



The Marquess' Disguised Heiress (Love and Secrets of the Ton #13)

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Category: Historical

Description: Orphaned Lady Eliza Gordon lives as a maid, stripped of her name and inheritance by a cruel uncle. Now known only as Beth, she endures her fate with quiet resilience, her dreams of freedom the sole spark in a life shrouded in shadows. Her world shifts when a familiar figure appears in the street, stirring memories of a childhood friend she once adored.

Alexander Blackwood, esteemed and elusive, returns to Eliza's world, capturing her heart anew. By day, he's George, the amiable stable boy, and by night, he becomes a masked stranger at the masquerade, reigniting her heart. As hidden enemies close in, his resolve to protect Eliza intensifies.

Entangled in a world of hidden enemies and buried secrets, Eliza and Alexander are drawn to each other as they fight for justice. With each step, their bond deepens, but so do the dangers they face. Can their love endure as they battle the past and claim the future waiting for them?

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Prologue

“Can I have another piece of cheese, Miss Donnell?” Eliza asked her nanny, seated just beside her on the picnic blanket laid out for them in the open gardens under the large oak tree.

When she had awoken this morning, the weather had been extremely pleasant, and Eliza had asked Lara to skip their lessons today and have a picnic instead.

It was usually rather difficult to dissuade Lara, but Eliza had shown some mock sadness over her parents’ prolonged absence, which had softened Lara’s heart, and she had easily obliged to the innocent request.

“Of course, Lady Eliza,” Lara had conceded, tucking her newly emerged white strands under her well-secured bun, “I suppose one afternoon of missed classes won’t cause our progress much harm.”

She picked up another piece of cheese from the picnic basket packed for them by the cook and handed it to Eliza, who took it greedily. She had always loved cheese and that was what she had asked her parents to bring for her when they returned from their trip to France.

Eliza had been extremely upset when they had refused to take her along with them on their trip, knowing fully well that she was never left behind on such adventures.

Her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Grafton, had insisted she stayed home while they attended to some important work.

Being the perfect daughter even at the young age of seven, Eliza had not wanted to be a bother and simply agreed to let them go if they brought her exquisite flavours of cheese from France.

And just like that, the deal was made.

Only now, she waited for them day and night since it was already past their visiting time, and they should be home any time now. Her mother had written to her almost two weeks ago and promised they would return soon. Eliza had never been happier about a letter, having been away from her parents long enough already.

“Do you think Mama and Papa might return home today?” she asked Lara, who smiled at her, running a hand through Eliza’s beautiful, golden hair.

“I certainly hope so,” Lara sighed. “The house does not seem alive without the duke and duchess.”

Eliza stared curiously at Lara, wondering what the comment meant, but in her heart, she already knew. It was apparent how much the servants loved her parents, them being the kindest duke and duchess in all of England, or at least that was what everyone who knew them said.

All Eliza knew was that they were the most perfect parents ever to exist and loved her more than she could have ever asked for.

“I cannot wait for the gifts they will bring for me.” Eliza laughed, taking a small bite from the cube of cheese in her hand.

“My goodness, Miss Eliza.” Lara chuckled. “And here I thought you were upset because you missed them so dearly. But you clearly only miss the presents they always bring for you.”

“That is not true,” Eliza protested, shaking her head vehemently at her nanny.

“Well, then, what is true?”

“I miss them.” Eliza shrugged, remembering her mother’s warm laughter. It had been too long since Eliza had slept in her mother’s lap, and where Lara was equally warm and comforting towards her, Eliza needed her mother.

She wanted to sit beside her father and listen to the countless stories he told her from his youth and the anecdotes they might bring home from France.

She wanted to laugh and joke with them and, as Lara had said, make the house feel alive again. Things were still lively and just as happy, but Eliza certainly could not wait for the house to be full once more.

It had been much too long.

“If you close your eyes and pray to God with all your heart, your prayers might be answered, and they will return home.”

“Are you certain?”

“Positive,” Lara replied seriously.

Without wasting another second, Eliza closed her eyes, her heart focused entirely on praying to God.

Please let them come home soon, even if they have forgotten my gifts. I miss them so much, and I cannot wait to see them. Please God.

As Eliza opened her eyes, a smile on her face, her eyes suddenly widened as they fell

on Mr Baker, the butler, standing right in front of her.

She felt as if all her wishes were coming true and the butler was here to inform her that her parents had returned home at last. She stood up excitedly, completely ignoring the solemn expression on Mr Baker's face.

"My Lady," he began speaking, his voice softer than usual, "someone is waiting for you in the drawing room. You must come at once."

"Are they here!? Are Mama and Papa here?"

"Miss Eliz-" he began speaking again, but Eliza felt the strings of her patience coming loose, and she ran past him straight towards the house just a few feet away.

She could hear both Mr Baker and Miss Donnell's footsteps after her, but the exhilaration from the run and the happiness of her prayers finally being accepted was too much for Eliza to bear. Her parents were waiting for her in the drawing room, and all she needed to do was hug them. As tightly as she could.

As she pushed through the large drawing room door, her tiny frame exerting all her strength, the large smile that graced her lips immediately faded.

What are they doing here?

