends live themselves in town.

You can stay there for the rest of the month, if you want—the month you owe me. Maybe a month after that.”

And then? As I met her sparkling eyes, I knew there was something more to this offer, but she wouldn’t tell me what. Perhaps Briar didn’t even know. I certainly didn’t.

“So, how about it, Peregrine?”

I took a deep breath, swallowed my pride, and hoped to God this wasn’t a mistake. “Thank you.”

EIGHT

Briar

It had been a good idea.

At least, I'd made it with the best of intentions. Peregrine had seemed so...so vulnerable. So open. I'd never seen him like that.

And it was true—I did have a spare bedchamber in my London townhouse. What I should have said of course is that I owned at least three other townhouses in London, two of which were currently unoccupied. That would have been the smart thing to do.

And now here I was, waiting for my tea to brew, unable to stop staring at the closed door to the corridor.

Through it, along a bit to the right, and then on the left? Peregrine, the Duke of Markham's new bedchamber door.

I had a permanent house guest.

“What were you thinking, Briar?” I asked myself under my breath as I picked up the small teapot and poured myself a cup.

The trouble was, I knew what I was thinking. At least, feeling. I hadn't done much feeling. I'd just felt so sorry for him, such a yearning to be close to him. Before I'd been able to stop myself the words had spilled out of my mouth.

Within an hour, I'd ordered my coachman to move most of his stuff into the empty stables that I owned two streets over. By yesterday evening, he was in.

Peregrine. Oh, I knew how stupid I was being. I had a fancy for the man—so what?

A fancy for a gentleman I'd already bedded. A fancy for a gentleman who evidently had major commitment issues, and had already lied to those he was closest to. And had stolen from them. From me.

A gentleman who was kind of my employee? And now was living with me?

I groaned as I sipped the teacup and rose from my chair by my bed, walking out of my bedchamber and down the staircase to the breakfast room.

I was a complete idiot.

What had I been thinking? This was just my own foolishness again, just like everyone said. I'd had the opportunity there to push Peregrine into actual employment, and instead I'd done what?

Moved him into my home.

Not a decision that was going to win me eligible debutante of the year.

I sipped my tea and almost moaned with the relief the sweet drink brought.

What I needed was a plan. A way to get Peregrine back on his feet without me actually doing anything.

No, that wasn't quite it. I groaned as I took another sip of tea. When did I start letting incredibly attractive dukes distract me from my plans?

When it came to ledgers and investments, I knew what I was doing. Mostly. But courtship? A potential future husband? I'd avoided them all after losing my parents. I'd already had my heart broken twice. Why on earth would I risk it again?

And that wasn't what this was. Probably.

Peregrine was just a gentleman I had taken to my bed, I told myself.

A gentleman who had bedded me then stolen from me, yes. But I was making him pay for that. I absolutely was not doing this merely because I wanted him close to me. Around me. Holding me. Touching?—

The teacup slipped in my hands and I almost dropped it. Swearing under my breath, I put it down on the breakfast table.

I was being an idiot. Letting my desires get the better of me. Letting Peregrine get the better of me.

I didn't understand this man. Sometimes he was so...so forward—so obviously wanting to kiss me, it was hard to concentrate around him.

And at other times? I just felt like an anonymous person he might have walked past once. Someone he hardly recognized, but was going out of his way for some reason to annoy me.

I tried to take a deep breath, but my eyes darted once more to the door to the hallway.

There was something about him. I was almost certain there was repentance in his heart for what he'd done, but Peregrine hadn't exactly said that. He was just the sort of rakehell Georgiana always said I should avoid. Perhaps she'd been thinking of her friend when she'd said that.

Such a shame the roguish men tasted the sweetest.

And that wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was?—

“Well good morning,” said Peregrine cheerfully, his expression still sleepy. “And what a glorious morning it is.”

I stared, lips parted, unable to reply.

Well, what was I supposed to say that?

It wasn't the fact he'd marched into the breakfast room when I hadn't expected it. It wasn't his greeting, and it certainly wasn't the smile on his face.

Honestly? I hardly noticed the smile.

How was I supposed to, when the man had walked in wearing tight breeches, a half buttoned shirt, and...nothing else?

Wiry hair cascaded down a throat that I recognized all too well, his collarbones brash against his shirt. His hands and forearms were tantalizingly visible thanks to how the man had rolled up his sleeves, leaving—to be honest—not a huge amount to the imagination.

Not that it needed to. I'd already seen everything before.

And that was the problem. I'd already seen, touched, tasted. And I had barely been able to get enough of him when he'd first come here, my unexpected boldness bringing him back to my home.

And now Peregrine was here, wandering about and picking up dish covers on the

sideboard until he found the eggs.

My sideboard. My Peregrine—I mean, my house guest. Damn.

“You...hello,” I said weakly.

My heart was hammering beyond what I could deal with and my lungs were tight, every breath an effort.

How in God’s name was I supposed to survive having Peregrine here for more than a day?

I couldn’t top staring, couldn’t help but appreciate the muscles that tightened in his shoulders as he reached out for a plate.

Couldn’t stop looking when he returned to the table and lounged on a chair, couldn’t help but admire the way his jawline moved as he took a bite of toast without butter or?—

Without butter?

“Are you some sort of animal who’s never heard of butter?” I said, astonished my voice had enough strength in to be heard by another human being. “Peregrine!”

Peregrine stopped eating, gazing at me curiously. The lack of movement only succeeded in drawing my attention to his perfectly clipped stubble, the way his hand now hung lazily at his side.

This was a man who had never had to worry about what to do with his hands. He’d certainly known what to do with them when?—

Not helpful, Briar!

“You wanted this piece?” Peregrine said, holding out the piece of toast.

Perhaps that was a discussion for another day. I’d never actually lived with anyone as an adult, now I came to think about it. Perhaps that was the sort of thing you were just supposed to...let slide.

“I’ve got my tea, thank you,” I said, gesturing with my cup.

Peregrine nodded, then turned blearily away from me and started to eat his toast again.

Not a morning person, then.

I should be doing something—something other than gawking at my new house guest. Reading the newspaper, getting updated on the financial markets, reading my letters. Anything to stop me from being such a gawker.

The trouble was, Peregrine was strangely hypnotic. I’d never seen someone so...so at home in their own body before.

I liked the way I looked, yes, but it had taken a little while to grow into my body. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who had that struggle, but still.

Peregrine was entirely different.

He seemed so comfortable. So fluid. Every movement he made was instinctual, and he never seemed to worry about how his body looked.

I mean, why would he, when he looked like that?

Still, I couldn't just allow this to continue without saying something. I mean, we were going to be living together for weeks. Perhaps more. I still hadn't decided what I was going to do when his time was up.

What was I going to do with Peregrine, the Duke of Markham? Cut him loose, let him fail on his own terms?

Keep him as an advisor of sorts, find out a way to extract a salary from the trust?

Or...or something more?

I pushed that thought down, way down. That was not going to happen.

So I needed to say something. Lay out the rules. Make it clear that being properly dressed at breakfast were not optional.

"You..." I swallowed. I would control myself! This was my home! "You don't want to put a waistcoat on? Or...or a cravat, or something?"

When Peregrine met my gaze, it was with a wicked glint that told me he saw right past my attempt at nonchalance.

"Why?" he said, leaning against the chair like he was a model for a painting master. "Is it bothering you? My body?"

Markham

"Is it bothering you? My body?"

What was wrong with me?

I could see the way my words affected Briar—blast, Lady Briar—and that was precisely why I had done it. What man wouldn't look at her, all ruffled in the morning looking like butter would instantly melt, and not say such a thing?

Besides, she may want to criticize me about my clothing, or lack thereof, but she was far worse.

Bloody hell, she was wearing a gown with a bodice hemline that skimmed so low...and as far as I could see, she was once again not wearing a corset. Did she have any idea how tempting she looked?

“N-No!” Briar stammered, cheeks flushed, gaze averted. “No, your body is—it isn't?—”

“Because it sounds to me that you either don't like the way I look,” I persisted, unable to stop myself, unwilling to give her any relief. “Or you really, really like the way I look.”

I tilted my head slightly as I took in Briar's response.

She didn't need to reply in words. It was all there, clear as day. She wanted me. She didn't even know how much, and I was still finding out.

Perhaps this was a bad idea.

I mean, when Briar had suggested it, it had seemed like the perfect way out of my problems. No rent? No being thrown out of my townhouse in a week with nowhere to go? A hostess as delectable as Lady Briar Weatherford?

Sign me up.

It had stopped being such a fun idea when I'd arrived yesterday. Briar had shown me about the place, flushing as she pointed out her bedchamber.

Well, it wasn't like I hadn't already been in there.

And that had been it. She'd given me a key to my own bedchamber, pulled on a spencer, and said with a smile that she was heading out, that she probably wouldn't be back until the early hours, and to not wait up.

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I'd spent the evening in my bedchamber, which was huge, trying not to think about Briar.

Where she was. Who she was with. What they were doing together.

It made my blood boil.

I didn't have any claim over her, even if I'd wanted to. I didn't own her. We'd made no promises to each other, and Briar had made it quite clear anything like that was off the table.

"No full names, no expectations, no hearts getting involved—definitely not broken."

"I don't—it isn't that—I wouldn't say," Briar was still stammering.

I saw the conflict in her, and decided to put her out of her own misery. "Do not worry yourself about it. I'll make sure tomorrow, I'll put a waistcoat on. Or a cravat. Perhaps both."

The gleam in Briar's eye told me she would rather prefer neither, but I didn't say that.

Whatever was happening between us...it wasn't happening. At least, I wasn't about to act on it, and I was pretty certain Briar wasn't either.

It didn't make sense. I hadn't interrogated it anyway, and I didn't know what it was. Did I just want to bed her? She was the best I'd ever had, and something about her left me with a hankering for more.

But right now, she was the only thing standing between me and bankruptcy. That had to come first.

At least for now.

“You know, I can’t stop thinking about our courtship,” I said with a grin.

Briar laughed. “What do I have to do to convince you that this isn’t a?—”

“Whatever you say,” I quipped, dipping my spoon into a cup of tea before taking a large mouthful. When I swallowed, I said, “I mean it, though. I’ve kept thinking about it.”

She frowned as she sipped her own cup. “I would have got you a reservation again if I knew how much you liked the food.”

I waved a hand. “Not the food.” It was the company, but I wasn’t going to admit to that. “I meant your idea. Your franchise idea, to take it to York, and all those other places.”

Briar perked up at that. “I didn’t...well. We wrote up the proposal.”

“You wrote it,” I pointed out.

I didn’t say that I had been significantly impressed by the work she’d done. I was just...a duke, just a member of the Gambling Dukes. I didn’t exactly have a role within the club, though Kineallen had threatened to make me do something. That was before I’d been found out.

It had all sounded far too much like responsibility to me. I’d declined.

My stomach lurched painfully.

I wasn't going to think about my friends. No good could come from that.

"I had a few ideas," I said aloud. "About the restaurant. Queen's Head."

Each word was spoken hesitantly, but I tried to put as much effort into my voice as possible.

Because I had. It was strange; at the Gambling Dukes, everything was taken care of by Kineallen.

Oh, I was there to help out, and in the early days I'd been the club's dogs body.

A room needed booked at a gaming hell? Markham will do it.

Currency exchange needed? Markham will do it.

Writing out a banker's note? Well, it's not like Markham has anything else going on...

But ideas?

That came from Kineallen. Or Georgiana. Or Lilah. Not me.

"You've got some ideas?" Briar said, her surprise written all over her face.

Pushing past my disappointment that she obviously hadn't considered ideas my forte, I pressed on. "Honestly, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. I know you like the idea of replicating what you already have?—"

“It makes the most sense,” Briar said, leaning forward in her seat.

I swallowed. Just a glimpse. That was all I’d got. But damn, it was enough.

“But it also reduces your potential profit,” I said, trying to ignore my throbbing manhood. “You’d have to employ a significant staff. If you ran the businesses yourself, you’d keep more of the money. If I had—what would you need, another two thousand pounds?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You mentioned before that you were looking for things to invest in. Should I be considering you a competitor?”

I snorted. “Like I could get my hands on two thousand! No, I was thinking you should take the two thousand and put it straight into Queen’s Head. Now.”

“Now?” Briar was staring. “I can’t be that impetuous!”

“The place is up for sale and you already have a controlling share—just buy them,” I urged, excitement flickering in my chest at the very thought.

God, I missed this. This rush, this launching into something without considering all the plans.

“And then what?”

I grinned. “Well, you’d run the place. Obviously.”

Briar stared as though I’d just suggested she give it all up and go live as a nun. “Peregrine, this is me we’re talking about. I’m a lady.”

I waited for her to continue, taking another mouthful of toast, but apparently that was

it. “And?”

“And I would have no idea what I'm doing if you tried to get me to run a restaurant!” Briar said, her voice full of disbelief. “I cannot work, I cannot be in trade—I'm the daughter of an earl!”

“You're smart, Briar,” I said, with far more earnestness than I'd expected. “Smarter than you think. Smarter than most people!”

Her deep flush told me exactly what she thought of that. “I'm not?—”

“You are,” I said firmly, not quite sure where this determination had come from. “If you want to run a restaurant, buy one out, extend it, you don't need a financial partner or man of business to run it for you. You could do it.”

She was gazing at me as though I was speaking nonsense—but I could see the glimmer of excitement in her.

Briar wanted to do this. She just didn't have the guts.

“Do it,” I said with a shrug. “If it fails?—”

“If it fails?—”

“Then it fails,” I cut across her with a grin. “You've got plenty of money, right?”

Briar hesitated, then nodded. “Yes, but?—”

“But nothing,” I said, surprised at how strongly I felt about this. “You should follow your dream and do whatever it is you want to do. You can do it. You're more than capable.”

“You...”

I watched her swallow. Watched her lips move, watched her eyelashes flutter—but I also watched the confidence I knew Lady Briar Weatherford should have rising to the surface.

I watched as she considered actually doing something for herself, by herself, with her own knowledge.

Watched as she started, just a little, to believe in herself.

Something against all the rules of Society, something that would shock, would scandalize—would make her known throughout the country. Perhaps throughout the world.

And she was still considering it...because I had suggested it.

A rush of warmth cascaded through my chest.

There was something about this. Something about her.

“You really think I can do it?” Briar said in a low voice.

Something caught in my throat, and I had to cough before I could speak. “Of course. Definitely—Briar, you would be amazing at this. You have to risk it all.”

She grinned. “What, like you risk it all?”

The words stung more than she could know, but I tried not to let it show. “Something like that.”

“I...I guess I could put together an actual business plan, rather than an investment proposal,” Briar said slowly.

But though her voice was hesitant, her body sure wasn't. The cup of tea was abandoned as she moved over to the sideboard and pulled a notebook out, along with a pencil.

“I'd always thought, buying locally would reduce costs if we could get steady orders,” Briar said with a grin over her shoulder. “What do you think? If we kept the menu flexible yet ordered it around a core set of local ingredients?—”

“You'd have to have a close collaboration with the chefs,” I said, moving toward her.

I couldn't help it. She was so eager, so excited. It was the perfect excuse.

I shivered as my shoulder clipped hers. “Sorry.”

Did she think I was just eager to look over her shoulder at the notebook?

I didn't know. I was standing right behind Briar as she turned to gaze up at me, her warm breath tingling on my neck.

All I had to do was lean forward, just a few inches, and?—

“You're sure you don't mind helping me with this?” Briar breathed.

I swallowed. I had actually intended to work that morning on my own investment ideas. If I was going to get back on my feet, ever, I couldn't ignore my own personal disaster. The duchy of Markham had debts, had bills to pay. I had hundreds of people depending on me.

Briar's eyes shone.

“Yes, it's no problem,” I found myself saying, clasping my hands behind my back to make sure I didn't give into temptation and pull her close. “But it's your idea, Briar. I'm just here to point out when you make a mistake.”

She breathed a laugh, and my heart skipped a beat. “Thank you, Peregrine.”

NINE

Briar

I never would have believed it, but Peregrine swiftly became a part of my life.

That sounded way more scandalous than I meant—it was just, he kind of...became a part of my life. He was a superb houseguest, tidy and clean, never demanding too much of my time. He even started to wear a waistcoat to breakfast, which was the perfect balance.

Naked enough to gawp at. Clothed enough to prevent me from taking him into my bedchamber and repeating the first night we met.

He turned out to be more of a night owl than I was. Most evenings he would stay up in the drawing room reading through my father's extensive library and working on my ledgers for me. I had to give him credit; he really seemed to want to help me.

Some of his insights were bold—far too bold for me to feel comfortable with. But he was never wrong.

It was almost a week later when I crept into my townhouse after a late night with Georgiana at Almack's that I saw the light coming from the drawing room.

Only then did I realize how ridiculous I was being. What, I was going to creep into my own house? Peregrine was already awake. What difference did it make how noisy I was?

Thanks to the well-oiled hinges of the door, I had entered the drawing room without Markham noticing I was there. His back was to me, seated on the sofa with a newspaper in his lap.