Where she had expected a familiar set of blonde hair and grey-blue eyes like her own, she was met with unfamiliar faces, their expressions grim. Eliza felt as if she had met both of them before, but she could not place them.

The disappointment of not finding her parents waiting for her was too large, and for a few short seconds, she stood staring at them and completely forgot her manners.

“May I help you?” She was suddenly jerked into the role of being the only family member present in the house, the duty of meeting the guests falling on her.

Even if she did not know who they were.

“Eliza, darling!” The woman, her blonde hair tied in a neat chignon, immediately made her way towards Eliza, arms spread as if in an embrace.

Before Eliza could understand what was happening, the woman bent down, her hands resting on Eliza’s bare arms as she held her close. The woman’s dark blue eyes were nothing like Eliza’s mother’s, for her mother’s eyes were as clear as the ocean on a sunny day, while this person had dark blue eyes, almost as dark as the night sea.

For reasons she could not place, Eliza suddenly felt afraid.

Something is not right.

“The last time we saw you, you were barely two years old, and you are almost a young woman now,” the man added, making his way towards her. His raven hair was neatly styled, and his face looked quite a lot like her father’s, but his eyes were more grey than blue.

Who are they? And where are my parents?

“Pardon me, but I have no memory of meeting the two of you. Could you please tell me your names?”

The man bent down as well, almost at eye level with Eliza now.

“I am Edgar Russel, my dear, the Earl of Leicester, and this is my wife, Beatrice Russel. Surely you cannot say that you have no memory of meeting your one and

only uncle?”

Uncle? Eliza had never been more confused.

“You are my father’s brother?” she asked, her eyebrows scrunching.

“Yes,” the woman, Beatrice Russel, replied.

She took Eliza’s hand and led her towards the sofa, where she made Eliza sit down before sitting beside her. Footsteps reached just outside the drawing room but stopped there, and Eliza knew someone was standing there. She was sure it must be Mr Baker or Lara and just the semblance of their presence gave her strength.

Her heart, on the other hand, was still gripped in fear.

“I am afraid my parents are not here if you have come to see them,” Eliza quickly said, unsure of the purpose of this unannounced visit.

“We have come bearing news, my child,” Beatrice Russel said, her dark blue eyes suddenly filling with moisture.

Eliza’s heartbeat accelerated.

“What news?”

“Your parents’ carriage met with an accident while returning home to you. We live near the accident scene, and when we got the news, we went to see and recognized the carriage.”

Accident? Eliza felt a faint ringing in her ears as her head began to spin.

“Are they okay? Are they resting at your place or are they still on their way here?” she found herself asking, although a part of her mind kept telling her that the question was pointless. If her parents were okay, they would have come home themselves. They had met with an accident and were no longer present here.

She felt tears sting her eyes.

“The accident was too serious, my dear,” her uncle replied, “even the physician could not do anything to save them. They passed away.”

She could hear the woman beside her, her aunt, sobbing loudly, but the ringing in Eliza’s ears only increased until she could not hear anything. She looked up, her uncle’s mouth still moving as he stared at Eliza calmly. She blinked multiple times, trying to focus on his words.

“... We will be moving in with you immediately so you do not feel alone ... our whole family ... I have children your age, Eliza, and you will not feel as if you have lost your family even for one second ... Henry and Victoria ... and Margaret ... we will take care of you, Eliza.”

Her parents were gone. They were not coming back.

How is this true? How is any of this real?

She felt tears running down her face, and she was certain her pale, porcelain skin must be botched red. She shared that trait with her mother because whenever she cried, her skin also turned red. Not anymore. Her mother would never shed any tears ever again because she was no longer in this world. She was gone.

No. No. It can’t be.

Eliza looked up as the drawing room door opened, and Miss Donnell walked inside along with Mr Baker. Some other servants were right behind them as well. Eliza saw tears in Ralph's eyes, her father's trusted valet. Everyone knew. She could see on their faces that everyone knew her parents were gone, but Eliza could not believe it.

"Miss Eliza?" Lara whispered, walking towards Eliza.

Lara's hand on her face forced Eliza out of her shocked stance, and she looked around. Her uncle and aunt were still there, right beside her on the other side, but Eliza could not care. She could not care about what they had just said. Everyone was lying.

Her parents had promised they would return from France and bring her cheese and exquisite presents, and they always kept their promise. They would never abandon her in this manner. Eliza was certain.

"It cannot be true," she whispered, staring straight at nothing in particular, "I am sure it is just a silly misunderstanding, and Mama and Papa are on their way home to us right now. They cannot just leave like this and never return. It is not true."

"My Lady," Mr Baker came closer, his face streaked with tears, "it is true. His Grace and Her Grace are no longer in this world. We have received the news from several sources. I am terribly sorry for this unfortunate sadness thrust upon you."

"Ralph," Eliza called out to the elderly valet, standing at the back of the group, sobbing uncontrollably, "Ralph, you must tell them it is not true. They will return to us, won't they?"

She stood up from the sofa, letting go of Lara's touch, and hurried towards Ralph, who quickly wiped the tears on his face. He bent down, sitting on his knees in front of Eliza as he looked at her. Eliza could see the truth in his face. Even he did not

believe that her parents were returning.

How can everyone be so pessimistic?

“I wish it were a simple misunderstanding, My Lady.” He shook his head. “But the news is true.”

No.

It cannot be.

Footsteps came through the open drawing room door, and Eliza looked up, hoping half to death for her parents to be standing there. She wanted to run to their warm embrace and tell everyone how it was just a harmless joke, and they were still alive.

They had to be.

However, instead of her parents, a familiar set of faces met her. The Blackwoods were here. Eliza immediately knew if someone knew the truth, it would be the trusted neighbours they had on the next estate since they were her parents’ closest friends. Eliza immediately ran towards Lord and Lady Lennox, their son, Alexander, right behind them.

“You must tell me at once that everyone is lying to me.” Eliza could no longer control her sobbing. “Tell me my parents are still on their way to the estate.”

“Oh, my child,” Lady Isabelle Blackwood, the Marchioness of Lennox, bent down and engulfed Eliza into her comforting arms. Eliza clung to her, crying, her worst fear confirmed.

Her parents were no more.

No one had been lying, and it was certainly not a joke. Her parents had truly left.

She parted from Lady Blackwood, her eyes falling on the grief-stricken face of her father's best friend, Lord Richard Blackwood. Alexander, who was just a few years older than Eliza and one of her closest friends, stood just beside his father respectfully, appearing sorrowful. The Blackwoods would never lie to her.

Her parents had left her all alone in this world.

Eliza felt as if she could not breathe, and without waiting another second, she ran straight out of the drawing room, past the main door of the house, which had been left open. Unsure of where her feet were taking her, she kept running and running until she finally could not run anymore and stopped.

The little creek, which lay just between their estates, lay in front of her, and Eliza sat down, letting her feet dip into the cold water. She always came here with Alexander when they wanted to go fishing or just have a little adventure. Eliza felt both happy and safe here, and right now, she could not think of any other place that might feel the same way as this little corner.

“Eliza?”

She did not need to turn around to know who was behind her; his soft, friendly voice was a little too familiar. It was Alexander. Her closest friend. Her secret keeper and confidante. The only person who taught her tricks and told her secrets of the world.

She stayed quiet as he came and sat beside her, taking his shoes off to dip his feet in the water as well. This was a ritual they shared, and Eliza could not even remember how often she sat this way with him, simply talking.

Although all those times were happy times, and they had laughed their hearts out, but

today, Eliza felt as if she could never even laugh again.

“What will I do, Alexander? What will I do without them?”

“I cannot even imagine the pain you must be suffering at this very moment, Eliza,” he whispered, “but what I do know is that no pain is too large for your heart and for this world. Things happen unexpectedly, and we have to endure them, but all the pain passes away with time. You just have to be strong.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Eliza, I know you feel alone right now.” He sighed, turning to look at her, their feet still dipped in the cool, clear water. “But you are not alone. You have your family and every single one of your servants love you with all their heart. But more than all of that, you have me and my family with you here. We will truly never let you feel alone. I promise.”

Eliza felt numb, tears no longer coming to her eyes.

“I miss them.” Despite Alexander’s comforting words, a cold dread settled over her, and Eliza felt devastated and terrified as if someone had taken away the one thing she cherished most in the world. As if no one was there to protect her any longer, and she was left with no one and nothing.

“They are not gone, Eliza.”

“What do you mean?” She finally looked at him. His dark brown hair flew breezily with the wind as Eliza stared sadly at his friendly face. His round, russet eyes remained trained on her. Staring at him comforted her as if she was reminded she still had her friend.

“They are with you in your heart, Eliza. They always will be.” He smiled, his entire face shining, “Their memories are stored in your mind and every corner of your house, and when you look around, you will find they are with you everywhere. I know it feels as if they have left you all alone, but they will never leave you now. They will forever be looking over you from the skies above.”

“Forever?”

“Always.” He moved in closer, patting her head affectionately as he always did whenever she asked him a question. She leaned in to the touch, comforted by its familiarity.

“So I will never be alone?” She felt like a weak little girl in front of Alexander, but his comforting expression made everything seem right. He lifted his right hand, tracing the beauty spot on her left cheek.

Eliza remembered how he always told her that the two beauty marks on her face, one under her right eye and the other on her left cheek, made her appear unique since no one else could ever have them but Eliza.

She tried to smile underneath his touch but failed.

“Never ever.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

As Eliza crept closer to Alexander, her head resting on his shoulder, she felt that despite the gut-wrenching grief in her body, things would eventually be alright again.

Hopefully, very, very soon.

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Chapter 1

Fourteen years later ...

She turned sideways, the flimsy piece of cloth she was using as a blanket sliding away from one side, exposing her back to the coldness of the attic. She flinched, quickly fixing her makeshift blanket to cover her once again from head to toe and tried to fall back asleep. Although, she knew it was a failed attempt.

The lone window in the entirely bare room was curtain-less, the early morning light filtering in through the translucent glass. She sighed, finally opening her eyes, knowing it was time to wake up anyway.

The house must still be asleep except for those in the servant quarters, who must be awake by now, already beginning to do their respective jobs.

She must get up as well.

Finally pushing away the cloth from over her body, Eliza sat straight on her rickety excuse of a bed, trying to shake sleep from her eyes.

She had not been able to sleep early last night, having been forced to stay up while Victoria was visiting a friend in a nearby estate for a house party from which she was bound to return late. Only once Victoria returned, and Eliza had made sure she needed nothing, would she be able to fall asleep.