I crept forward as I glanced over his shoulder at what was printed on the page he was reading as something caught my eye.

I couldn't have told you straight away what had done it. The print was small, paragraphs and paragraphs of text. I had assumed Peregrine was meandering through one of the old newspapers that I hardly ever managed to give the footmen for lighting fires.

But when I blinked and stepped forward, I saw what had caught my attention.

The Gambling Dukes

Wasn't that the club Peregrine and his friends had created?

I tried to concentrate, blinking a few times, and the words came together.

THE GAMBLING DUKES THREATENS CLOSURE AS SCANDAL SIMMERS

A few scattered phrases jumped out at me as Peregrine's gaze flickered, evidently completely unaware I was there.

The Duke of Markham...scandal...outrageous actions...financial misconduct...

I swallowed, a lump in my throat threatening to prevent me from speaking.

Not that I wanted to. This was odd, right? Peregrine had left the club—had stolen from it. He'd been thrown out, as much as anyone could be thrown out of something

they'd created.

And now he was reading an article about them?

Not just one. As I stood transfixed, unable to make a sound to let Peregrine know I was there, he pulled out a pocket book and unfolded a newspaper clipping—several of them. The headline blared out at me in black and white.

DUKE OF MARKHAM DESTROYS GAMBLING DUKES CLUB

I watched as Peregrine shook his head. What was he doing? Keeping tabs on the club he had almost destroyed? Reading the latest goings on of friends who evidently wanted nothing to do with him?

A shiver cascaded down my spine, and I clutched my shawl in an attempt to ground myself.

This was perfectly normal, right? I mean, it wasn't like a person could just stop thinking about something—or switch off their heart and stop caring about something.

Peregrine had been there from the very beginning, hadn't he? He'd been a complete ass, and should never have even considered stealing from them, true.

But then why fixate?

I watched as he sighed and shuffled the papers to examine a page which had been ripped out of something. A ledger, perhaps.

Now that was interesting.

I leaned closer to look at the numbers, heart hammering. Peregrine hadn't noticed me.

This was definitely spying at this point—I should have made it obvious I was here.

But perhaps it was better I hadn't. Because the page Peregrine had pulled out looked suspiciously like...

I groaned under my breath as I saw the Gambling Dukes watermark.

It was a document from the Gambling Dukes. Had he stolen it?

However he'd got his hands on it, Peregrine certainly shouldn't be looking at someone else's financial records in my home.

My mind raced.

What was he doing? Looking for a way to steal more money? Had all my hopes, my expectations of him been wrong? Was it possible Peregrine wasn't the man I thought he was?

A soft thump ended my thoughts and made Peregrine stuff all the paper away in his pocket.

I'd dropped my shawl.

Peregrine whirled around, his eyes wide in shock at being caught in the act.

Caught in the act of what, I still didn't know.

"Briar," he blurted out, forcing his pocketbook away and rising to his feet.

Oh God, I'd never seen anyone look more guilty. Peregrine looked as criminal as someone who'd just been caught robbing a bank, with one of those daft masks on and

a sack labelled 'loot' over his shoulder.

"I didn't think you'd be back—when did you get in?" Peregrine said in a rush.

My heart was thundering, and I didn't want this confrontation now. In a way, I don't think I had ever really wanted it. If I'd been smart, I would have headed to bed and tried to forget what I'd seen.

But I couldn't forget now.

Leaning down to pick up my shawl and buy myself some time, I straightened up and pushed a stray curl from my eyes.

It was instinct that did it. I saw the way his gaze flickered to my hair, then to my lips, before returning to my eyes.

It would be so easy, wouldn't it? Just give into the temptation to kiss him, distract Peregrine with my body. I knew he wanted me. I knew how good it felt when he touched me.

I could just forget about all this in pleasure and desire.

But that wasn't who I am.

"You're looking into the Gambling Dukes," I said quietly.

Peregrine shifted on his feet. "So?"

My heart sank. If there had been an innocent explanation, wouldn't he have just given it? Why did everything have to be so combative with this duke?

“Their financial records,” I emphasized, pointing at where his pocketbook had disappeared to. “Don’t...don’t you think that’s a little strange?”

Peregrine glanced down at his chest before looking back at me. “It isn’t what it looks like, Briar.”

“What does it look like?” I said, trying to keep the frustration from my voice. “Damnit, I’m really trying here. You steal from me, I give you work. You don’t pay your rent, I give you a place to live. Am I just an idiot, Markham?”

“No!” His face truly looked pained, but how could I trust that? “You have to believe me, Briar, I?—”

“You’re not giving me a huge number of reasons to believe you’re capable of change, here,” I said, my arm pulling my shawl tight around my side. “What is going on?”

I watched as Peregrine swallowed, evidently torn about telling me the truth or letting me believe whatever I wanted.

This wasn’t a man who shared easily. I don’t think he was the sort to share at all. He hadn’t mentioned any mistresses in the past, no ladies of the night had come looking for him. His parents were gone, no siblings, and his wife had died...when? Long ago enough that he was out of mourning.

He’d had his friends at the Gambling Dukes, and that was all, as far as I could tell. Now he didn’t have them.

But he had me. Had I been played?

“Hell, this is so embarrassing,” Peregrine sighed, shaking his head.

Ice clutched around my heart. What on earth had he done? “What is?”

“I...” Peregrine swallowed, eyes darting about the place as though searching for a way out. “I have some old financial records from the Gambling Dukes—old, Briar. At least eighteen months old.”

“Pretty sure your friends won’t be thrilled to hear you still had them,” I said quietly.

I hadn’t intended my words to be harsh, but he flinched.

“Perhaps not,” he said with a dark shrug. “I’m...blast. I’m trying to look for ways to help them.”

I blinked. “What?”

“The Gambling Dukes are about to risk it all, right?” Peregrine said in a rush. “They’re going to risk it on a huge gamble with a Spanish Count, and they needed me to...and then I stole from them. And so I’m looking for a way to help.”

I stared. He couldn’t be serious.

“You’re looking for a way,” I said slowly, “to try to hide the fact that you stole from them, because they’ve got a huge wager coming up?”

Markham

“You’re looking for a way to try to hide the fact that you stole from them, because they’ve got a huge wager coming up?”

I stared at Briar, her uncertainty stabbing a knife into my chest.

Damn, was I truly so untrustworthy as all that? Did everyone around me just want to keep assuming the worst of me, for the rest of my life?

“No!” I said, perhaps too forcefully. “No, I more meant—I was smart enough to find a way to skim money off without anyone noticing for a while, right?”

Briar’s face became one of disgust. “If you call that smart.”

I winced. She had such a way of directing disappointment at me. Like I could never make it up to her. To anyone.

But I had to. That was what this was all about.

“I wanted to look through the records to see if there was any way to maximize their profits,” I said slowly, hating I had to admit this.

But what choice did I have? Briar had obviously been watching me for a little while, and she wasn’t going to accept some generic placating. This was her home, she’d risked her reputation having me to stay here as her guest.

I owed her that. And so much more.

“I don’t understand—you’re not a part of that club anymore,” said Briar with a frown, turning to drop her shawl onto an armchair behind her. “Why would you bother?”

“Why would I bother?” I repeated in disbelief.

But of course, how could she understand? Lady Briar Weatherford had never done anything wrong in her whole life. Awful things had happened to her, but she’d never ruined anyone’s life.

Not on purpose, anyway. My life felt pretty unstable around her, but that was probably because every moment I was with her, I was fighting off the temptation to kiss her so hard?—

“You really think you can go over eighteen month old accounts and find a solution?”
Briar said suddenly, stepping around the sofa.

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She stood before me, bold, direct. She'd had a drink or two wherever she had gone, I could tell, but there was no shift in her vision, no slurring her words.

I swallowed. Having her standing there, just a few feet from me, was playing havoc with my ability to concentrate on the problem before me.

The problem of convincing Lady Briar I wasn't a total rakehell.

I took a deep breath. "Look."

"I don't want you to give me a long speech about how you were so clever to steal money from your friends without them noticing, Markham," Briar said with a warning look. "You might think that's impressive, but?—"

"Impressive? It's shameful." The words had slipped from my lips before I could stop them, and I couldn't take them back now.

Even if I wanted to. And I didn't think I wanted to.

It was the truth, and I hadn't said it for a really long time. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I just make a clean start?

Lilah had jokingly called me the black sheep of the family when we'd become in-laws, and in a way, it was true. The 'good' response never came as easily to me as it did my friends. And now I was paying the price for never having grown a conscience.

Warmth, on my hand. I glanced down.

Briar had taken my hand. “Shameful?”

I swallowed. Well, there was no turning back now. “Christ, Briar, I made such a stupid mistake. I was a complete ass. I thought—oh, I can’t even tell you this.”

Pulling my hand away, I stepped back from her. I didn’t deserve to be this close to someone who was so good.

But Briar took a step after me. “You can tell me anything.”

“I didn’t even know you a month ago,” I pointed out with a dry laugh, pulling a hand through my hair as my stomach lurched.

God, I didn’t know her then. And now I’m living with her?

As her houseguest. Obviously.

“Well, you know a fair bit about me, things that I don’t usually talk about,” Briar said quietly. “I’d...well. I’d like to think you can talk to me about things you wouldn’t normally talk about.”

I dropped down on the sofa behind me, no longer willing to attempt to remain upright.

It was all such a disaster. I’d done it to myself, which made it even worse. But there was no turning back from it now, no changing the past. All I could do was change the future.

I looked up as Briar sat next to me, her knee just touching mine.

“I want you to tell me,” she said gently.

And something strange happened to me as she said that. Something in my heart twisted, and it hurt, but when the pain was over I felt...lighter. Better. Safer.

I hung my head. "It was all a game, at least to start with."

With my head like this I couldn't see Briar any more. Perhaps that was for the best. I heard a short intake of breath.

"A game?"

"A bet," I said ruefully, wishing to goodness I'd never been pulled into it. "A gentleman I knew—I won't call him a friend, because he wasn't. He said I couldn't take five quid out of the club accounts without someone asking me why."

I could almost feel her disdain pouring through her.

"So you did."

I nodded. "It was so easy. They—my friends, they were so trusting, they didn't even seem to notice I'd done it. It was strange. The thrill of it, the high, I can't explain."

"A rush," came Briar's soft voice.

I looked up and met her eye, and it was kind, and accepting, and so much more than I deserved. "You do understand."

"Just because I haven't done it doesn't mean I haven't considered breaking into the trust and taking out a thousand I can do what I want with," said Briar quietly with a wry smile.

It was not the image I had of the prim and proper Lady Briar Weatherford, and it only

made me want her more.

But I had to get this off my chest, I had to tell her the rest.

Not that there was much to tell.

“Eventually it just became a habit, something I knew I had to stop, but couldn’t,” I said heavily. “Every week I told myself it would be the last time. I didn’t need the money! I was just dumping it back into the business through another?—”

“Wait,” interrupted Briar, putting a hand on my leg to silence me.

It did. My throat went dry as her warm fingers pressed into my thigh. Did she know what she was doing to me?

“Are you in earnest?” Briar said slowly. “You were taking money from the club...but you were putting it back?”

“Into another part of it, of course,” I said with a dry laugh. “No one knows that though, you’d better take that to your grave. It was a huge mistake to do it in the first place, I should never?—”

“Peregrine! Are you honestly telling me your friends don’t know you never actually took the money?” Briar said, eyes wide.

I shrugged. “I did take it.”

“But you didn’t keep it!” she insisted, as though that made any difference. “Peregrine, that means—you’re not a thief!”

My heart warmed to hear her say those words, but I knew it couldn’t be true. “No, I

am.”

“You’re not! You gave the money back!”

“I was a complete scoundrel to do it at all,” I said, trying not to just accept the praise she was giving me. If she knew how much I needed it, and from her... “So I’m trying, in a small way—I know it won’t matter—but to make it up to them. To find a way to help. Even if they don’t want it.”

Briar was smiling. I couldn’t understand why. Hadn’t she listened to a word I’d said?

Her hand was still on my leg. “You’re a good person, Peregrine.”

Something darted down my abs to my loins. Sudden heat.

“Not that good,” I admitted quietly, meeting her eyes. “I want to do very bad things to you right now.”

Her eyes widened as I knew they would—but she didn’t take her hand away. “If you want to kiss me?”

I didn’t even let her finish her sentence. I’d been so restrained, so good for so long. Being around Briar was to want her, and I’d wanted her day in, day out, for almost a week.

Moving into her townhouse had been the single best and worst idea we’d had.

But she wanted it. As I crushed my lips on hers, pressing Briar into the sofa, her arms came around my neck and pulled me closer. Her lips parted, her tongue reached out for mine, and I groaned as she squirmed against me.

Pleasure was roaring through my veins, tingles of sensual delight flickering along my jaw, down my spine, and to my growing hard on.

Damnit, but she was everything I wanted. Almost.

The kiss ended almost as soon as it had begun. And then my sense began to catch up with me.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” I said remorsefully, moving back.

But I couldn’t. Briar’s fingers had caught the neck of my t shirt, and she was pulling me back.

“We’re both adults here,” she said with a shy smile that belied her bravery. “And if I want to sit on my sofa and kiss a scandalous duke who has, to his own surprise and mine a conscience...then I will.”

I smiled as I let myself be pulled back into her arms. Well, who was I to argue?

TEN

Briar

“You’re really certain about this?” Markham sighed as he looked up at the building.

I grinned. “Certain.”

Well, as certain as I ever was. It was never easy to feel particularly certain about anything when I was around this man, to tell the truth. Especially when he was kissing me.

I tried not to think about that morning as Markham had surprised me in the morning room, kissing slowly down my neck as I’d poured out my morning tea.

Tried to pour out my morning tea.

“Good morning,” he had whispered.

It had been all I could do not to turn around and start taking off the waistcoat that was starting to become a real temptation.

Something had shifted in our...relationship.

Not that we were in a relationship. Obviously.

But whatever it was between us, it wasn’t just friendship. Friends didn’t go around

kissing each other all the time. At least, none of my friends did.

The kissing hadn't progressed—and though we hadn't talked about it, I think both Peregrine and I were clear on that. No touching, no taking off clothes, no ecstatic peaks. Just kissing.

Another rule, this time unspoken. And I was pretty sure we were going to break it, just as we'd broken the other ones.

But right now, we were working. Once again, I wanted Peregrine's opinion.

"It's a dump, and you're an idiot to even consider buying it," Peregrine said briskly as he looked up at the dilapidated townhouse my carriage had dropped us before.

I chuckled as I pulled the key from the pocket. "That's a shame. I told the owners I would buy it."

"You did what?—"

I laughed as I walked up the steps towards the large front door. "Well, not exactly. But I am serious about this place, Peregrine. I think you'll see why when we get in."

He was muttering behind me as he followed, mostly about women who pretended to need the opinions of others when in fact they knew precisely what they were doing. I couldn't argue with him. Not completely.

I'd wanted Peregrine as a neutral, honest person in my life. My advisors just told me what I wanted to hear and did whatever they wanted. I was tired of being ignored, tired of none of my ideas even being considered.

My friends didn't understand it. Not that having all this money was a burden, but it

was, in a way.

Georgiana was the only person I could be mostly honest with, and she was a dowager duchess who earned a living from gambling.

She understood contracts and clauses, not callable bonds and cost of equity.

Peregrine could.

He wasn't wrong. I knew my own mind. I just needed someone to talk to about it. And that person, somehow, was him.

Peregrine coughed as we entered the hallway, years of dust rising up from our footsteps. "Nice. Were you thinking of putting, I don't know, a dust museum into this place?"

"Not quite," I said, nudging him with my elbow and stepping forward. "But not far off."

I loved this style of architecture. Neo-classical, designed and built by a gentleman who had gone bankrupt not long after, and had left the place to itself.

The hallway was more an atrium. Full height, two story ceiling had several globular skylights, allowing sunshine to cascade slowly through the dusty air.

The cornicing and paneling was truly elegant, while the elegant columns on each side of the four doors leading off it, one on each side, was pure Greek inspiration.

The place must have been beautiful, once. It was still beautiful now, in a way. Not a way Peregrine, the Duke of Markham appreciated, however.

He coughed again. “I don’t get what you see in this place.”

“That’s because you have no vision!” I said, stepping to the left and opening the door. “Perhaps this will give you a clue.”

Peregrine stepped forward with an irate look on his face, as though I was keeping him from something very important.

By the time he’d joined me in the doorway, his expression had changed. “Oh my.”

‘Oh my’ just about covered it.

The previous owners truly had a vision. This room was six bay windows long and almost as wide, continuing on down half the street.

The ceiling had a beautiful gold frame around the walls, and the rest of it was taken up with a painting of Greek gods and goddesses, bathing in a lake, laughing, splashing each other.

And in the room?—

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Markham said weakly. “That’s not?—”

“A plunge pool, yes,” I said, delight pouring through me. “Empty now of course. It’s better than I had imagined—the engravings really didn’t do it justice.”