Lara had constantly asked her to go to sleep, for she would see to Victoria, but Eliza

could never agree to that proposition, knowing fully well how important Lara's sleep was for her in old age.

Now that she was no longer a nanny as she had once been for Eliza, she was reduced to being a scullery maid and had to wake up early in the morning as well.

"I will not allow grief to consume me today," Eliza whispered in the almost empty attic, which was now her bedroom, "I will try to be happy."

She sat up straighter, preparing for her everyday ritual.

"Dear God, I must thank you for giving me shelter, food, and clothes to wear, even if they are just used clothes that Victoria no longer wants for herself. I must thank you for letting me have my own space and my own bedroom, even if it is in the attic. I must thank you for ensuring I am still with the company of all those who loved me once in this house and are still here to protect me, guide me, and keep me safe from Uncle Edgar and Aunty Beatrice. I must thank you for not filling my heart with bitterness or hatred and keeping my smile intact. Thank you, God. I can't ask for anything more."

She opened her eyes, a smile coming to her blush pink lips as she breathed in deeply. She knew how important it was for her to thank God daily, or else her circumstances would have thrown her into a fit of rage.

She could not afford for that to happen.

Not when she had no means to change her circumstances and no desire to leave the house, which belonged to her, even if it had been stolen away.

No. No. I cannot think about that. Not today.

Tears stung her eyes as she stood up, folding her blanket neatly as she remembered the past once more. Uncle Edgar had shifted into the Grafton Manor right after her parents' death, and everything had gone downhill since.

Eliza had been reduced to the role of a servant in the house, everything that belonged to her snatched away.

Her room, clothes, jewellery, possessions, and everything she held dear were given to Victoria, Uncle Edgar's daughter and similar in age to Eliza. She had been forced to move into the attic, her identity taken away from her. Despite being of noble blood, she no longer felt like a lady and had made peace with the fact that it was no longer her life.

Her life was this now.

For she was no longer Eliza. Even her name had been taken away from her as Uncle Edgar and Aunt Beatrice began to address her as Beth instead, ensuring her identity was erased in a way that no one even remembered she existed. That was all Eliza was now. A servant in a house that had once been her very own.

"Oh good God," she sighed, realizing how late she already was, and quickly fixing her hair without the aid of a looking glass.

Once her light blonde waves were well secured in a braid, which she hoped looked half presentable, she raced downstairs straight towards the kitchen. Just as she had expected, this part of the house was already awake, and all the servants were at work.

"Good morning!" Eliza greeted the cook, Mrs Abouela, loudly, along with the kitchen maids helping her prepare breakfast. She quickly assumed her position in front of a burning stove, beginning to prepare tea and coffee for all the members of the house.

“Mornin’, Eliza,” Amelia greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, and Eliza smiled at her friend.

Eliza loved Amelia like a sister, the two of them growing closer after Amelia had started working at the house. She was the eldest of seven siblings and had a hefty amount of responsibilities over her head. Eliza loved the young woman’s courage, and they immediately became friends due to being closer in age.

However, despite their friendship, Eliza couldn’t help noticing how bitter Amelia was at times, the trauma of having a difficult childhood catching up to her. But Eliza could never hold it against her.

“Morning!”

“Are ye beginning to make the tea?” Amelia asked, and Eliza nodded, returning to work.

To her dismay, everyone preferred having their morning beverage differently, which only meant added work. All the other maids were terrified of getting it wrong, but Eliza had years of practice and knew she could simply not go wrong.

“I will see you later,” Amelia said, walking away, clearly rushing to complete her own set of chores.

Eliza smiled at her before returning her eyes to the kettle.

“Lady Eliza!” Lara’s voice in her ear forced her to turn around as the aged woman came inside the kitchen.

“You must not be calling me that, Lara,” Eliza whispered, hoping the other servants hadn’t heard Lara.

“To hell with it,” Lara snickered. “You will always be Lady Eliza to me no matter what that uncle of yours says.”

Eliza looked guiltily at the cooks and the maids, but they were completely oblivious to their conversation. Eliza herself did not wish to cross anyone from the house and cause trouble for herself and Lara since even Lara had been asked to start addressing her as Beth only.

She had learned very early on that acceptance was always the easiest thing, and the sooner you accepted things, the better it was for you.

“Let’s not begin any unnecessary arguments this early in the day,” Eliza joked, hoping for Lara to stay calm. Progressing age and the worsening condition of the house had turned her sour, and Eliza could not blame her. Most of the servants hated the conditions here since everyone in the house was absurdly cruel and harsh.

“You are right.” Lara nodded, standing beside her, “Did you have any breakfast yourself?”

“Not yet.”

“And you are standing here preparing tea for them instead,” Lara said disapprovingly.

“I will eat once I have served this. I would rather have some peace while eating and not have to hurry.”

Lara nodded as Eliza poured everyone’s beverage into separate cups and balanced them meticulously on a tray before leaving the kitchen.

Without wasting a single second, she quickly made her way towards the living room where, just as she had expected, her Uncle Edgar was already seated with his back

towards Eliza as she entered.

She silently walked in front of him, picking up his sugarless cup of tea and placing it on the table. He looked away from the piece of parchment in his hand to pin Eliza with a look, but she did not say anything.

“Have you forgotten all your manners, girl?” he asked, his voice thundering unnecessarily. Eliza knew he only raised his voice to achieve dominance over those below him, but it had stopped affecting her quite some time ago. She could hardly care any longer.

“Pardon?”

“I do not remember you wishing me a good morning.”

If she could roll her eyes right now, she would. However, she refrained for the sake of avoiding unnecessary drama and only angering him for no reason at this early hour.

“You were busy reading your letter, and I did not wish to be the reason your focus was broken. I do apologize. Good morning, Uncle Edgar.”

He nodded, not replying to her greeting.

“About the letter, it’s from Beatrice.”

Eliza hoped with all her heart for the letter not to say that she was returning soon because out of everyone, she was the absolute worst person to be present in the house. She had been away in London for three weeks now, and everything had been much more peaceful.

“I hope she is doing well.”

“She is.” Uncle Edgar nodded, “She wishes us all to head to London at once because she is planning to co-host a masquerade ball with her friends.”

Eliza kept her expression neutral, already knowing what followed this revelation.

“I want you to make sure everyone is ready for travelling in two days’ time and their luggage is packed. If anyone requires or needs anything, you will look into it personally, and you will be coming too, of course.”

Oh God. Why me?

“I will make sure everything is right. You mustn’t worry.”

He nodded at her, his eyes returning to the letter, and Eliza took it as her sign to leave. She slipped out of the living room and went upstairs towards Henry’s bedchamber, already wanting to puke at the thought of seeing his face. It was true she did not like any of her cousins, but her hatred for Henry was due to the terrible person he was.

On top of being dishonest and immoral, he was also a rake who had no respect for her or any woman at all. He had never been kind to her and only brought her extended misery. Despite that, he had demanded only Eliza be the one to bring him his morning coffee, getting extremely angry if someone else dared to step into his bedchamber.

She knocked softly, and Henry’s valet opened the door for her. He was standing in front of the looking glass, staring into his reflection, but upon seeing Eliza, he turned around, a leering smile on his lips.

He had never been conventionally handsome, but to Eliza, he always only appeared ugly. She hated that he, too, had blond hair and blue eyes like her own, even if the shades were vastly different, but the mere fact that she was related to him was almost disgusting.

“Good morning, beautiful.”

His valet looked at Eliza at the comment, an apologetic smile on the face of the young man, but Eliza nodded at him to assure him she was alright.

“Good morning.”

She placed his steaming mug of hot coffee on the table in his bedchamber and began to turn around to leave, but he hopped forward to block her path. Eliza looked up at him, unsure what he was trying to achieve.

“You look exceptionally charming this morning,” he said, sighing dreamily and baring his teeth.

“My room does not have a looking glass, so I thank you for the observation,” Eliza said seriously, leaving no room for even the slightest hint of a smile.

“You can take my looking glass, and I can simply get another.” He shrugged, motioning towards the large mirror in his room.

“Why, thank you,” Eliza replied, trying to appear sarcastically grateful, “but I am not obsessed with staring at my reflection for hours. You can go ahead and keep it.”

Without letting him add another remark, she ducked from underneath his arm and hurried straight out of the bedchamber, not wanting to be in his presence even a minute longer. He made her hate men even though Eliza was hopeful that not all men

were as awful as Henry Russel.

Thank God, she sighed, stepping out at last.

Eliza's eyes fell on the several smaller pieces of mirrors on the wall, and she walked closer, staring at her broken reflection. To her surprise, the braid appeared rather presentable, her blonde hair shining as a streak of sunlight from the open window fell on them.

Her gaze fell on her pale skin, which almost looked untouched except for the beauty marks under her right eye and over her left cheek. She had never liked them, but everyone had always told her that the marks were signs of beauty.

Am I beautiful? She wasn't certain.

Shaking all such thoughts away, she made her way forward and knocked softly on Victoria's door. Her ladies' maid opened it, moving away so Eliza could see the bed.

Just as she had expected, Victoria was still asleep, having returned rather late last night, and Eliza was almost grateful for not having to face her.

"I will take this," her maid whispered, taking the cup of tea that belonged to Victoria from Eliza's tray, which was only left with one more cup.

"Thank you," Eliza replied gratefully.

The maid, Trina, smiled at Eliza before closing the door, and Eliza made her way towards Margaret's bedchamber. As Eliza knocked, Margaret opened the door and invited her inside as always. Out of all the Russel children, Margaret was the only one who was kind to Eliza and far different from the rest of her family.

“Good morning, Beth,” she greeted Eliza with her assigned name as Eliza placed her cup of hot chocolate and biscuits on the table.

“Good morning, Margaret.”

Eliza knew the reason Margaret was different was that her family treated her like the runt of the litter. She had failed to adopt the blonde hair and blue eyes, the common feature in both Henry and Victoria. Instead, she had her father’s raven hair and grey eyes, making her look slightly different.

She was plainer and a little heavier than what was considered attractive by fashionable standards. Eliza had heard Beatrice constantly reprimand Margaret to eat less to lose the extra body fat.

It was both insensitive and jarring, especially coming from a mother. However, Eliza could see how weak Margaret really was, for she had never been able to stand against the cruelty of her parents and siblings.