“No, I suppose not.”

I swallowed. Focus on what was before you. “The plumbing is still in good repair apparently, and?—”

“You’re thinking of a spa,” Markham said slowly.

I turned and grinned, joy flowing through me. “A members only women’s club, indeed. There are so many men’s clubs here?—”

“Of all kinds,” he turned with a grin as he stepped around the edge of the luxurious pool.

I glared, but couldn’t hide my excitement for long.

“I thought, why not have one just for women? There’s a room that’s the perfect mirror of this on the other side, I thought to turn it into a place for massages.

We can transform the second floor into relaxing spaces—meeting rooms for members, a drawing room, a library?—”

“And the third and fourth floors?” Peregrine asked, gazing about the place in wonder. “This place is huge, Briar. It’s going to take a serious amount of work to get it to the quality you want.”

I shrugged. “I thought accommodation on the third floor—like a hotel but better. And then restaurant, kitchens, and storage on the fourth.”

I’d gone over the blueprints with a fine toothcomb, and I was pretty certain I could manage it. I had the money for a good architect.

Peregrine brushed some dust from one of the gold benches that lined the edges of the room. “You really think you can do it?”

His voice was low, his tone testing.

I swallowed. I knew what he was doing. Obviously if I brought this proposal to the board, my advisors were going to shoot it down before I could even run through the numbers.

It was a risk. My trust preferred to buy buildings already in use and just let them out. Passive income. Low investment, but low risk.

Low excitement.

This was a project.

“I know it’ll need a lot of work, and not just the physical building,” I said, dropping to sit on the edge of the plunge pool.

My legs and skirts hung where there should be water.

Where one day, I hoped, there would be again.

“Considering what sort of members I want, deciding what I want the feel of this place to be. But I...I really think I can do it, you know?”

Peregrine was wandering down the opposite side of the pool to me, but he halted and grinned. There was something so comforting in the way he looked at me.

Yes, he was handsome. But there was something very strong, very dependable in that look. Like I’d been searching for it all my life, and just hadn’t noticed.

“I want to thank you,” I said hesitantly.

Only now did I notice how any words spoken in this place of marble and tiling echoed around. My cheeks flushed, burning with heat, as my own words were

repeated back to me by the echo.

Thank you...thank you...

“Why?” asked Peregrine, a furrow appearing on his brow. “You’re the one putting me up. Putting up with me.”

“There is that,” I said, trying to tease but finding myself breathless. “But you’ve given me confidence in myself, and I don’t think I had ever thought that was possible. You’ve made me feel like I can...not necessarily do anything, but do great things.”

The way he was looking at me...his gaze was burning as though he could see right through me. Something about him had changed, after Peregrine had admitted to me just how pained he was about his stupid actions in the past.

There was a bolder Peregrine before me, but it wasn’t cocky. I mean, he was. But he also seemed...more centered. I couldn’t explain it.

“Buy it.”

I blinked. “What did you say?”

Peregrine shrugged. “Buy it. It sounds like you know what you’re doing—and even if you don’t, you’ve got the vision, right?”

I rose, shoes scraping on the marble. “You mean that?”

“Why do you need my approval, Briar?” Peregrine said softly.

I swallowed. “I don’t.”

Not on paper. But I did, somehow. He'd built something incredible with his friends, the whole world was sitting up and taking notice of what the Gambling Dukes was doing. And I had never done anything. Not like that.

"It's getting late," I said with what I hoped was a nonchalant grin. "I suppose you've got somewhere to be this evening. Someone to meet."

We hadn't asked. I'd wanted to, but knowing the answer might have been painful. Peregrine and I hadn't conversed about the future—I still didn't know what this is.

"What, you're going to buy this place without looking at every room?" Peregrine said with a raised eyebrow, turning and heading to the atrium. "Come on. There's so much more to discover."

Markham

More to discover? What sort of nonsense was that?

The trouble was, it sounded so good. Even I was almost impressed by my own drive.

Briar certainly looked impressed. At least, there was a warmth to her eyes I hadn't seen before. Or was it just her excitement about the building we were in?

She was right, it was spectacular. We crossed the atrium and took a look at the room on the mirror side of the plunge pool. Its wide windows and gorgeous high ceiling would make it perfect for drawing room.

I didn't bother to point this out. She'd already thought of it, I was sure, and the last thing I wanted was to make an ass of myself in front of Briar.

She was starting to mean...something, to me. Kissing her this morning, I'd almost

forgotten for a moment that we weren't together—that we were just two people who lived in the same townhouse.

But we couldn't be unique in that, could we? Plenty of people crossed that line, and I'd bedded her before I'd ever thought she might offer me a place to live.

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“I’d like to take a look upstairs,” Briar said as we stepped back into the atrium, the day’s light dying away as evening approached. “Apparently the owners have a small apartment up there, though they moved out last month. I thought I could use it as a base, keep an eye on the work.”

I shrugged. It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to be, after all. “Of course.”

Every new view of this place revealed something impressive, but it wasn’t the building that was capturing all my attention. It was Briar.

This woman. She didn’t even know how unusual she was.

She certainly hadn’t come from nothing, her trust was worth more than some countries—but Briar had never taken that for granted.

The staircase creaked slightly, and when we found the apartment on the second floor, the mood of the building changed. It had clearly been lived in, and recently, with a little more luxury.

A kitchen. A drawing room. A bathroom that had the most incredible claw footed bath I had ever seen. And?—

“Ah, the bedchamber,” Briar said briskly as she strode in. “Peregrine, look at this.”

I swallowed, hesitating in the doorway.

Never before had I hesitated when a beautiful woman had invited me into a

bedchamber. I had never needed to. What they wanted, and I wanted, had always been obvious.

And they'd got the pleasure they'd craved.

But this was different. Briar was different. There was something about her I had never felt or seen in anyone, and living with her, working for her—even for free—had made this so much more complicated than I had ever wanted.

“Peregrine?”

I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The bedchamber was impressive. A large four poster was covered in dark blue, almost navy silk sheets.

The hangings were there too, along with a bunch of throw pillows.

There was a pair of armchairs by the large bay window, a few empty bookcases, and a chest of drawers that had a handle missing.

A chandelier, slightly dusty but all in one piece, hung from the ceiling.

“I think I could rather make myself at home here, don't you?”

I swallowed, trying as best I could to calm my manhood.

Lady Briar Weatherford was lying on the bed.

“Making yourself comfortable?” I said as lightly as possible as I stepped to the bed.

Then I stopped. Maybe that wasn't a good idea.

"Well, if I do buy the place, being on site to keep an eye on things wouldn't be the worst idea in the world," said Briar with a teasing grin. "Come here, tell me if the bed is comfortable enough."

My jaw tightened and I walked forward again, legs shaking, until I was standing at the side of the bed.

And then, despite everything I wanted so desperately, I shook my head. "I'm not going to do that, Briar."

The disappointment on her face was sweet, somehow.

Damn, I was right. She wanted me.

"Why not?" Briar said, slipping off the bed onto the other side and looking at me curiously. "I thought...well. After the last few days. I thought you wanted this. Wanted me."

I tried to take a deep breath, but my lungs were constricting.

She was right. I wanted her.

But I couldn't afford to get distracted right now. Even if I wanted to.

"Making it up to my friends, somehow, is my priority right now," I said, ensuring my voice was level.

Not that I felt level. I was completely at odds, the ground shifting around me. Briar was so intoxicating, so tempting. I'd been restrained for so long, and it wasn't in my

nature to hold back.

“You’re a good man,” Briar said, trailing a hand on the silk bed coverlet, drawing my attention to her once again.

Something deep within me stirred—and it wasn’t just my manhood.

Hell’s bells. I really liked this woman. Far more than I had thought. Far more than was good for me.

“You’re distracting,” I whispered, despite all my intentions.

Briar met my eye and grinned, stepping round the large ornate bed to stand before me. “I am?”

Swearing under my breath and trying to ignore how Briar laughed at my obvious discomfort I nodded.

“Pardon?”

She was doing it on purpose, I knew, but two could play at that game. It was a risk—or perhaps it wasn’t.

I looked up, met Briar’s eye, and took a step forward. “I said, you’re distracting me, Briar. You’re too beautiful, too clever, and too beddable.”

Briar’s lips parted as she took a hesitant step backwards—but her eyes held onto mine, and I could see that she wanted to hear more.

More? I could give her more.

I took another step forward, and reveled in the way that this time, Briar didn't move away. "Every time I kiss you, Lady Briar Weatherford, I'm risking it all—that one day I'll be bedding you again. That you'll be under me again, squirming against me as my fingers make you come."

Her eyes were wide now, not in surprise or horror—but eagerness. "You will?"

I nodded slowly, taking in every inch of her. Every inch that one day would belong to me. "You can't even guess at half of the ways I could make you come, Briar. And the trouble is, you know it. You look at me and I know I want to bed you, and you don't do anything to stop me."

Briar lifted her chin, just slightly. "And why should I?"

I almost lost my nerve then. Any man would.

But I could feel the tingling anticipation in the air, knew it was different from anything Briar and I had shared before.

This was an opportunity, and it wasn't one I was going to miss out on.

I may be a knave, but I knew how to play my cards.

"I could get you crying out my name in less than five minutes," I said, my voice so low it was almost a growl as I stepped toward her, my body now only inches from hers. "And I'm trying to be a gentleman here, trying not to tease you into submission, trying to ignore the distraction that you are."

"I didn't know I was such a diversion," Briar breathed, wetting her lips.

I managed to catch the groan in my throat, but only just. "Damnit, Briar, you know

full well. I'm...I'm trying to be a better man. Leave behind the man I was, but?—”

“Don’t leave all of you behind,” Briar said softly. “I rather like the man who brought me to pleasure again and again after I met you at Ferncombe’s.”

“I met you,” I said, stepping so close to her, my nose brushed up against hers.

Oh, this was sweet torture—but I couldn’t step away. Though every inch of me ached for her, the longing for Briar’s touch almost making me weep, I wouldn’t cross that line.

Not yet.

“I think you’ll find I invited you back to my townhouse,” Briar said softly, every word honey.

I grinned. “I knew who you were, and I knew what you wanted the moment you saw me. And now you’re the one distracting me.”

Briar tilted her head slightly, the dying sunshine bathing the room, the bed, and us in a golden glow. “So what can I do to stop that—to get me out of your system?”

ELEVEN

Briar

“So what can I do to stop that—to get me out of your system?”

It was a stupid thing to say, and I’d said it—but I didn’t want to take it back.

Wasn’t this what we’d been skirting around for days? Hadn’t this been something top of mind, even if we hadn’t wanted to admit it, since the first moment we’d met? The moment I’d taken Peregrine, the Duke Markham back to my townhouse, my actual home, and allowed him to worship my body?

“No full names, no expectations, no hearts getting involved—definitely not broken.”

I’d had the best of intentions: I hadn’t wanted to get my heart involved, and so I’d put all these rules in place to try and stop Peregrine becoming important to me.

And how well had that gone?

Working for me. Living with me. Kissing me whenever our guards were down, unable to stop ourselves from taking the pleasure we knew we wanted.

Why not just admit it? Why not enjoy each other, rather than pretending we didn’t want this?

I could see in Peregrine’s eyes that he wanted this. Wanted me. Wanted everything I

could offer him, and I shivered to think what he could offer me.

Perhaps it was the shiver that rushed through me that pushed him over the edge. I wasn't quite sure.

All I knew was that all of a sudden, Peregrine had stepped forward, his nose grazing mine as he stared at me intently.

"Are you sure?" he said, his voice low, almost a growl.

I whimpered as his fingers brushed up against mine. His heat, his warmth, it was so visceral I could feel it emanating from his body into mine.

I wanted?—

"Briar," Peregrine said quietly, slipping his hands away from mine as I attempted to entwine my fingers with his. "I need to know—I need you to say it."

I swallowed. Admitting to such a thing...it was pretty much as vulnerable as I ever wanted to be. Revealing my helplessness, showing him what I wanted, how I ached for him...

And not just his body. Peregrine may know what to do with that tongue, but not only when he was kissing me. He'd been so open with me, so exposed. I was certain I had seen parts of Peregrine no one else had.

The guilt. The regret. The determination to do better.

What was that, if not affection?

My heart skipped a beat. "Peregrine, I want you."

“That’s not enough.”

I gasped at the sudden absence of him. Peregrine had taken a step back, his face rueful but determined.

What had I done? Had I just ruined it, this moment I had been sure had been leading to?—

“I want more,” Peregrine breathed, unable to look at me as he took another step back.

“Damnit, Briar. More than this, more than making love. And I know you can’t?—”

“Peregrine,” I interrupted, my heart soaring. “Peregrine, I?—”

“And I would never want to put you in that position, where you didn’t feel you could say no,” Peregrine said fiercely, still not looking at me. “I may have made mistakes in the past, but I would never?—”

“I know you wouldn’t,” I said breathlessly, hope soaring. More? He wanted more?

“Peregrine, I’m trying to say?—”

“So perhaps it’s just best if we go back to your townhouse and?—”

“Peregrine!” I said forcefully, taking his hand in mine.

It was an electric moment. I’d crossed some sort of line, a barrier, a boundary between us. Now I was holding Peregrine’s hand, something intimate in a way we had never shared before.

I could feel his pulse. It was racing.

“Look at me,” I said quietly, trying to keep my voice level.

Finally Peregrine did, but it was a fierce look, one that was determined not to get hurt.

Determined not to get hurt...

Of course. Wasn't it easier for Peregrine just to push me away before he got close to me? Before I could hurt him, reject him, tell him he wasn't enough? Before he could make another mistake, as he so clearly thought he would?

"You want more?" I repeated softly.

My words echoed in the large bedchamber, and Peregrine's cheeks flushed.

"Yes." His voice was a growl but it was enough.

I smiled shyly. We were stepping into unknown territories, but that there was only one person I wanted to step into them with.

"Peregrine, I want more," I breathed, my hand squeezing his. "I want—don't get me wrong, making love with you is...but I want more. There's something between us, don't you think?"

His uncertain grin warmed my chest, pooling heat between my legs. "You do?"

I nodded, conscious of how intimate the words were. Almost like a—"I do."

And then he was kissing me. Peregrine was kissing me, and it was unlike any other kiss I had ever known.

This didn't just warm me—it burnt me yet I craved the pain, the agonizing delight of connection. His hands had already reached my buttocks and I leaned into him, feeling

the hard bulge of his manhood struggling to break free of his breeches.

But it was more than that. Though raw animal heat pulsed through us, taking and giving in equal measure, there was something deeper.

Something softer.

The way he was kissing me...full of passion, yes, but also full of something else.

Reverence.

It wasn't the right word, but as pleasure roared through me, I couldn't think of anything else. Peregrine had a way of making all thought impossible.

"Peregrine," I breathed as he broke the kiss to look deep into my eyes.

"Briar," he said, and a wicked grin curled his lips. "Come here."

I would have followed him anywhere, head dazed with desire, but as it turned out Peregrine didn't want to take me far. Just to the end of the bed.

Taking my hands in his, he lifted them up, each stretched out to my side. He curled my fingers around the posts at each end of the bed, and with his foot, gently eased mine out.

Now I was standing like a star at the end of the bed, and my heart was racing, and I wanted him but he wasn't kissing me and I didn't know why.

What was all this about?

Peregrine grinned, that wickedness still glowing in his eyes. "Now stand there...if

you can.”

If you can? Why on earth wouldn't I be able to?—

“Peregrine!”

I didn't shout his name, I moaned it. It was impossible to do anything else. Peregrine had dropped to his knees and slipped his head under the hem of my skirt.

It was then that he gave out a whimper much like my own. “Briar, you're not wearing anything under here!”

I shivered as his warm breath met my thigh. “N-No.”

Not that I had known what today would bring, but...well. I had hoped.

Recently, I was always hoping.

“God, you're so beautiful, and so warm, and so kind,” Peregrine murmured, trailing kisses from my knee slowly up my thigh, as my legs quivered. “And you taste so good...”

His mouth stopped just by my slit and I found myself leaning down, just to feel his lips against mine, and?—

“No,” Peregrine said firmly, his hands grasping my hips and pushing them up so I was standing once more. “I'll kiss you there when I want to.”

My voice whimpered. God, I wanted him. The ache between my legs was growing to such a pace, I wasn't quite sure how I was going to stay here with him so tantalizingly close.

“Though I do rather like the idea of you riding my face,” came Peregrine’s light words as he kissed my other thigh. “Remind me to indulge in that later.”

I moaned, my fingers gripping the wooden posts, wondering how on earth I was going to bear this.

Peregrine’s tongue slowly licked up my thigh until it ran, inch by inch, over my secret place. “God, you taste good, Briar. And you’re wet. Wet for me.”

My back arched but I tried to obey and keep standing, desperate for him to go further, go deeper. I craved him, needed him, needed?—

“Peregrine,” I groaned with relief as his tongue slipped inside me.

Oh God, this was a man who knew what he was doing. Peregrine didn’t hold back now he had entered me; his tongue delved deeper, darting in and out with a slow rhythm that made the ache in me deepen with every movement.

Movement that grew swifter, and swifter. Soon I was shaking, the waves of pleasure sparking through me as his tongue twisted over my nub. Jolts of sensual delight I had never known before were building, building, and eventually my head tilted back and I let out a cry as I came.

Shards of myself were peeling away, I was on fire, yet I wanted to burn like this forever. Everything about me shook and Peregrine held onto my hips, bearing my weight, allowing me to collapse into the pleasure.

Markham

Hell’s bells. If she wasn’t careful, I was coming to come into my breeches without savoring any of the relief I needed.

Any of Briar I needed.

She was magnificent. When was the last time a woman had just let herself go, accepted the worship of my mouth, and just taken all the pleasure she could?

I couldn't remember. Perhaps no one had. Perhaps what I was sharing with Briar right now was something I had never experienced before—and never would again.

Her taste was still in my mouth and I savored it, licking my lips as I emerged from under her gown.

God, what a view.

From this angle, kneeling at Briar's feet, I could see her flushed cheeks, her bright eyes, the swell of her breasts, the curve of her waist.

But despite the multiple tantalizing parts of her, it was Briar's eyes that caught my attention the most.

Trusting. Eager. Honest.

Everything I wasn't. Everything I wanted to be.

She was so far beyond anything I thought I could ever deserve, yet she gave herself willingly to me. She wanted me, for me—knowing who I was, what I was. Knowing my greatest failures, my biggest mistakes.

And what had she said?

“Markham, I want more. I want—don't get me wrong, sex with you is...but I want more. There's something between us, don't you think?”

“That...that was...”

I grinned. “Just a taste. Just a taste of you, Briar, and it wasn’t enough.”

She shivered, my hands on her hips still keeping her steady.

Damn, it did something to a man to know just his tongue could bring a woman to such ecstasy. To give pleasure like that with no expectation of reward.

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I mean, don't get me wrong—I wanted to sink myself into Briar and lose myself once more in the pleasure she could give me. That I could give her. The intimacy of two people who now didn't just want to be bedded, but wanted more.

More .

It seemed strange, the idea of having more. I still wasn't entirely sure if I deserved it. But Briar thought I did. Why else would she be here, offering herself—offering more than just her body?

“You do know that's not fair, don't you?”

I blinked. Briar's words had been spoken quietly, but there was no shyness in them. In fact, there was a directness I had seen in her before.

When she was most comfortable. Most sure of herself.

I raised an eyebrow. “Not fair? You don't like being eaten out?”

“I love it,” Briar whispered, her cheeks flushing a slightly darker shade of pink. “But you know what I'd like even more?”

I shook my head slowly, my mouth going dry.

My mind could certainly supply a few possibilities. Briar, lying out on the floor as I slowly sank my manhood into her. Briar, kneeling on this bed and whimpering as I enter her from behind, her wet secret place welcoming me in. Briar, her hands?—

A soft finger on my chin, tilting it up. Briar increased the pressure and I rose as I was clearly being bidden.

Briar taking charge. Now that was not something I had expected.

“You do what you’re told,” Briar said quietly, looking deep into my eyes as her fingers fumbled with my breeches. “And you’ll be rewarded. Can you do that, Peregrine? Can you do what you’re told?”

A guttural moan escaped my parched throat.

How did she do it? Briar was not the sort of person to take charge in any scenario. She’d spent the last few weeks trying to get me to bolster her bravery with her own advisors.

But here, now, the two of us alone? Something had come over her and I reveled in it. A side of Briar I hadn’t seen before—had only snatched glimpses of, had never fully been able to appreciate.

I was about to appreciate it now.

My breeches slipped to the floor and I stepped out of them, glorifying in the way Briar’s gaze immediately slipped appreciatively to my manhood. It was hard, aching for her touch.

“Excellent,” Briar said softly.

And then before I could stop her—not that I’d want to—she’d grabbed my shoulders, pulled me to the bed, twisted me round, and pushed me back.

I fell onto my back on the bed, my hands scrabbling to pull off my shirt as Briar

clambered onto the end of the bed by my feet.

Somehow, she seemed to have lost her gown...

“Oh God, Briar,” I moaned.

The sight of her was almost enough to undo me. Teasing smile, slightly nervous eyes, and heavy breasts swaying down as she clambered toward me.

I dropped my shirt off the side of the bed and quickly moved to reach for her?—

“No,” Briar said, placing her hands on my wrists and preventing me from closing the final inches between me and her.

I was breathing heavily now—I’d hardly noticed how my heart had started beating faster.

God, I craved her. It was the ultimate pain, lying there with a naked Briar above me, my damned hands unable to touch.

“Lie back and don’t move,” Briar said with what she evidently thought was a teasing smile.

A moan threatened to escape my lips. It was teasing. Everything about her was teasing. Every part of her not touching me, every inch of her I hadn’t kissed, all of her was a temptation aching to be taken.

As I wanted to take her.

But I watched, pulling a pillow under my head so I could get a good view, as Briar slowly lowered her lips to my manhood and lightly kissed it.

I squirmed. Oh God, it was awful and wonderful. The promise of more, and yet the restriction teased me like nothing ever had before. This was edging of a new variety, and I wasn't sure I liked it.

I loved it.

“Briar,” I said breathlessly. “Please can I?—”

“Every time you ask me for permission, it'll take longer,” said Briar quietly, slowly licking right at the base of my shaft.

I couldn't help it—I whimpered. The white fabric of the sheet beneath me was gripped by my desperate hands, and it just heightened the agony tensing in my balls.

I wanted her, I needed her, and if I didn't have her soon?—

“Patience,” murmured Briar, her tongue licking slowly up my shaft to my weeping tip.

One of her nipples scraped against my thigh and I couldn't help but thrust upward.

I was punished for it.

“No,” said Briar darkly, gazing up at me and holding down my hips with her hands. “You don't want to wait, do you, Peregrine?”

I swallowed. “N-No, Briar.”

Damn, I hated the weakness in my voice—but somehow that only made Briar smile.

“You're making me wet,” she said quietly. “Feel.”

Slowly, she lowered her straddled legs onto mine. A damp, warm, wetness pressed against my thighs and I groaned.

If she wasn't careful?—

“You'll make me come,” I warned her in a dark voice.

Briar grinned, keeping eye contact as she leisurely lowered her mouth back to my manhood. “Promise?”

I groaned again, a dark growl rolling in my chest. “You make me want to?—”

“I know,” Briar murmured against the base of my shaft. The thrum of her voice almost tipped me over the edge. “And you've been very, very good.”

I strained against her hands on my hips. I was stronger than her, much stronger. I could pin her under me and take what I wanted and she would beg for more—but it wasn't about that. It wasn't about me.

It was about Briar.

Thank God, she seemed to be as wound up as I was. “Peregrine, I'm sorry—I can't wait any more.”

Before I could tell what was happening, Briar had somehow moved over me. My manhood lurched and I only just a moment to breathe before?—

“Briar!” I cried out, my head tilting back, unable to take it.

She'd lowered herself onto me, spearing herself with my hot throbbing manhood, and both of us moaned at the sudden intimate connection.

God, I'd wanted this the moment I'd stopping making love to her the last time—but this time was different.

I blinked up, bleary eyed, at Briar. She was gorgeous, and she was shy, and she was giving herself to me in a way I was certain she never had with another.

It was intimate, and personal, and she was giving her heart to me as we had never shared before. And as she rose, building a rhythm as she dropped onto me, thrusting her hips against mine, causing a friction that sparked pleasure through every inch of me, I knew.

I knew.

There would never be anyone else. There never could be. What this was, whatever it was, it was more than a good bedding, more than liking, more than desire, more than affection.

It was?—

“Briar!” I couldn't help but cry her name as I thrust up into her, coming so hard my vision blurred.

It was, apparently, what she'd needed to reach her own peak. That, or she'd been heroic and held off her own orgasm for me.

Briar bucked, her secret place tightening around me and elongating my own coming, her voice whimpering my name. “Peregrine—Peregrine, oh Peregrine, yes, yes...”

By the time she collapsed into my arms, I was ready for her. Waiting to catch her. To hold her.

To never hold anyone else again.

Our breathing eventually slowed.

Briar pushed herself up off my chest and looked deep into my eyes. “Peregrine?”

I nodded. “Briar, I lo?—”

She crushed her lips onto mine. Maybe it didn’t need to be said.

TWELVE

Briar

“You don’t have to do that,” I said with a wry smile.

Peregrine grinned as he pulled on a black greatcoat, the collar sharp against his jawline which could already cut steel. “I know. But I want to.”

I rolled my eyes extravagantly, so he could see just how ridiculous he was being.

“I am not being ridiculous!”

“Of course,” I said with a laugh, leaning back into the sofa. “Not ridiculous at all.”

It had been a ridiculous suggestion, but in all honesty, I kind of liked it. There was something about this warm new routine Peregrine and I had slipped into in our home.

My home. My townhouse, I suppose. But we had ignored Society, ignored all hint of scandal, and found that our happiness was far greater than anything we could have expected.

He’d been here almost two months now, and it was starting to get difficult to remember what it had been like before he had moved in. Become a part of my life.

“I said I would get the book which it arrived, and I will,” Peregrine said, pulling on his shoes.

“And yet you didn’t,” I pointed out with a laugh, pulling a shawl around my shoulders as I sat in the drawing room. “And it’s cold out there now, autumn has really arrived!”

“And I am the one who ordered the book,” Peregrine said with a wry grin. “I guess I can’t complain—I will go to the bookshop!”

I shook my head ruefully. “You do know I have people for that, don’t you?”

In fact, I was finding I was using my servants less and less. I didn’t really need them, now I had Peregrine. Not that he was that helpful. His memory was shocking, and I had a sneaking suspicion the man had never learned to tie a knot. I suppose dukes never had to learn such a thing.

But there was a sweet sort of eagerness in Peregrine I simply couldn’t quash. He wanted to do things for me.

I knew it was in part because I’d done so much for him—at least on paper. When we’d talked about it earlier today, I had pointed out just how much he’d done for me.

“I’ve done nothing for you,” Peregrine had said flatly. “You’re perfect, just the way you are.”

“And that’s true,” I said with a laugh, cheeks burning with the lie. “But you’ve helped me with so much—my advisors actually listened to my last proposal!”

“They should have been listening to you for yours, its criminal how that trust is set up,” muttered Peregrine, grabbing a scarf to wend around his neck against the cold autumn afternoon air. “I’ll be gone twenty minutes, maybe less.”

“You’ll be gone at least an hour because you won’t be able to help stopping in the

bookshop and selecting half a dozen volumes to set against my account,” I pointed out, snuggling under the shawl, a warmth spreading through my chest that had nothing to do with the soft fabric.

Peregrine’s cheeky smile, on the other hand? “You’re right. I’ll see you in three days once I conquer the history section.”

I threw a cushion at him, which missed. “Don’t be too long.”

I hadn’t intended there to be any remonstrance in my words, but suddenly Peregrine halted. Then he was striding across the drawing room, leaning over the back of the sofa, and giving me a searing kiss.

Resisting the urge to cling to him, I accepted the passion he evidently could no longer contain, and breathed happily as he straightened up.

“The book I ordered, and just a quick look in the history section,” Peregrine said seriously. “Then I’ll be back.”

I smiled wistfully as my gaze trailed him to the door, which opened then shut. He was gone.

Sighing heavily, my smile did not waver.

Peregrine, the Duke of Markham.

It was strange to think that the first time he’d left my townhouse, he’d done so with my belongings in his pockets. What he thought he was going to do with them, I didn’t know. I hardly liked to think about it.

That Markham was about as far from the Peregrine I now knew as was possible to be.

He was loving, and kind, with a strong desire to do good. To be good.

What was it he had called himself before? A duke who risks it all.

Well, perhaps he had been. Everyone had a past, I guess. Everyone had made mistakes when they were younger, when they didn't know any better. Everyone did things they wished they hadn't.

Peregrine was one of those few people who had actually done something about it.

The door opened—surely he had not returned that quickly.

My butler gave a brief smile. “The afternoon post, my lady.”

“Ah. Thank you,” I said brightly.

My servant did not quite meet my eye as I took the three letters from the silver platter he was holding. None of my servants approved of Peregrine living here, of course they did not—but they would not betray me nor sell the gossip to the scandal sheets. Not if they wished to retain their employ.

My butler bowed and left the room, leaving me with the afternoon's correspondence. I looked down, half expecting to see a note from Peregrine, telling me he'd got trapped in the archaeology section and to send a rescue party.

Who would have thought: Peregrine, a huge fan of history?

But it wasn't from Peregrine. It was, however, from a member of the Gambling Dukes.

I straightened up and slit open the letter. Why precisely Delilah, the Dowager

Duchess of Rotherwick, or Lilah as Peregrine called her, had thought to write to me, I didn't know.

Perhaps Georgiana had suggested it to her. Evidently she had something important to tell me.

I started to read. With every sentence, my stomach fell further into my chest.

Dear Lady Briar,

I hope you do not mind the imposition of me writing you like this. I know it's a little untoward, but after seeing you and my brother-in-law at Queen's Head, I asked one of my servants to look into my friend's activities.

I have just received the report. I wanted you to be the first to know.

Though I am sure my friend has kept this from you, he was involved in petty theft for years within our club, the Gambling Dukes.

His betrayal has, as you can imagine, come at a great cost. Not just financial, or reputational—we'll be launching our next big wager soon, and I am sure you know, of all people, how important it is to keep a clean reputation during that time.

No, it was personal.

Our friend—and the husband of my own late sister—has completely destroyed any trust we could have felt for him. He probably hasn't mentioned this either, but to think that he's potentially cost us everything: it doesn't bear thinking about.

And so when I discovered through my informants that my friend has inveigled himself not only into your confidences but your very home, I wanted to send you a

warning.

Do not trust Peregrine, the Duke of Markham.

He's out for whatever he can get. No one matters to him like he does to himself. Whatever he has promised you, whatever he has said, you cannot believe him. He's not to be trusted.

I just hope you haven't given him access to your money.

Run, Lady Briar. Though it pains me to write such disparaging things about my own friend, I would be committing a far greater crime by letting him get away with it for a second time. He's using you, I guarantee it. He's using you, Lady Briar.

It's time to cut and run. Throw him out of your home, rescind all his privileges and accesses, and get away from him.

I hope you will take this letter in the spirit in which it is intended.

I remain yours sincerely,

Delilah Rotherwick

I stared.

The words did not make sense. No matter how many times I tried to read them, they swam about my mind, untethered to any sort of reality.

No, she had to be wrong. Peregrine wouldn't use me—he loved me.

True, so we hadn't said it, not properly. But it was obvious. Implied, felt, known

every day that we were together ever since we finally gave into the temptation of each other at the property we viewed weeks ago.

He cared about me. Peregrine wasn't using me.

I swallowed, my mouth dry, slipping the letters onto the sofa beside me.

This was ridiculous. Peregrine had been completely honest about his past—arguably too honest. He'd never hidden who he was, and he had changed. He had!

“Like I could get my hands on two thousand! No, I was thinking you should take the two thousand and put it straight into Queen's Head. Now.”

A prickle of something that could have been doubt curled around my heart. There was no harm, I suppose, in checking my accounts. They were my accounts, after all. I could check them any time I wanted.

I swallowed, rising to my feet and stepping along the corridor to my study, on the other side of the library, and tried to ignore the frantic thumping of my heart. I stepped inside, pulled out the ledger which chronicled my expenses, and?—

And there it was.

My heart could not sink. It broke.

AUTHORISED: Peregrine, Duke of Markham----?1990

She'd been right. Lilah—the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick. She'd been right.

Peregrine hadn't loved me. He probably didn't even like me, he was just using me. That night at Ferncombe's, I'd thought he didn't know who I was, but he admitted the

very next day that he had.

“I knew who you were the minute you stepped into Ferncombe’s. Lady Briar Weatherford, the heiress.”

Of course he had, I thought dully as I leaned back into the armchair and tried to take deep, calming breaths.

Peregrine, the Duke of Markham was exactly what he’d seemed at the start. A lying, conniving, thief.

And I’d been foolish enough to fall in love with him.

The front door opened.

Markham

The parcel was heavy in my arm and it swung about as I turned to close the front door. “Briar, I’m back! And I only bought two books!”

Quiet. No answer.

Had she retired for an afternoon slumber? It was far too early for Briar to go to bed—I hadn’t been gone that long. Had I?

I glanced at my pocket watch, then remembered I’d pawned it the day before Briar had let me move into her townhouse. Well, I was pretty sure I hadn’t been that long.

“Briar?” I called out, slipping off my shoes by the door and striding down the hallway and into the drawing room. “Are you quite well?”

She wasn't there.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:01 am

Stange—but then a part of my mind recollected that the door to the study had been closed when I'd left, and was now partly open. I stepped back into the corridor, along the passage, and into the room.