“I hope you have a good day,” Margaret wished her as Eliza exited the bedchamber and returned to the kitchen.

At least she is kind to me.

Eliza shook her head, not wanting to derail her train of thought, and carried the empty tray back to the kitchen. Just as she had expected, breakfast had been served in the dining room and all the household servants were gathered in the kitchen, having their own breakfast.

Eliza smiled, seeing Ralph, who now worked as a stable hand at the house, his loyalty not allowing him to leave despite his advanced age.

“Beth!” Ralph called out to her, patting the chair beside him so she could come sit down.

Her heart always melted whenever she realized that no matter what, Ralph always saved a seat for her whenever they were all eating in the kitchen, and if Eliza were out working, he would even assemble her a plate.

Just as she had expected, a small plate filled with tea and biscuits was placed on top of the chair, and Eliza sat down, putting the plate on her lap.

“Oh Ralph, you do so much for me.” She smiled at him, taking a sip of her steaming, hot tea.

“Of course, Miss Eliza.” He was another person who refused to call her Beth whenever they were alone.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Eliza suddenly said, standing up from the chair and clearing her throat to gather everyone’s attention. All the other servants in the household both loved and respected her, and at least, here, Eliza always felt as if she was still home.

They all looked at her expectantly since mostly it was she who came bearing news.

“The family will be leaving for London a little earlier now since Lady Leicester is hosting a masquerade, and the family must be present for it. Hence, some of us will be going along with them. Everyone will probably be informed by tonight if they have to go, so be prepared,” Eliza said with a tilt of her head, noticing the glow in everyone’s gaze.

She knew what everyone was hoping for: to be the ones who were supposed to stay back.

I wish I could have been one of those, too.

“Are you going?” Ralph asked her, and Eliza nodded.

She sat back down, keeping her plate in her lap once again as she continued eating. She had not even realized how hungry she was, not even having eaten last night.

Everyone had been asking her to eat regularly since she was constantly losing weight, but she remained extremely busy with work around the house and mostly forgot.

If it had not been for Ralph and Lara, she would have fallen sick by now, and it was just the two of them taking care of her in whatever way they possibly could.

“Do you really believe Uncle Edgar will let me stay behind and have a few moments of peace for myself?” She sighed, not wanting to feel discontented.

Although, at times like these, it was a little too difficult.

“It is alright,” he replied, “I just hope I come along as well so you do not have to survive the London Season catastrophe all alone.”

“I hope so, too, Ralph.”

They continued having breakfast in silence, but all Eliza could think about was her dread of this upcoming trip. It was an awful thing to think about, but she knew the moment she stepped foot in London, all five members of the Russel family would only make her life even more miserable than they did in the countryside.

London meant balls and parties and constantly arriving guests. It meant excessive socializing, and the entire work for the household would fall on Eliza, with no one there to save or protect her.

Although, what other choice did she have? She had resigned herself to this fate and she must be brave in the face of it. She had endured worse, and this was simply another test.

I will be just fine.

She had to be. She said goodbye to Ralph and put the plate and cup away, leaving the kitchen, which was still in the midst of conversations between the other servants. She needed to escape to the attic for a little while because even though she was trying to be resilient in the face of every hardship, sometimes it felt too much.

She needed to escape somehow. She could not live this way forever.

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Chapter 2

My dearest Alexander,

I am ecstatic to find out that you have not only arrived in London but have also bought the Blackwood Estate, which we sold before leaving for France after your father's death. I miss you terribly, but I must thank you for taking heed of my concerns seriously and going to England at once to find Eliza.

The little girl was left all alone in the world, and we even left her two years later when we had to move away from our country home and cross the country to where Richard's parents resided and needed us.

You are well aware that I continued writing to her, and so did you, until one day, she asked us to stop writing and disappeared. My heart has ached since that very day, and I hope you find her soon enough.

The Grafton London Estate is right beside the Blackwood Estate, and you must visit it at once to find out whether Eliza is here or in the country. Do write to me once you find out anything.

With love,

Mother

Alexander folded the letter that his valet, George, had handed to him a few minutes earlier, saying it had just arrived from France. He missed his mother just as much and

even missed Mary, his little sister, who was just fifteen years old. However, Alexander knew he needed to be in London.

What he had thought would be a short search where he would be reunited with his childhood friend, Lady Eliza, had turned into a mystery he could not understand how to unfold.

It had only been five days since he had arrived in London, during which he had hired a private investigator to look into the matter along with buying the Blackwood Manor and moving here.

From what he had found out through the servants, what once had been the Grafton Estate was now known as the Russel Estate, the Russel family making religious use of the place. In fact, the place had not been occupied by any member of the Gordon family for years now, and no one was even aware what had become of them.

How was it even possible?

“My Lord?” George called out to him, and Alexander looked up, still rather confused about the whole thing.

“Yes?”

“Mr Striker is here to see you.”

Alexander stood up at once, eager to see the private investigator he had hired to look into the matter.

It was true he had come to London on his mother’s request and guilt over not knowing what had become of her best friend’s daughter, but a part of him missed Eliza just as much. He had been thirteen while she had been seven, but she had been

much older for her age, and far too mature.