There she was, in the armchair, her back to me. Her hair was still piled up into a messy bun, the shawl still around her.

“Briar?” My voice was a little more hesitant. This wasn't like her. The Briar I knew would have turned to greet me, yelled out if she was working on something, anything.

She wouldn't have just...ignored me.

My heart skipped a beat as I stepped over to the desk and placed the brown paper wrapped parcel upon it. I almost missed the desk, my gaze was so focused on Briar.

What the hell was going on?

“Briar, has something happened?” I said, shrugging off my greatcoat and throwing it on the sofa as I stepped hastily toward her.

As I came around the side of the armchair, I saw her face—and that was when I knew something was wrong.

Briar looked...I couldn't understand it. Sad, but also furious. Bitterly disappointed about something.

My heart sank, my lungs constricting painfully. “Was it your advisors—did they call

on you? Did they not like your latest proposal? Were they?—”

“No one came to call,” Briar said quietly. “I received a letter.”

I sank slowly onto an armchair opposite her. It didn’t feel like the right time to push aside the ledger she was clutching and sit next to her. Somehow, I could see Briar wouldn’t appreciate that—though why, I had no idea.

“A letter?” I repeated. “From your advisors?”

From what Briar had said, it wasn’t like them to do something like that. Perhaps her Queen’s Head scheme had been foiled by someone else making a counter bid. Perhaps the place with the large pool had been bought by someone else before Briar could put the final touches to her financial proposal.

Whatever it was, it was bad. I’d never seen her look like this.

Briar swallowed, then met my eye. “It wasn’t from my advisors.”

“Not from your advisors?” I said, confused. “Then?—”

“It was from your friend.”

I froze.

My friend?

It had to be Georgiana. She might want me to sign something, I guess, ahead of this wager that they kept talking about—but then, why would they? Hadn’t the arbitration been enough?

And why, asked my beleaguered mind, finally catching up, would they have written to Briar? Surely they would?—

My heart became ice. Why had Georgiana written to Briar?

“Whatever Georgiana said,” I tried to say calmly, “I wouldn’t?—”

“It wasn’t Georgiana. It was Delilah Rotherwick,” said Briar, her gaze sharp as she stared at me.

I blinked. “Lilah?”

Lilah was perhaps the friend who held a grudge longer, sure, but she was also my sister-in-law. True, the legal connection may have been severed when my wife died, but why on earth would she be bothering Briar? It didn’t make sense—unless of course, they were looking for Briar to join the wager.

My heart relaxed and the tension that had been building in my shoulders melted away. “If Lilah wants to talk wagers, that’s excellent news! I didn’t even consider?—”

“She didn’t want to talk about a wager.”

I should have known by the tone of Briar’s voice that it was bad news, but I couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t allow myself to believe it.

What Briar and I had, it was so good. Better than anything I could have imagined, better than I deserved. It wasn’t going to fall apart before me...was it?

“Here,” Briar said quietly, picking up a letter and passing it over to me.

I could hardly hear anything except the thumping of my pulse in my ears. Fine, it was bad news. The question was, how bad?

I realized just how bad the moment I read the first few paragraphs.

And so when I discovered through my informants that my friend has inveigled himself not only into your confidences but your very home, I wanted to send you a warning.

Do not trust Peregrine, the Duke of Markham.

Bitter bile gathered in my mouth and it was all I could do to swallow it down.

Lilah. She couldn't let it go, could she?

By the time I had reached the bottom of the letter, I was ready to throw it across the room and never see my family again. What did I need them for? I had Briar.

But when I looked up, I saw to my instant dismay that I was wrong. I didn't have Briar. Not anymore.

"You—you're not going to believe all this, are you?" I said hotly.

Yet my anger didn't spark the effect I wanted. Briar didn't forcefully disagree, tell me that she would never doubt me, and that she was furious at the boldness that Lilah showed by writing such nonsense.

No. Instead, Briar just looked at me, a coldness in her eyes that I had never seen before.

"I checked my accounts, Peregrine," she said quietly. "I can't believe it. Two

thousand pounds. You thought I wouldn't miss it?"

I swallowed. Ah. Fine, so the timing hadn't quite worked out—but that was easily explained away! I could fix this.

"I can explain," I said calmly. "You see, the thing is?—"

"Stealing from me? Me, Peregrine? Really?" Briar said, rising to her feet, the sudden explosion of energy making me lean back. "You stole from me the very first time we met, and I willed myself to ignore it! I don't know what I was thinking!"

I cringed at the memory but I rose to my feet too. This could all be explained, all Briar had to do was listen. "I can explain Briar—the thing is, all I wanted was?—"

"Yes, that's precisely what I thought," Briar said darkly, stepping back from me. "All you wanted. All you wanted! This was about you. Your ability to get money, your chance to do something, you thought about yourself and no one else!"

"That's not true!" I said hotly, stepping forward as though being closer to Briar would help me explain. "I told you before, I'd worked on an idea that could?—"

"You'd worked on it, an idea you could—is the only person you think about yourself?" Briar said, shaking her head with wide eyes. "I can't believe I was so stupid!"

I swallowed. "You're not stupid, Briar."

"Really? Because as far as I can see, I allowed myself to be bedded by a rogue, offered him a job after he stole from me, gave him my heart, moved him into my townhouse, then was robbed again," Briar said in a cold voice I'd never heard before. "Where have I gone wrong?"

Struggling against the desire to defend myself, I tried to take a deep breath. This was about Briar. She was right, I couldn't make this about me. She was so precious, so important. I wouldn't let her think I'd?—

“I want the money back, and I want you out.”

I blinked. She couldn't have said that. “Briar, I?—”

“I should never have trusted you, Peregrine.” Briar said, and she was blinking back tears, and it broke my heart to see her so wretched.

She'd stepped out of the study now, as though keeping as much physical space between us was the only thing keeping her safe.

As if I would hurt her.

“Briar, you have to listen to me,” I said urgently. Somehow all of this happiness, all the joy I'd found with her, was slipping away. “I'm not the same person I was when you met me—I've changed!”

“You've not changed at all,” Briar breathed, tears glistening in her eyes.

“You are a knave, Markham. You're the duke who risked it all, and you've lost. You are everything you said you didn't like about yourself, everything you feared.

You've just proved yourself to be the worst kind of man, and I want you out. ”

Rage flared in my chest. The injustice of it! If Briar just let me explain: but I never got the chance to explain, did I? My friends hadn't wanted to hear it, my landlord hadn't wanted to, and now Briar, the one person I trusted the most in the world.

Well, I shouldn't have been so surprised. This was what happened.

"Fine. Fine! You want me out? I'm out," I said, words spilling from my lips before I could stop them.

And there was fiery rage roaring through my veins, a rage I knew I should quell but I couldn't. It was always the way. No one wanted to trust me, so why should I give them any cause to?

"Pack up my belongings and send it to me, or dump it, I don't care," I snapped, grabbing my greatcoat from the sofa and tugging it on.

"Burn it, like you're burning this down before even trying to understand.

It may surprise you, Briar, but you've got this wrong.

Big time. And the moment I walk out that door, it'll be too late to fix. "

"Then walk," Briar said, her eyes unwavering. "Walk, Peregrine."

For an instant, just an instant, things could have been different. My hand was on the door to the hallway and I could have said something.

But the words didn't come.

With a guttural growl that revealed more of what I felt than I could put into words, I stormed into the hall, jammed my shoes on, and slammed the door behind me. I didn't stop to take a breath, it seemed, until I was out on the London pavement, the carriages roaring in my ears.

And then I took a breath.

Now what?

THIRTEEN

Briar

I was not crying.

I was not. I was leaking. Entirely different.

After all, it would be pathetic to be crying about a gentleman who clearly had never wanted me. Had perhaps never even liked me. Even if when he looked at me, every part of me had melted. Every part of me had wanted to know what it was to be touched by him, adored by him. Loved by him.

“You’re being an idiot,” I muttered to myself as I remained curled up in a ball under the covers in my bedchamber.

Why couldn’t I lie here? Why not remain here for the rest of my life, never moving, never doing anything?

My advisors would run my financial affairs. Who knew, perhaps they’d prefer to do it without me. Lord knows, they had already tried to do that for so long, I could hardly remember a time when they actually just allowed me to do what I wanted.

I sighed heavily, the warmth of the bed cocooning me.

I never wanted to leave.

But I had to. I couldn't spend my life hiding in my bed, just because I was stupid enough to let a man make me feel like I was nothing.

It took me at least ten minutes to clamber out of bed, and by the time I did so, I had put on, with the assistance of my maid, a heavy woolen gown and a wide shawl. Autumn was definitely here. It wasn't the coldness in my heart that was making the air so frosty.

When I stepped out into my breakfast room...everything was how it was.

I don't know what I had expected. I'd thrown Peregrine out two days ago and had barely left my bedchamber since. No one else had been here. I'd even told my maids to just leave a tray of food at the door and told them not to come in.

Sitting slowly at the table, I saw something odd. A brown parcel.

My heart cracked slightly as I opened it up. The book Peregrine had wanted, and two history books.

"Fine. Fine! You want me out? I'm out."

The words from our argument resounded through my head, and I blinked back tears. How could I have been so stupid to have trusted him?

Peregrine, the Duke of Markham, had given me more than enough reasons not to trust him. Time and time again, I'd wanted to believe he could be better, could be different. But he hadn't actually given me any evidence of that, had he?

A noise. Someone in the hallway.

I don't know why I rose to my feet so swiftly. It wasn't even like Peregrine would be

returning—but I shouldn't have felt so disappointed when I saw who it was.

“Georgiana,” I said weakly as she gave her gloves to my butler. “I know I should have replied to your note inviting me to tea, but I?—”

“When precisely were you going to tell me that you had given your innocence to my rakish friend?” came the sharp tones of my best friend.

I winced. “Ah.”

“‘Ah’ doesn't even begin to cover it, Briar!” said Georgiana, her voice stern. “I can't believe you?—”

“Yes, thank you,” I said quickly, my cheeks burning as I looked away from my butler. “Come in here.”

“I just cannot believe it,” Georgiana muttered as we walked into the breakfast room. “You allowed him to seduce you, to ruin you!”

“So the fact that he moved in with me then stole from me?” I said darkly, dropping into my usual chair. “Is that better or worse?”

There was silence as my friend gazed at me darkly. Then she uttered a swearword that didn't bear repeating.

“Briar,” said Georgiana wearily.

“I know, I know,” I said heavily. “I'm an idiot.”

“Both of you are,” Georgiana said darkly. “But if you really like him?—”

“He’s gone.”

I hadn’t intended to sound so depressed but I couldn’t help it. Peregrine was gone. And I couldn’t believe how upset I was, considering all he’d done to me.

“Leave it with me.”

I blinked. My friend’s steely gaze was unchanged. “No, Georgiana, I?”

“This is a Gambling Dukes club mistake, and we’ll fix it,” said my best friend curtly. “Just leave it with me, won’t you?”

There was no point in arguing with her. I’d learned that a long time ago. “Fine, but Georgiana?”

“Must be going,” Georgiana said brightly. “I’ll see you soon.”

She had marched out of the room before I could say a word, and I was alone again.

I glanced at the silver platter on the sideboard and saw I’d not received any post. Well, that wasn’t a huge surprise. Who was I expecting to write to me?

I drank my tea, and then rose to my feet, moving almost without conscious thought throughout my house. That was assuredly why I found myself standing in the hallway, just inches from his bedchamber.

My guest bedchamber, I told myself fiercely. Peregrine had only lived in it a month or so. This was my townhouse. My home.

Slowly, very slowly, I opened the door.

I'm not sure what I was expecting to see. It was just a bedchamber. Peregrine hadn't made much of an imprint on it. He didn't seem to own much, though now I thought about it, I was pretty sure he'd sold most of it.

There were a few books by the bed, which wasn't made. No surprises there. A towel was hanging near the unmade fire, and there was a trunk at the end of the bed. From the doorway, I could see a pair of breeches and one of the cravats I really liked poking out of it.

My stomach lurched.

I couldn't keep a gentleman in my life simply because I liked his cravats, I told myself fiercely. I had been stupid enough already. Gullible enough to invite this man in.

I couldn't allow myself to make a fool of myself again.

Which was why the notebook only caught my eye as I was closing the door.

Maybe it was a flicker of light moving through the curtains which were half drawn. I don't know what it was that made me look on the bedside table.

But when I did, I could see a notebook. A pen lay beside it and the pages were all crinkled.

I shouldn't look. But Peregrine's betrayal—his second one—had lit such a fire of indignation in me, I cast all thoughts of his privacy to the wind.

Why should he get that respect? He'd taken over two thousand pounds from me. Hadn't I basically bought the possessions he'd abandoned in my room?

It didn't take more than a few heartbeats to step into the room, pick up the notebook, and sit on the bed.

I breathed in deeply.

Damn. This place smelled like him. It was like the warm comfort of a hug embracing me as I sat there, as though Peregrine was right beside me, pulling me into his arms. I breathed in again, my eyelashes fluttering closed.

If I just sat here for a moment, I could almost forget he was gone.

I opened my eyes. The notebook lay in my hand. There was no sign of Peregrine.

My conscience prickled slightly as I opened it up, but I couldn't help myself. I was curious—and I had a right to be. What had Peregrine been doing with my money? Had he planned it right from the beginning, perhaps? Was this all just one long con that I'd managed to get myself tangled into?

Perhaps, and my stomach lurched at the thought, it could have been anyone. Any woman. It just happened to be me.

So when I turned the page to the first in the notebook that had been written in, it took me a moment to realize Peregrine's handwriting, though legible, had been splattered with something.

I blinked. Surely not—tears?

Kineallen, Georgiana, Lilah,

I cannot tell you how sorry I

I never thought it would ever impact you how this

You have to know, I didn't think that

Nothing I can say can will ever make up for the fact that I betrayed you your trust but I know hope that one day

I stared. There it was, over and over again, line after line. Apologies. Apologies to his friends.

In astonished wonder, I turned over the page. This one was far more detailed.

and though I shouldn't have got caught up with it, I did. Did you ever gamble on the edge? Feel the rush of knowing you were onto a good thing, and no one else could stop you? It was like that—and I know it shouldn't have been. This is useless

I should never have taken your faith in me away. You're all that I have. My family. I'm alone in the world now, and I never know how lonely I could

I should never have taken your faith in me away. You're all that I have. My family. I'm alone in the world now, and I regret it with my whole heart. Not just because of what I've lost, but because of how I've hurt you.

I turned another page, and my heart skipped a beat as I saw my name.

Briar, will you marry

A noise. There was a noise coming from downstairs.

I hesitated for a moment, then my brain caught up. A visitor. And I couldn't hardly pretend I was not here.

The gentleman had given his hat and gloves to my butler by the time I had descended the stairs—but I had time to see who was calling on me and for tension to creep up my neck.

Mr. Stephens. My advisor. One of them.

“Good morning, Mr. Stephens,” I said weakly. “Look, I am sorry about not replying to any letters the last few days. I’ve...I’ve been sick.”

It was a lie. But a believable one.

“Yes, your butler said,” my advisor said without much preamble. “Look, I wanted to congratulate you.”

I raised an eyebrow, even though he wouldn’t see it. “For being sick?”

“For the great investment you made, that two thousand pounds you put into the Queen’s Head,” came his words as though from a great distance.

I clutched at the banister. “I...I beg your pardon?”

My lungs constricted, every breath hurt, and though he was babbling in my ear I couldn’t take in a single word.

“—and we hadn’t spotted it as an investment opportunity, something I feel pretty silly about now. But I suppose it doesn’t matter. You did!”

“I did,” I said weakly.

I did. Or rather, Peregrine had.

The two thousand pounds. He hadn't taken it out of my account and transferred it into his own. He'd made an investment—the one I'd been talking about for weeks. And it had made me money.

Almost doubled it, apparently.

“—send the paperwork over next week,” Mr. Stephens was saying in my ear. “And bring us the next idea you have, won't you? We don't want to miss out on your insight, Lady Briar.”

I blinked. “You don't?”

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The man chuckled as he took back his hat and gloves from my still silent butler. “You’re a dark horse, Lady Briar, and no mistake. I’ll see you at the next board meeting.”

The door clicked shut and he was gone.

I lowered myself onto the bottom step of the staircase and looked, almost in wonder, at the notebook in my right hand. The notebook; his notebook. The evidence that Peregrine was perhaps just the man he had tried to become.

Markham

Though I knocked on the door with a certain amount of boldness, I didn’t actually think it would open.

She had wide, front facing windows, after all. It wasn’t like she couldn’t see it was me.

“You,” Lilah said flatly, leaning against the doorframe with a raised eyebrow as her footman backed away. “You’ve got a nerve.”

“I don’t know, I think if we’re talking about who’s got the biggest nerve, I’d say it was you,” I said in a level tone. “I saw the letter.”

For a moment, Lilah just stared at me. Then she blinked, her cheeks flushed ever so slightly. She brought her hands together before her, twisting her fingers as she always did when she was caught out. Or regretted something. Or felt like she was under

attack.