The two of them had bonded over their mutual love for adventure, and he had taught her things that girls were never interested in learning.

He had been the one to teach her horse riding and to shoot arrows, and she had even learned to fish with him as they used to go fishing in the little stream between their estates in the countryside.

Those were beautiful times, until they had to move away, and then Eliza disappeared from his life.

But I will find her. I have to.

“Mr Striker,” Alexander greeted the young man right after entering the drawing room where he was seated.

From what people had told Alexander, John Striker was the best investigator in the business, able to find intimate and covert details about people at the drop of a hat.

He had his ways of doing things, and Alexander had found him rather interesting. He dressed peculiarly, wearing a long trench coat no matter what time of the day it was, and he never took off his hat either. His moustache was rather huge but suited his face, and he always held a cigar between his lips.

He was both handsome and classy, and Alexander had found himself trusting the man almost immediately.

“My Lord,” he greeted Alexander, after which they both sat down and faced one another.

“So what do you have for me?”

The man sighed dramatically, leaning forward on the sofa. “From what I have come to see, Eliza Gordon does not exist.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before that, must I address you as Marquess Lennox or Earl Eastwood?”

Alexander was surprised: his title as the Earl of Eastwood was one of his lesser-known titles, and not everyone was familiar with it. Although John Striker had clearly done his research on Alexander as well, knowing him quite closely already.

“You can call me Alexander.”

“In that case, My Lord, the country estate neighbouring the Blackwood Estate, which once belonged to the Gordon family, now belongs to the Russells, and so does the London estate. From what I have found out, after the duke and duchess died mysteriously, the Russel family settled into the house, Edgar Russel being the cousin of the duke and uncle to their daughter Eliza Gordon.”

“Yes, yes.” Alexander nodded. “We still lived in the country when the Russel family settled in the house. Although, Eliza still lived with them.”

“She must have, but since you moved, Lady Eliza disappeared.”

“Disappeared how?”

“She has never been seen in society, and her name has never even been heard by anyone in the nobility. She is simply a ghost of someone who might have existed but no longer does. The family could have moved her to France because that is one of the

rumours I heard, or she could have died.”

Died? Alexander’s heartbeat stopped for a second.

“She is not in France.” He shook his head, “And she certainly cannot be dead. Be reasonable, Mr Striker.”

“How do you know she is not in France?”

“Before arriving in London, I had my people look over France to find out if she was staying there or perhaps visiting, but she is not there.”

“In that case, I have been unable to find her in London or the rest of England either,” John said dejectedly.

“This is not right, Mr Striker,” he said, mostly conversing with himself, “I can feel something is terribly wrong about the whole situation, and I will have to find out what it is.”

“If you know an old house servant who might be contacted, you might be able to gather more information because all the servants in the country house and the London estate were replaced ten years ago.”

“What about her inheritance, Mr Striker? There must surely be a record of that?”

“Yes.” John nodded, giving Alexander hope, “When the duke and duchess passed away, the duke’s will had been done very smartly. He already knew he would not be able to give his daughter his title or the country home, so he gave her everything else. Every penny that belonged to the Grafton name was written to Eliza Gordon, including the dresses, the jewels, and even the London house now called the Russel Estate. If Eliza Gordon is alive and exists, everything the Russels are using right now

belongs to her, and they are committing a major crime.”

Alexander was certain Eliza Gordon did exist. But what had the Russels done with her? He suddenly felt terrified, extremely worried for her sake.

“Thank you so much, Mr Striker.” Alexander stood up, “If you find out anything else regarding the matter, I wish to know about it at once. I appreciate all the good work you have done for me. This will help me in finding Eliza.”

“Of course, My Lord.”

The butler came inside at a knock on the door, and Mr Striker was ushered outside while Alexander made his way towards his study, extremely confused. He knew he needed to do something, and he needed to do it quickly, especially now that the London Season was almost upon them.

As he entered his study, George followed him inside with a steaming cup of tea, which he placed on Alexander’s table.

“Your tea, My Lord.”

He nodded absently at his valet, sitting behind his desk with his mind still on Eliza and the supposed mystery of her disappearance. Where could she be? he wondered, his heart racing with confusion.

John Striker had been right in suggesting that Alexander needed to find an old house servant to discover more, but where would he even find them? Could someone still be working on the estate?

It was still worth a try.

“You seem worried, My Lord.” George’s concerned tone made him look up, an idea suddenly springing to his head, “Can I do something for you.”

“Actually, George, you can.”

Alexander stood up, striding out from behind his desk, his mind already rushing in triumph. He knew exactly what he needed to do to reach a servant from the Russel London Estate and find out if someone who had been there fourteen years ago could potentially still be working there. He had to take this risk.

“Anything for you, My Lord.”

“Take off your clothes,” Alexander said hurriedly, already beginning to take off his boots.

“I do not understand, My Lord.” George was the very picture of confusion, and Alexander realized how absurd his request must have sounded to his young valet.

“I need your clothes. I will pretend to be you, George, a stable hand of the Blackwood Manor and the right hand to my valet.”

“But I am your valet.”

“Absolutely you are.” Alexander nodded. “But if I simply pretend to be a valet, I will have no reason to go inside the Russel Estate, but as a stable hand, I can find one reason or another to get inside the place.”