Blast. I hadn't meant to be so forward.

"I can come back later," I said, taking a step back. Perhaps that would be best for me, anyway. Get my thoughts in order.

Georgiana would put me up for one more night, I was almost certain.

"No, come on in," said Lilah quietly. She turned on her heels and wandered back into her hallway.

I hesitated, just for a moment.

Perhaps this a bad idea. I was still full of rage, after all, that Lilah had intervened in what had been the best opportunity I'd ever had for happiness.

But I couldn't blame her. Not after what Briar had found in the financial records of her own ledgers.

How had I been so stupid?

I had come all this way. And Lilah did owe me an apology, of sorts.

Nothing like the one I owed her.

Not for the first time, I cursed the fact I'd accidentally left my notebook in Briar's townhouse. I needed it. Hours had been spent pouring my ideas in that notebook, desperately trying to get the wording exactly right.

And now, when I needed it the most, it was out of reach. Just as out of reach as the

woman who know owned it.

If she hadn't already burned it.

"Pack up my belongings and send it to me, or dump it, I don't care. Burn it, like you're burning this down before even trying to understand. It may surprise you, Briar, but you've got this wrong. Big time. And the moment I walk out that door, it'll be too late to fix."

I sighed, stepped into Lilah's townhouse, and shut the door behind me. "I hope I'm not disturbing."

"You're always disturbing," shot back my friend's voice from further down the hall. "But I'm used to it."

I snorted, despite myself, and wandered into the drawing room.

It was impressive. Lilah had updated the décor since I'd last been here. There was a marble and ivory chess board near the window I hadn't seen before. At the table was what looked like the remnants of a poker night. Three players.

My stomach lurched. The Gambling Dukes...minus me.

"Missed you at poker night," Lilah said softly, confirming my suspicions as she leaned against a bookcase. "I didn't think you'd come."

I shrugged. "Neither did I."

We stood in silence, the awkwardness flowing between us.

How had it got this bad? So awkward that I couldn't even talk to my own sister-in-

law?

Lilah was always the confident one. Some thought her prettier than Georgiana. I couldn't really tell. They were my friends, and they had wardrobes to rival any royal stepping onto a ballroom.

And she had indeed been confident to write to Briar directly. I wouldn't have thought Lilah had it in her.

But she did. And now she'd ruined whatever it was I could have had with Briar.

Not that I could blame her for that. Not entirely.

"I wish you hadn't sent that letter," I said quietly.

I hadn't intended to be so blunt, but then there was no getting around it.

Lilah flushed. "I know."

"There were a lot of things in there that hurt, you know."

"I didn't actually think you'd read it," my friend admitted, cheeks burning but her gaze steady as it met mine. "But I meant what I said. You're bad news, Markham. And I didn't think someone like Lady Briar Weatherford deserved to have the wool pulled over her eyes."

Try as I might, I couldn't stop my hands clenching into fists. Slowly, I unclenched them. "I'm not the villain you think I am."

"Stealing doesn't make you a saint," Lilah pointed out.

I swallowed. “I never stole from you, or the club.”

“Oh Markham, give it a rest,” my friend said with a heavy sigh. “You think I'm going to believe that, with all the evidence we have? All the arbitration, the agreement your lawyer?—”

“I just meant, it never actually left the Gambling Dukes,” I said stiffly. “If you check the safe in your study, you’ll find it there. Honest.”

“Honest?” Lilah said, eyebrow raised.

But obviously she couldn’t help herself. Her curiosity was too high.

Sighing heavily, she stepped past me to the painting of three hunting dogs which she’d set up over her safe. We all knew the combination. It was a safe primarily for the Gambling Dukes, after all.

From here, I could see the look of astonishment.

“Well I’ll be blown,” Lilah breathed. “It’s all here. Markham, I didn’t even think to—why the hell didn’t you say anything?”

“It was never about the money, it was about—I don’t know, the game? The risk?” I sighed heavily as I stepped closer. “I know that doesn’t change the betrayal. But I was never a thief, Lilah. That’s not who I am.”

My friend turned to give me an appraising look. It was cold, at first, but it warmed as I steadily held her gaze.

This was it. The moment I had thought would never come. Decision time.

Lilah's sway with our friends was strong—stronger than Georgiana's, though neither of my friends would probably admit it.

If she was able to forgive me, to see past the initial hurt, to see the man I truly was, was trying to become...then perhaps...

"You're my friend," said Lilah flatly.

I tried to grin as I shrugged. "I guess so."

"And my brother-in-law."

"I still think about her."

"And you're an idiot."

"I've never disagreed with you there."

"And I've destroyed things with Lady Briar Weatherford for you, haven't I?"

I winced, but there was no point in attempting to hide the truth. She'd know, soon enough. "I love her, Lilah."

"Oh, disgusting," my friend said with a dry laugh as she rose from her chair. "I'm not sure I've ever heard you actually express emotions, Markham. What happened to you?"

Laughing wryly, I shook my head. "You know, I don't know. Got a conscience? Met a woman who makes me want to find one?"

"Disgusting," said Lilah, a slow smile creeping over her lips. "Fine, so, I sent her a

letter that painted you in a pretty shocking light. But you've spent what, two, three months with her? You've bedded her, obviously."

There was nothing more cringeworthy than your sister-in-law saying that. Still, I couldn't lie. "Obviously."

"And you love her. I don't see the problem here," Lilah said with a shrug.

"Go see her, tell her that my letter was nonsense—I'll even meet with her, if you like.

Confusion sorted, problem solved. Right?

"She must have seen my hesitation for my friend narrowed her eyes and jabbed me, hard, in the chest. "What did you do?"

I flinched. Not that her jab hurt, but she was right. I had done something, and it was something I should have explained from the very start.

"I made another mistake," I said heavily, regret pouring through my chest.

Lilah's frown deepened. "And when you say made another mistake, you mean?"

"I might have moved some money about," I said weakly. "Money which wasn't...exactly...mine."

The disappointment in my friend's face was almost worse than Briar's—but not quite. "You little?"

"I know I'm your idiotic friend, but can we just go ahead with the assumption that I'm a man who makes terrible mistakes but always wants to rectify them?" I grinned helplessly at Lilah. "The question is, do you think I can salvage this?"

Lilah shook her head slowly, and my heart sank as she spoke. “Honestly, Markham? I don’t know. This time, I really don’t know.”

FOURTEEN

Briar

This was a bad idea, but it was mine, and there was no stopping me now.

Not now I was standing at the desk, making a complete fool of myself.

“I am sorry, miss, but?—”

“Lady Briar,” I said, correcting the irritating man behind the desk. Honestly, I’d said my own name at least three times, the very least he could do was attempt to remember. “And as I said, I would be grateful if you could?—”

“Yes, but you see, the Gambling Club members don’t just drop everything they’re doing to meet random women who turn up at their homes,” said the man dismissively.

He was wearing a livery in a shade of red which did not suit him. His dark greasy hair was pushed back in a sort of wave, and he was frowning at me through dark rimmed glasses.

I tried to smile back. I should have sent a note ahead, I just knew it—but by the time I’d made the decision, I was already halfway here.

Impetuous, I was not. And yet today I was.

“And I heard you,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “And all I’m asking you is to?—”

“I don’t know who you think you are,” interrupted Henry, with a look that told me he wouldn’t care if I was the Queen of Sheba. “The Gambling Dukes are not to be disturbed. And that’s final.”

I let out a long, low breath, and tried to collect myself.

It had, perhaps, been a rash idea. There was nothing more pathetic than a woman turning up at a building as impressive as this one and demanding to see the owners. With no appointment.

I glanced up. Long soaring glass archways curved into a roof that allowed sparkling sunlight to pour through. The flowers in the gardens were positively blooming, even as autumn crept onward, and there was a fresh coat of paint on the door.

Evidently The Gambling Dukes was doing well.

I, on the other hand, was not.

Forcing down the urge to tell the footman precisely who he was talking to—one of the richest woman in Britain—I tried to smile.

“I honestly think that Lilah—that Delilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick will want to see me,” I said, amending my words hastily at the look of horror on the man’s face. “I think you’ll find?—”

“You’re looking for Markham, aren’t you?”

I turned around to face the unfamiliar voice.

It was a man. You could tell he was connected to Peregrine immediately. There was something about his friends, they all had a look. It wasn't one I could describe, except a quiet confidence behind the eyes that proved just how impressive they were.

This one, however, was not as handsome as Peregrine. He didn't have the roguish charm of his friend, nor the ease with which Peregrine stood.

This man looked comfortable, of course. Just simultaneously uncomfortable. Was that because of me?

"Your Grace, I had no idea you knew the lady," babbled the footman behind me. "If I had known?—"

"He's not here," said the man quietly, entirely ignoring the servant and looking instead directly at me. "You would know that, if you knew anything about him."

I bristled. It was difficult not to. I knew Peregrine better than anyone in his club, though they didn't know that right at this moment.

But I would prove it to them.

"I think you'll find you are the ones who don't know much about him," I said coldly, thrusting my hand into my handbag and pulling out the precious notebook. "Here."

Stepping forward, I pressed the notebook into his hands.

"I am Lady Briar Weatherford, by the way," I said, stepping back and trying to look sharply at Peregrine's friend, as though my heart wasn't in my mouth. "And you are?"

"Kineallen," he said with a raised eyebrow. "The Duke of Kineallen. And what's

this?”

Kineallen. The leader of the club, Markham had once called him. No wonder he looked so surprised I was here, ruining his day. Likely as not getting in the way of a few appointments.

Well, there was nothing for it.

“This is Peregrine’s notebook,” I said, pushing aside the guilt I felt. Well, he’d left it in my townhouse, hadn’t he? It wasn’t up to him what I did with it. “I think you’ll find a few things of interest there.”

I spoke far more boldly than I felt, and the Duke of Kineallen seemed to know it.

Despite only having met me minutes before, he chuckled slightly as he opened it. “Really? And you know this because...ah.”

I said nothing as his eyes perused the page. Then he turned the page, his expression growing more and more astonished with every word that he took in.

My heart slowed slightly, now the greatest hurdle had been reached.

Simply posting the notebook would not have worked. Who knows how many people there were between the Gambling Dukes and their post? I couldn’t be certain they’d ever actually see it. And I had to be. It was important they saw this.

“Damn,” the Duke Kineallen breathed. “Turns out the rake had a conscience after all.”

Irritation bubbled within me. “That man has a great deal more conscience than half the people in London.”

That made him look up, his eyes cold. “And you know this because—what? He’s always acted honestly with you?”

The barb stung, and what hurt even more was that it was a shot in the dark that landed home. Even though the Duke of Kineallen hadn’t known what Peregrine had done with my money, he knew enough about his friend to guess.

That hurt.

But I lifted my head high as I said, “I thought you’d want to know that, for when Peregrine—when the Duke of Markham contacts you. I think it’s important for everyone to have all the facts, don’t you?”

“I haven’t heard from my idiot friend,” said Kineallen shortly. “If he turned up here?—”

“He won’t,” said another voice.

I swallowed as the beautiful woman who had awkwardly stood by our table at the Queen’s Head approached us.

Delilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.

Some of their servants were staring at us now. We weren’t making a scene, exactly, but I was sure that most of the time, the Gambling Dukes held their meetings in private. They didn’t debate the morals of a man in public.

“Of course he won’t turn up here,” I said quietly. “He already believes it’s too late to reconcile with any of you. Even though I think, honestly, it was his greatest wish.”

“Making it up to my family, somehow, is my priority right now.”

“I told you,” said the Duke of Kineallen, a testiness entering his voice. “I haven’t heard from Markham, and?—”

“I have,” said Lady Rotherwick quietly.

My gaze snapped over to her. She had? When? Why? Had he mentioned me?

Thankfully I managed to keep my questions to myself before I completely embarrassed myself.

Peregrine would never have mentioned me, and even if he had, I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear it.

It wasn’t like our last conversation had been that complimentary.

“Briar, you have to listen to me. I’m not the same person I was when you met me—I’ve changed!”

“You’ve not changed at all. You are a knave, Markham. You’re the duke who risked it all, and you’ve lost. You are everything you said you didn’t like about yourself, everything you feared. You’ve just proved yourself to be the worst kind of man, and I want you out.”

“Kineallen, I need to talk to you,” the Lady Rotherwick was muttering in her friend’s ear. “Something has changed?—”

“I hope it has,” came a voice that I knew, a voice that crept down my spine tingling all the way, a voice that made my legs quiver and my heart throb painfully. “I really hope it has.”

Markham

Every breath hurt, but it had been my own damn fault for running the last few streets. My impatience hadn't helped in the long run. My sides ached from running and I knew every word was going to hurt.

But it had to be said.

The trouble was, I could hardly concentrate when Briar was looking at me like that. Like I'd just arrived to save the day, but only had to because I'd destroyed it in the first place. Like she'd expected me long ago, and I was late, and she wasn't sure if she was going to forgive me.

She had to forgive me.

"Markham." Kineallen's word was cold. He'd managed to put into two syllables everything I knew he was thinking.

Not hatred. My oldest friend was far above that, I thought bitterly. Kineallen wouldn't demean himself to feel something so unproductive.

No, he just felt distaste, I was sure. Disappointment. Many other things I probably didn't want to know.

"What's taking so long?" came a voice I knew well. "I thought you said—Markham."

Georgiana halted as she stepped up the footpath to Kineallen's house, her expression astonished as she saw me, her arm linked with her new husband Monroe.

Great. The whole family was here.

"What's this, Markham?" Kineallen said quietly, lifting up?—

Hell. How in God's name had he got that?

"Ah," I said with a wry laugh. "Funny thing. I...well, I?—"

"There are apologies in here," Kineallen said, glancing down at it before passing it to Georgiana, who whistled as she skimmed through it. "And Lilah tells me you actually didn't steal any money, you idiot."

That had to be a good sign. Kineallen almost never spoke with such passion. He was the epitome of detachment.

I tried not to grin, but I met Monroe's eye and couldn't help myself. "Is a thief really a thief if he didn't steal anything?"

"He's an ass," Monroe pointed out fairly. "They've gone through the mill for you, you?—"

"There's so much to talk about—so many conversations long overdue," said Briar quietly.

Her voice cut through the chatter of my friends, and my heart leapt as she took my hand.

"Don't you think it's worth it, though? After all, you're all one family.

You've got each other. Don't you all deserve to know the truth? "

I realized I was holding my breath as I looked at each of my friends in turn. Georgiana looked ready to forgive me immediately, but then she and I had always been close. Monroe didn't look that bothered.

You could read Kineallen. He was irritated, aware we'd made this far too public. The Gambling Dukes servants were whispering and that damned footman was probably selling the story to the nearest tabloid as we spoke.

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It was Lilah who was glaring the most. “You still cost us time. Money. Effort. Heartache.”

“I know,” I said swiftly. “And I’m sorry. I really am. I want to make it up to you all.”

My heartbeat raced—or was that Briar’s pulse, throbbing as her hand held mine tightly?

“You’re an ass,” Lilah said flatly.

I nodded. “Indeed.”

“Of the highest degree.”

“I’m not arguing with you, Lilah.”

“I hope you know what this means,” said Kineallen dryly. “I’m going to have to offer you a place in the club again.”

Something akin to hope leapt in my chest—but it was quickly quashed by reality.

I’d made enough mistakes. Time to stop before the next one.

“Thank you, but no,” I said quietly.

Briar’s hand squeezed mine. “You’re quite sure?”

“You’re being ridiculous,” was my friend Kineallen’s only response.

“You really don’t want to rejoin the Gambling Dukes?” Lilah said. Her suspicion was potent, her every word dripping with it.

I looked up at them.

Kineallen, Georgiana, and Lilah. The people who made me who I am today, for better or for worse. They had stood by me, but gave up when it got too complicated. When I got too complicated.

I loved them, but I couldn’t work with them again. Not after everything that happened.

Surely not.

“I have to do something on my own. Earn my own money, actually go into trade properly,” I said ruefully, trying to ignore Briar’s snort of laughter.

“I’ll always be ready to consult, of course.

But actually join the club again?” I looked at each of them, my heart breaking.

Only now I was no longer a part of it, and it was no longer a part of me, could I see it clearly.

Yes, I desperately wanted to return, no matter what my words said...

but there was no place for me here. My home was elsewhere.

In the hand that had slipped into mine. “I’ve got different plans. ”

“Your plans are idiotic,” said Lilah frankly, raising an eyebrow. “You honestly can’t tell me you don’t want to be a part of this. Part of the wager. Risk it all?”

I hesitated. “I can’t risk it all. Not any longer.”

Not now I had something worth risking.

“Then risk something. Risk it on your own terms,” said Kineallen quietly. “We’re not just friends, Markham. We’re family. You’re a part of the Gambling Dukes whether we want you to be or not.”

“And there are some days that I very much do not want you to be,” said Lilah darkly. Then she grinned. “But today I do. Come on, Markham. Join us.”

Tears itched at the corners of my eyes. They wanted me back—there was still a place for me in the Gambling Dukes. With my friends. My family.

“I do want to join again,” I admitted with a wry grin.

“You do?” asked Briar quietly.

I turned to her, and knew I had to do it. It was too soon, too rushed, the whole world would think I was crazy.

But that didn’t matter. I knew what I wanted.

And it was her.

Slowly, without taking my eyes from Lady Briar Weatherford, I slowly lowered down onto one knee. The ground was cold but it was nothing to the warmth in my chest.

Georgiana gasped and Lilah rolled her eyes.

But they weren't the ones who mattered.

"You are not in earnest," Briar breathed.

I grinned up at her from bended knee. This was ridiculous, I knew, and some people would think I was an idiot for even considering this.

But she was it. The one. The one person in the world who had tried to see the best in me. The one person in the world I had felt able to be open with, vulnerable with. The one person I wanted to be better for.

Trying to be a better man on my own...well, it hadn't worked out.

I'd never felt so terrible as when Briar had looked at me like that.

And now all I wanted to do was go through the rest of my life living with her. Living for her. Living every moment of my life as though it was my last chance to make Briar smile.

"Peregrine," Briar said softly, her cheeks pink. "You?—"

"Lady Briar Weatherford," I said quietly, ignoring the snort from Kineallen.

This moment was all about Briar. "I lied about not knowing who you were. I stole from you the moment I could. I hid the worst about me, moved into your townhouse when I should have gone to my friends for help, took your money and invested it without asking?—"

"Is this an apology, a confession, or a proposal?" interrupted Briar with a nervous

grin. “Peregrine, I don’t know what you’re doing!”

“Neither do I,” I said, swallowing my panic and looking up into her light blue eyes. At once, all the panic in me stilled. “But I’m with you, and that’s where I want to be. All I want. I’ve been a knave, a fool, a liar, and not quite a thief. But when I’m with you, Briar, I’m just...Peregrine.”

She blinked back what could have been a tear. Was Briar crying?

“And I know it’s rushed, I know it’s fast—but I have never felt so sure about anything in my life as this,” I said, pushing on before Briar could pull her hand away.

“I want to marry you, be your husband, continue to work on being a better version of myself. I...I know I haven’t much to offer.

I just have myself. The only question is, do you want me? Will you come down to my level?”

My heart was in my mouth, and I couldn’t read Briar’s face. For the first time ever, she was completely closed to me.

Then all of a sudden, Briar was kneeling on the ground outside Kineallen’s home, pulling me close, placing her lips on mine.

I melted into her, unable to do anything else. How could I? This was either the first of a lifetime of kisses, or a final kiss goodbye. And I couldn’t tell which.

Even when Briar pulled away from me, tears sparkling in her eyes, I couldn’t tell.

“Briar, answer me,” I said urgently in a low voice. “God’s sake woman, put me out of my misery!”

“You are a rogue, and a thief of sorts,” Briar said with a laugh. “And you have risked it all—and won. And I will marry you, Peregrine.”

I could hear cheers somewhere off in the distance. I was almost certain Georgiana was exclaiming with joy, and Lilah was shaking her head with disbelief. Who knew what my friends thought.

It didn’t matter. I had Briar in my arms and her promise on my lips and her heart in mine.

And we had a lifetime to share them.

Briar

I tugged awkwardly at the veil. “Are you sure?—”

“If you ask me one more time, I’m going to start wondering whether it’s actually your choice of groom you’re having second thoughts about,” shot back my future sister-in-law.

I swallowed. The Lady Rotherwick wasn’t frightening—not in an obvious way. But like with every other person I’d ever met, she had this...way about her. She seemed to know precisely what I was worried about, before I even voiced it.

“He loves you,” Lady Rotherwick said smartly, her green floor-length bridesmaid’s gown fitting her to perfection. “He’s an idiot.”

Something must have changed on my face.

“Not because he loves you,” she added hastily. “I’m not good at this sort of thing. Georgiana?”

My friend, gowned immaculately in a matching gown, stepped forward. “What Lilah means to say is that though Markham is a complete dolt?—”

“Dolt, that was the word I was looking for,” cut in Lady Rotherwick with a grin.

“—he has done one thing right,” continued Georgiana, matching her friend’s smile. “He found you.”

“It’s good to have another woman in this family,” said Lady Rotherwick. “I never thought I—Lord above, is that Kineallen? He’s not wearing that waistcoat to this thing, has he?”

Before either I or Georgiana could respond, she rushed out of the room we had been getting ready in and stormed toward another wayward friend.

There was something about the Gambling Dukes. Even though they weren’t related, you could tell. There was something about the eyes. An intelligence. A fierce, angry, determination. A frustration.

It was...maddening. Glorious. Wonderful.

It made me wonder how I hadn’t seen it when I’d left Georgiana at Almack’s and almost immediately run into her friend...

“You’re sure you want to do this?”

I turned to Georgiana, my cheeks burning. “You think I shouldn’t?”

“I didn’t say that,” she shot back with a grin. “But you have to admit—meeting then getting married just a few months later? You are an heiress. You don’t have to?”

“I know I don’t,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “But I want to.

She didn’t mean any harm. Hell, she probably wanted what was best for me.

From the little Peregrine had said, I got the impression his friends were constantly having to clean up from his messes.

Maybe Georgiana and Lady Rotherwick just saw me as another disaster they were

going to have to sort out in the future.

But I was tired of being pushed about, tired of being told what was and what wasn't good for me. I didn't need to be advised, or receive consultations, or be delicately informed that marrying Peregrine was a bad idea.

On paper, he was a nightmare.

In bed, he was a dream.

And somewhere in between, he had found me. Seen me. Known me. All of me.

And he hadn't been fazed by the money, the wealth that dripped from every part of me. No, instead he saw something else worth investing in.

Me.

"I know it's rushed," I said, glancing at the looking glass and flushing to see myself in a veil. "But I'm certain. As certain as I've ever been in anything in my life, I know I want to marry Peregrine."

Georgiana sighed. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you." Then she grinned. "I know a great investment opportunity in Timbuktu which you can send him to investigate, if you get sick of him."

I couldn't help but laugh. "You know, I don't think that's going to be necessary, but thanks."

Precisely what I had expected from the large ornate chapel I hadn't even known was in London, I'm not sure. I know that when I arrived outside it, my mouth dropped.

There was an archway of white roses over the door. Lavender was woven into it, gifting its sweet scent to the autumn afternoon. And I could see, just through the slight crack in the open door, lavender plants were in gold pots all the way down the aisle.

“Ready?” asked my coachman.

I took a deep breath, and nodded. “Ready.”

“Who’s walking you down the aisle?” he asked, looking about.

My heart skipped a beat. I knew my parents were there with me, in spirit. “Myself.”

The vows were spoken so swiftly, I could hardly keep track of them.

Fine, that was a lie. But honestly, anyone would have found it hard to concentrate when facing Peregrine, the Duke of Markham in a cravat knot that was so sharp, it could have cut him in half.

When he took his hands in mine and vowed to love me for richer and for poorer, my whole center melted.

We’d already shared so much: delicious lovemaking, theft, devious bargains, arguments, and passionate reconciliations. We’d fallen into bed, fallen out, and at each turn, the absolute knave had kept me guessing.

It was a gamble, marrying this man. But I wouldn’t want to play my cards any other way.

“You may kiss the?—”

Peregrine didn't wait. His hungry lips had already claimed mine and he devoured me. I melted into his arms, giving him everything—at least, everything I could in a church before all those we know, and quite a few I had never met.

“Peregrine,” I breathed, ending the kiss far sooner than I would wish if we were alone.

There were cheers around us, but I didn't care about them. I was only interested in him.

Peregrine grinned, his eyes dark. “Just a taste of what's to come.”

Much as I kind of wished it, we didn't head straight from the chapel to somewhere quiet where he could give me all the pleasure I wanted. No, we had to be polite. We had to attend our own wedding breakfast.

It wasn't that bad. In fact, it was rather beautiful. A luxury ship rarely made its way up the Thames at this time of year, after all, and absolutely no expense had been spared, it seemed, in its decoration.

“Anything for you,” Peregrine grinned.

I couldn't help but laugh. “What, you're splashing the cash already, now you're back in with your friends?”

“Fine, anything my friends can do for you,” he corrected with a roguish grin. “But I couldn't help it. I wanted everything to be perfect for you, Briar. Perfect.”

Markham

Perfect.

There was no better word for Lady Briar Weatherford. The Lady Briar Markham now, of course.

“Perfect?” Briar repeated, her cheeks pinking in that way that always made me ache for her. “I think you’re a little ahead of yourself here. I’m hardly perfect.”

“Perhaps not, but being with you is,” I admitted. It was still strange, to speak so openly, so honestly about how I felt about her.

But I wasn’t an idiot. I’d almost lost her once—twice, if you include the fact I’d stolen from her the very first time I met her.

I wasn’t about to lose that.

“You’re teasing me,” said Briar quietly, her fingers tightening in mine.

Swallowing hard, I tried not to rush into speaking.

This had to be right.

The afternoon was slipping into evening and candles were being lit all over the yacht. Servants moved about seamlessly, our guests chattering happily as the champagne flowed. There was a string quartet playing and braziers keeping us pleasantly warm.

Turns out, money can buy you almost everything.

Almost, but not quite.

I took in Briar’s blue, trusting eyes. The way her hair had been pinned, so elegant, emphasizing the curves of her breasts, the slightness of her waist. The wedding gown was exquisite: I couldn’t understand how undergarments could fit under such a...

Groaning, I bit my bottom lip.

Of course. She wasn't wearing undergarments.

"Peregrine?" Briar stepped close. "Are you quite well?"

We were nestled in a corner of the ship. In a way, it was almost as though we were alone.

I took a deep breath. "Briar I...I have to tell you something."

Her eyes widened. "What?—"

"It's nothing bad," I said hastily, seeing the panic rise in her chest. "Blast, I meant to say this in a better...Briar, when I met you, I was nothing."

I expected Briar to smile, to find joy in my words, but still she looked hesitant.

"Well, I guess so. I mean, you'd been booted out of your club?—"

"I don't mean money—fine, I didn't have much money either," I said, hating every word that came from my mouth.

I swallowed, tasting bitter panic. This was all going wrong.

Briar leaned back hesitantly. "Peregrine, I don't...I don't understand."

Taking a deep breath, I knew I had to be as honest as possible. Even if that meant I would be...vulnerable.

Damnit.

“I had lost everything of actual value. My pride, my place in the Gambling Dukes. My family,” I said, my eyes searching out hers. Could Briar see, could she understand? “My self-respect. God, Briar, I was a thief, a liar, I was the worst sort of knave.”

Briar merely stood there, staring at me. God, I wanted her. But before I pleased her again, she had to know that this marriage, this wedding...it was so much more than it looked on the surface.

And then just a tiny corner of her lip smiled. And my heart melted.

Everything I’d planned, the big speech I’d practiced in the mirror. It was all gone.

“You changed me,” I said simply.

Briar chuckled as she glanced down at her hand—now adorned with my ring. “Peregrine, I didn’t?—”

“Not on purpose, and in ways I don’t think you’ll ever quite know,” I said gently, lifting a hand to cup her cheek. My heart tightened. “In ways I don’t think I’ll ever quite know. But you changed me. Made me a better man—definitely a better friend.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she said ruefully as sparklers started to be lit by Briar’s—by our servants, to our guests’ amazement. “I don’t think Lady Rotherwick is a fan of me.”

“She’s got a lot on her mind at the moment. The big wager that approaches—but I don’t want to talk about that,” I said, catching myself. Damn, it was easy to slide back into old habits. “It’s you. I’m so grateful to you, and I adore you. Everything you are?—”

“Even the money?”

“Especially the money,” I teased, then pressed a kiss against her forehead as Briar laughed. “Seriously. I may never be the man you deserve, but I hope?—”

“You’re the man I want,” said Briar softly, leaning into my hand on her cheek. “Peregrine, Duke of Markham, you are a rogue. You still haven’t returned my jade figurine?—”

I swore, hard, under my breath. I hadn’t.

“—but you make me happy. You make me know who I am, I can’t describe it,” said Briar with a laugh, leaning into my side.

God, I could feel her softness, her warmth. It was enough to make me?—

“And I am ready to spend the rest of my life with you, making sure you never steal from me again,” Briar said, her teasing smile far more tempting than she realized.

I grinned. “Now why didn’t we use that for our vows?”

She tapped me lightly on the arm, then glanced out at our guests. “You know precisely why!”

There was such warmth in her words, I almost moaned. “You’re driving me wild, you know.”

“Not my fault,” Briar said with a shrug, but shifted purposefully to rub slightly against me. “Ah, now what is that in your pocket? Not my figurine, is it?”

Damn, this temptress was good. The trouble was, she was playing with someone who

had far more cards in the deck. There were at least six places on Briar's body I knew I could stroke to bring her close to a climax.

Not that I should be touching them in public at our wedding reception, of course...

But it seemed I wasn't the only one with one thing on their mind. Briar's eyes darted down to my manhood, thrumming against her hip in my breeches.

When she met my eyes again, I grinned. God, how did I deserve her?

"Do you think they'll miss us?"

"Let them," I breathed, my hand snaking around to her buttocks and almost weeping at the deliciousness of their plumpness in my palm. "I ensured the master suite here was ready for us."

"You gambled that we'd be using it, then?" Briar said, her voice nothing but a husky whisper as she led me toward the door that led to it.

I swallowed. "Oh, I hoped, if I played my cards right."

"Well, you may just risk it all and win the hand, Peregrine," said Briar as we slipped into the master suite, the door closing shutting out all noise, all the world.

I swallowed, unable to believe I could be this lucky. "I didn't just win, Briar Weatherford. I got everything. I got you."

Lilah

I was the queen of winning hearts, I told myself. I was in complete control.

I took a deep breath and plastered a smile on my face.

They didn't need to know how desperately I needed this to go well. How my shoulders ached with leaning over a desk all last night. How I had agonized over my choice of jewelry in the desperate hope it would impress.

Impress. Who was I fooling?

The Count of Guadalencia and his retinue, all the way from Spain, wasn't going to be impressed with my pearl necklace and my diamond earbobs.

Well. That particular gentleman would.

But the rest? They wanted to see the numbers, discuss the probabilities, be confident that we would pay up if the Gambling Dukes lost...

Interrogate me. For over two hours.

I did my best not to glance at the longcase clock in the corner, but I could hear its tick, slowly crunching away time.

"So, Lady Rotherwick," said one of the gentlemen whose names I had already forgotten. "This is it, is it?"

Doing everything I could not to cringe, I stepped forward from the sofa where I had been seated, and moved over to the table where the Spanish Count and two of his most trusted advisors were seated.

Slowly, slowly, I allowed myself to slip into the fourth chair, conscious of the way two of them watched my form appreciatively.

But not the Spanish Count. He was more attentive to the notebook in his hands where he had been jotting down his thoughts throughout our conversation.

“It?” I repeated, as lightly as possible. “You mean your chance to triple your initial investment within eighteen months, should you win the wager? Yes, this is it.”

All too late, I saw one of the five people in his retinue who had come to the Gambling Dukes to consider placing a wager raise a suspicious eyebrow.

Damn. I should have known to play it cool rather than go in hard.

That was the trouble with the Gambling Dukes. I knew it was unusual, a lady earning her own income, and doing so with three friends was perhaps even more unusual still.

But what was the London Stock Exchange, if not a gambling den of their own?

Four friends. Four widowers. Four poverty-stricken nobles.

It had seemed the cleverest idea in the world to establish a gambling club to earn a little coin...but the Gambling Dukes—I had wanted Duchesses, but had been shouted down—had become so successful, earning us such impressive incomes, that now others wanted to join.

After a great amount of debate between the four of us—the Duke of Kineallen, the

Duke of Markham, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, and myself the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick—we started to accept members.

Nobility only, of course. Gentlemen like the Count of Guadalencia.

Who I was currently in the process of embarrassing myself before.

I could feel the heat rushing into my cheeks and tried desperately not to care that I was blushing in the middle of a meeting.

Blushing? Really? I couldn't get through one meeting without allowing my flushing face to take over?

Kineallen was going to kill me.

And it was my friend's irritated response that I just knew I was going to receive the moment I stepped out of our drawing room—that was, the drawing room in his London townhouse which acted as the base for our Gambling Dukes club—that put me on edge even more.

That was the trouble with running a gambling club with your friends. It was all too easy to argue when things went wrong.

With a great effort, I managed to pull myself together. The smile returned, my cheeks I think were only now a light pink, and I smoothed my hands down my skirt.

I was Lilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.

I was one of the Gambling Dukes, the friends who had built one of the most successful wagering clubs in London—in just a few years.

I had an income of eight thousand pounds.

I had spent the better part of my life ensuring that nothing and no one could ever hurt me; a persona of utter cool, calm, and collection. No one, not even my friends, knew just how much I was terrified of these sorts of meetings.

And I was only leading this meeting because my friend Markham had to be thrown out of the club—for thieving.

Long story.

“No, I meant are these the numbers? Your forecasting is impressive, Lady Rotherwick, and it’s clear to see that you know your stuff when it comes to a wager,” said the same gentleman whose name I still couldn’t remember. “The trouble is your reputation.”

I flinched.

Dear Lord, I really had to overcome this hatred of the way Society demanded a woman’s reputation be just so. It had been what, three years? Three years, and I hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him . For all I knew, he’d left London.

Part of me hoped that he had. Spending any more time with William Parry...

But that wasn’t what they’d said, I told myself fiercely, trying to keep calm. No one had mentioned the bastard who had broken my heart.

No, they’d talked about my reputation.

The one weakness of the Gambling Dukes.

“We have a strong reputation,” I said. It was a complete lie, and I could see on the faces of the Spanish noblemen that they knew it. Still, I had to keep talking. “The Gambling Dukes will soon be known all across Europe for?—”

“As far as I'm concerned, the Gambling Dukes is known across Europe this very moment, and not for the right reasons,” interrupted a gentleman with dark hair and a frown. “Wasn't your friend thrown out of the business for stealing? From the club itself? Markham, right?”

My stomach lurched, but I repeated the sentence my friends and I had formulated, perfected, and memorized. “A huge misunderstanding. Markham was merely moving club funds to?—”

“Another club account, yes,” continued the gentleman, speaking over me.

Goodness, I hated it when people did that.

“But the point is, none of the rest of you knew he was doing that. You thought he was stealing from you,” said another gentleman quietly, gazing at me severely.

“You were so convinced, you threw him out of the Gambling Dukes, did you not? I don't just mean you, Lady Rotherwick, my apologies. I mean your whole club.”

I smiled weakly. Well, they were obviously well informed, there was no point trying to hide it. “Yes, we did.”

Blast.

This was what happened when no one in the club had thought to prevent the story from leaking into the international press. Oh, we had been careful to ensure that no journalist had heard the story in London...but we should have thought about this. We

should have been prepared.

Kineallen—that was the Duke of Kineallen—was my eldest friend, the leader of our little club. He was nice but dull, and enjoyed ordering people about. That was a good place for him.

My best friend Georgiana, the Dowager Duchess of Cartice, had attempted to learn as much of the law as a woman would be permitted. It had been her and her now husband, a Mr. Fynn Monroe, who had discovered Markham's treachery. Or at least, what we thought was treachery.

Our rascal of a friend the Duke of Markham had been thrown out of our club, only for it to be revealed a few months ago that actually, he'd just been bored. Moving club money about without us finding out? All part of a stupid bet.

God, he was an idiot.

And then there was me. A widow, whose lover had scandalously promised much and then abandoned her three years ago. Oh, I had ridden out that particular scandal...at least, I thought I had.

I smiled weakly. "Look, all of that has been resolved now. We are stronger than?—"

"Has the Duke of Markham rejoined the Gambling Dukes?" the Count of Guadalencia said, leaning forward.

I heaved an internal sigh that Markham had rejected Kineallen's foolish offer...and then accepted it. "Well...yes. We trust Markham, and even though he offered to leave, we felt that... But he has nothing to do with this particular wager, that has been created completely independently?—"

“But you still let it happen,” interrupted one of the Count’s retinue.

I tried not to glare, but as he flushed and scribbled a note down in his notebook, I could see with a sinking heart that I hadn’t quite managed it.

Well, damn. I could see where this was going. There was only one way it could.

“I want to thank you, Lady Rotherwick, for your time today,” said the Count of Guadalencia smoothly. “I think you and your friends have some excellent ideas, and that is hard to find wagers of this heightened interest.”

I had heard the patter before. This was the third group of potential gamblers I’d met with this week alone, and though it was the meeting which had lasted the longest, it was going to end the same way. I just knew it.

All my suspicions and fears were confirmed as the Count of Guadalencia steepled his fingers and looked at me closely.

“The thing is, Lady Rotherwick, you are fighting a losing battle, and I do not see how you can win,” he said quietly.

I had to put in one last attempt. “If you are concerned about the?—”

“Your competitors do not interest me,” he said with a wave of his hand. “You do, Lady Rotherwick. You and all your friends. You create a good gambling club, yes, but can you successfully run one?”

I winced. Well, it was never nice to have one’s judgement criticized in such an oblique way. “You mean my friend, Markham.”

The Count of Guadalencia shrugged. “If you cannot keep your own friends in line,

and from stealing from the club?—”

“He didn’t exactly steal?—”

“I was talking, Lady Rotherwick,” he said quietly.

I swallowed, hating that I’d allowed my passion to get the better of me.

That was the trouble, wasn’t it? The fieriest temper, the Gambling Dukes member swiftest to assume the worst, the one who never wants to believe the best of others.

I had my reasons. I was sure anyone like me would. But that didn’t help me right now.

“Your judgement are in question,” the Count of Guadalencia said quietly. “And for that reason, you must see it is completely impossible for us to consider realistically wagering such large sums with you.”

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Determined not to let my disappointment show, I ensured my head didn't fall. "I see."

And I did. And it was crushing.

I knew our Gambling Club was legitimate; yes, we won more often than we lost, but that was because we understood people so well, understood the odds, knew how to select our targets.

Our income depended on bets with the rich, but in truth we were running out of sufficiently rich people within London.

Just one more wager. Kineallen was confident that one last, large wager would be sufficient to purchase the competencies, land, and investments we needed to secure all of our financial futures.

My friends, my four closest friends. Kineallen was still a broken man after the loss of his wife and their babe in childbed—Georgiana's sister, so she'd had two people to mourn when her own husband had died, though admittedly the man was in his eighties.

Markham had hardly known his bride, my own sister, an arranged marriage for the betterment of all our families...

a marriage which had ended in accident and death for my sister just months later.

And so we'd clung together. Of course we had. We were all we had.

Until the Gambling Dukes.

And if it was going to survive, thrive, purchase for us the investments needed to provide us with incomes for life, we needed more members.

So we needed one more willing people to make the bet.

We needed the Count of Guadalencia.

And I had failed. My friends depended on me to get his agreement, and he was going to walk out here with all his money, all his connections, everything we wanted.

It was difficult not to feel crushed. I'd been certain, as we had talked about this wager and the potential it could bring to the Gambling Dukes, that I could secure the money. Out of all my friends, I thought I could do it.

And here I was, watching a third potential wagerer walk away.

"I am sorry, Lady Rotherwick," said one of the gentlemen as the five of his retinue started rising and smoothing down their breeches. "I can see that you are...saddened. About our decision."

I swallowed. I was not going to allow my voice to quaver. "I think you will all be the ones disappointed when?—"

"The meeting is over," he said, and there was a kindness in his voice now that I hadn't heard when he'd been questioning me on the probabilities of our wager. "You don't have to try to impress me anymore."

Before I could stop them, my shoulders slumped. "I've failed."

"You haven't succeeded, not yet," he said with a tilt of her head. "And I can imagine

there is a great deal of pressure on you right now.”

There were always rumors, about every club or lady in Society—but for us, it was almost true. If we didn’t find someone willing to accept our wager in the next few months, The Gambling Dukes simply would not be able to keep going. We were running on borrowed time as it was.

“I would suggest, if you do not mind me saying so, that you need someone in who specializes in?—”

“Marketing,” I said wearily. “I know.”

The woman raised an eyebrow as her four fellow colleagues waited for her by the door. “Well if you knew that, Lady Rotherwick, what on earth is stopping you?”

She strode away and I stood there by the projected growth chart, heart sinking into my chest.

Because she was right. And I knew precisely why I had absolutely no desire to go anywhere near marketing.

William Parry.

William

There were only three ways that a person could enter the Norfolk Club in London.

Firstly, you could have an income of ten thousand pounds or more. But honestly, how many gentlemen with incomes that high have you heard of? Not many. Maybe fewer, with investments failing left, right, and center.

Secondly, you could be given membership by a member of the royal family. Difficult,

when Prinny had already rewarded all his friends and did not appear minded to make any more.

Or thirdly, you could be sponsored in by a current member.

That was how I was standing at the smoking room in the prestigious Norfolk Club, smiling at the gentleman who had nominated me and gained me provisional membership only a few weeks ago.

“As I said, I owe you, Anderley,” I said, clicking a glass of definitely illegally imported brandy with him. “Thank you.”

Anderley grinned. “Anything to get a bit of young blood in the Norfolk.”

I nodded, returning his smile.

Because I could see what he meant. This was my first official Norfolk attendance, a monthly occasion held in the clubhouse in London.

The idea, according to the brochure that had been given to me after my acceptance, was to exchange ideas with the best in Society. Constantly be sharpening our skills.

And if we were fortunate, gain greater connections.

And tonight was a most unusual occurrence, at least when it came to gentlemen’s clubs; ladies were present. Oh, they had to be connected most closely to at least two members, to be sure...but still. Ladies. In the Norfolk.

My blood hummed.

My gaze flickered across women in diamonds, men with signet rings larger than a guinea, and a general sense of excited chatter in the room.

Yes, I could do great things here. Gain connections, be invited to house parties—really start to make a name for myself.

Soon William Parry was going to be on everyone's lips.

"Don't get too predatory too fast," came Anderley's voice with a warning tone.

I looked back at my friend and laughed. "Am I that obvious?"

"You never were one for holding back when it came to what you wanted," he admitted with a wry shake of the head. "Your father was the same, and I like that trait in both of you. But I warn you, don't underestimate the people here."

I snorted. "Have a little more faith in me, Anderley. You don't think I can impress them?"

"I didn't say that," said Anderley, taking a swig of his brandy. "I just said not to move too fast. You have just entered the Norfolk?—"

"You make it sound like White's," I said with a grin.

A pair of ladies accepted glasses of white wine from a footman in the Norfolk livery, and I tried not to cast my eye over them too closely.

Both were pretty. One was a little taller, a little more curvaceous, which I adored. The other had eyes to die for, warming up to me immediately.

I shifted on my feet. Well, it was good to see that?—

Snap!

I jerked my head back in shock as my heart skipped a beat. Anderley was laughing.

Apparently snapping his fingers right in front of my eyes when I wasn't expecting it was genuinely hilarious.

"Focus, man!" he said with a chuckle as the two pretty ladies meandered over to converse with a trio of gentlemen. "This isn't White's—it's far more prestigious, and far more difficult to get into. And you can get out just as fast."

That sharpened my mind.

It had taken all my persuasion to get Anderley to sponsor me.

One of the Anderley brothers; a pair of twins, the grandsons of a duke.

The elder would inherit, their father already gone, and that would make the younger a marquess.

People to know, particular once their grandfather had died.

A harsh man in business, he was one of my most loyal friends.

The idea of getting thrown out, after all this hard work, before I'd managed to achieve anything?

Now that would be a real disappointment.

Especially as I was carefully ignoring letters from my landlord about that dammed rent increase. How was anyone supposed to live in London with rents like that?

"Look, I've got to head over and converse with a few people," said Anderley with a knowing look. "Can I trust you enough to leave you alone for ten minutes?"

My smile only flickered for a moment. "Of course."

I tried to speak more like Anderley. Son of a marquess, grandson of a duke; there was an effortless flow to his words that someone like me had never managed to learn. It would have been easy to be envious, and at times, I was. But most of the time, I was grateful. Grateful for his friendship.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” Anderley said, claspings me on the shoulder for a moment before he wove his way through the crowd.

And it was getting crowded. Evidently there were more people in this Norfolk Club than I had anticipated—which just meant more opportunities for me to meet them, get to know them, and benefit from their reputations. It should be as easy as that.

But though the whole reason I was here was to climb up the social ladder, I couldn’t help but get distracted, and it was by my one weakness.

Raven curls.

My stomach lurched as I spotted a lady over on the other side of the room. She had her back to me so I couldn’t see her face, but the hair was enough to spike my interest.

I could try to lie to myself, tell myself it was just a coincidence I was always attracted to dark, raven hair. Particularly dark hair with curls.

But I wasn’t an idiot. It was because of Lilah. Lilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.

How it had all gone so terribly wrong, I didn’t know. I wasn’t entirely sure which of us had ended it. It had all got so tangled by the end, I think we were both just relieved that it had ended.

Ever since then, I hadn’t seriously pursued another woman. The only women I’d even

considered...had been raven haired.

Making sure not to quite catch the eye of anyone else in the place, I smiled and nodded at people as I started to walk through the room. Not directly at her, whoever she was. The last thing I needed was Anderley thinking I was here just to find a mistress to bed.

But, if I could? Why not enjoy the bonus?

I settled myself just a few feet away from the raven haired woman. I sipped my brandy. And I listened.

“—would you do in that situation?” the woman was saying to her companion eagerly.

Something prickled around my heart. There was something familiar about that voice.

Unfortunately I didn't get a chance to hear it again. The person she was standing with, a gentleman with a brilliantly white smile and eyes that were too close together, grinned at her.

“Why, don't end up in that position in the first place, obviously!” he said loudly, as though that was an actual response to the lady's question. “I mean, you would have to be really stupid to do that!”

I winced. Not a great conversationalist, then.

“Only a real idiot would end up there!” the gentleman continued, evidently oblivious that he was directly insulting the lady in front of him. “I can't think of anyone who'd be so?—”

“That's one way to look at it, I suppose,” I said aloud.

My voice carried, just as I intended it to. Well, I wanted to put the gentleman out of his misery and rescue the poor lady who was being insulted right to her face. No one deserved that, even if the fool didn't realize it.

The lady with raven curls turned around to look at me, and my heart stopped.

She didn't look like Lilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.

She was Lilah, the Dowager Duchess of Rotherwick.

A slow grin spread across my face as warmth suffused through my chest. Damn. Lilah. It had been...what, two years since I'd seen her? Almost three?

And now she was here.

It didn't look like Lilah was as pleased to see me as I was her. To the contrary, her face immediately fell, and a furrow appeared in her brow.

Ah.

"You," she said succinctly.

The gentleman she'd been talking to looked between us, evidently unsure what he should do next. "I...uh..."

"Why don't you grab another drink, my good man?" I said, stepping toward them and not taking my eyes off Lilah. "Lady Rotherwick and I have business to discuss."

"Drop dead," Lilah said conversationally.

"Can't die when I've got so much to live for," I returned without missing a beat.

“Living as you do isn’t what I’d call living at all,” Lilah said, her frown deepening.

“I...I think I’ll just go,” said the gentleman, glancing at me with an unsure expression.

I grinned. “Great idea. I’ll deal with Lilah for you?—”

“I don’t need anyone to—” Lilah glared at me as the gentleman slipped into the crowd, and she folded her arms in that irritated expression I knew so well. “Go away, Parry.”

“I think you’ll find this is a drinks evening at the Norfolk Club, something I am in but you are not,” I said delicately, sipping my brandy as nonchalantly as I could.

Which was difficult.

I couldn’t believe it. Lilah, here? After years of being in London, waiting for us to run into each other, it seemed almost ridiculous that it was here of all places. A club I had only just managed to get into, and where she by rights shouldn’t be.

Lilah was still glaring. “I’m here for the Gambling Dukes, Parry. Not for socializing, and certainly not reminiscing about the past.”

I watched her wince as she brought it up at all, and my heart contracted painfully. Was it truly that bad to see me? Had I been really that awful a lover that she couldn’t even bring herself to look at me?

Damn. Perhaps it didn’t end quite as smoothly as I remembered.

“You’re here for gambling advice, right?” I said in a quieter voice, stepping closer.

Lilah immediately took a step back. “Go away.”

I couldn't help but grin. "Is this how you do all your business dealings? No wonder you're looking for help with that club of yours, Lilah. Though you always knew how to present yourself, I'll give you that. You look...good."

She looked better than good. Lilah had always been beautiful, and it had been a delight to have her on my arm all those years ago when we had...well, not been courting. She'd been a recent widow and I'd known I would be staying a bachelor. Nonetheless, heads had always turned.

She was even more beautiful now. Wealth had brought her to a modiste who really understood her shape, the complexion of her skin, the warmth of her eyes.

Admittedly, Lilah was glaring at me coldly right at this moment.

She snorted. "And you look terrible. Same as ever."

But I could see the dilation of her eyes, the way her gaze had widened then looked me up and down. Lilah may not like it, but she couldn't fight the fact she found me attractive.

It had been our mutual attraction that had got us together in the first place. And our complete inability to compromise that had driven us apart.

"Now, Lilah," I said quietly, allowing my voice to drop below the thrumming noise of conversation around us. "Let's just be honest, shall we? You want me. My position in Society, my witty banter...perhaps even more."

For a moment, just a moment, I thought she was going to say yes. My heart leapt, my lungs tightened with shock, and I was already planning how to get her back to my place when?—

"You could not be more wrong," said Lilah sweetly as she looked daggers at me. "I

would rather the Gambling Dukes fall apart than be helped by you. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to find someone who actually knows what they're talking about in this place."

And she strode away from me without a second glance.

I blinked. Ah. That, I hadn't expected.