“The Russel Estate? Our neighbours?”

“Yes, I must get inside and do some investigating myself. No other way left.”

George's confusion finally cleared up, and he nodded.

"Is this the search you have been doing since France? You have been looking for Eliza Gordon."

"Precisely and for that, I must assume your identity, and if need be, you will have to assume mine."

"Of course, My Lord. I will quickly run up to my room and bring you some of my clothes, which will definitely make you look like a stable hand."

Alexander nodded, already anticipating the success of his plan.

"DYSON! COME BACK!" Alexander let go of the reins of his beautiful chestnut stallion, allowing him to run into the woods bordering the Russel Estate property.

He was sure Dyson would run quickly and enter the estate grounds, forcing Alexander, now dressed as a stable hand named George, to run after him, giving him a reason to enter inside and eventually perhaps reach the kitchen.

In mock play, he began to run after Dyson, who only ran further ahead, his hooves stampeding firmly on the forest ground.

However, Alexander merely walked behind him, knowing Dyson was not going anywhere when he suddenly heard the loud neighing of his prized stallion. Growing worried, he increased his pace to find Dyson, unable to see him anywhere nearby in the forest.

"DYSON!" Alexander shouted, growing worried, but Dyson neighed in response,

helping Alexander locate his position.

He ran forward into the forest and thankfully saw Dyson standing just a few feet away, though he was not alone. A young woman, her back towards Alexander, stood just in front of his horse, her hand resting affectionately between his eyes as he allowed her to pet him. The view was strange for Alexander because Dyson was a very fussy stallion with French mannerisms, having been born in France. He never allowed anyone except Alexander to come close to him, but the way this young woman was petting him felt as if she knew how to handle a horse just as well as Alexander did.

He was both surprised and impressed, slowing his run to a walk.

“Excuse me, Miss?”

She turned around as he greeted her, her arresting beauty suddenly making Alexander a little too conscious about his own looks.

He knew he was not unfortunate looking; in fact, the French women had never failed to dazzle him with compliments, being a little more forward than English women in their attempts to woo.

His dark brown hair reached his shoulders, but he had tied it in a ponytail, keeping it away from his face, which only made his square jaw appear even stronger.

He was tall and muscular and certainly should not have been conscious about his looks one bit, but something about the woman before him would have made him feel this way even if dressed in his usual attire.

He was immediately attracted to her.

“Is the horse yours?” Her honeyed voice reached his ears, making her words appear musical.

As he approached, the first thing that struck him was her exquisitely blue eyes, highlighting her pale, porcelain skin, which was slightly pink due to the cold air. Her light blonde hair was tied in a loose braid, but despite that, Alexander could see how thick it was, casually reaching her waist. She was much too petite and short, almost breakable.

Alexander almost felt protective of her.

“Yes, miss,” he replied, standing right before her.

“You should be more careful before letting him walk alone into the woods. He could have been hurt or could have hurt someone.” Her tone was slightly harsh, as if she was trying to scold him, and Alexander wished to laugh at the heartfelt attempt. He could see she was not used to being stern, the role not coming to her easily.

“I am sorry,” he immediately apologized, “it is Lord Eastwood’s horse, and I was simply tending to it in the stables when the beast decided to run away. I had been looking for him all over.”

“He is all yours now.” She smiled, her entire face lighting up. The very smile tugged at Alexander’s heart as he tried to shake away the feeling of familiarity that had overtaken his senses.

It almost felt as if he knew her. He knew her very well.

“Do forgive me, but it feels as if I have seen you before. Do you work on this estate?”

“I do not remember ever seeing you,” she replied plainly, looking at him curiously,

“but yes, I do work on the estate. I am Beth, and you are?”

“I am George.”

“You are a stable hand, George?”

“Yes, yes.” He nodded, still in awe of her. “At the neighbouring estate. I work for Lord Eastwood.”

“You better get back before he requires his horse.” She smiled once again, picking up her basket from the ground.

Alexander noticed the basket was filled with fruit from the woods and several flowers and realized she probably worked in the kitchen.

He had never seen her before, so why did she feel so familiar? As he looked closely, he tried to place her features, but the last time he had seen Eliza, she had just been a child, and this person before him was a beautiful young woman.

Except that her eyes were bluer than Eliza’s, and her hair a little less blonde.

But, the beauty marks. Alexander’s eyes widened as he noticed the beauty marks on her face, one of them just beneath her right eye and the other on her left cheek. Exactly the marks Eliza had. Or did Eliza have them under her left eye and right cheek? He was suddenly confused.

But if this woman was Eliza, why would she call herself Beth? The Russels couldn’t have done this to Eliza. They couldn’t have forced her to become a maid and taken away her identity. Even the mere thought of it was cruel, and Alexander had no desire even to consider such a thing.

No, it couldn't be the case.

"Is something on my face?" Her voice forced him to blink quickly, returning to the present.

"What?"

"You are staring."

"I must apologize," he immediately said, smiling at her. "I was lost for a second, but I must thank you for your help in finding my horse. I must repay you somehow for your kindness."

"That is unnecessary." She raised her hands, already turning around.

"Here ..." Alexander walked towards her, taking her basket from her hands as she continued to protest. "Let me carry your basket to the house. Please."

"I can take it," she said, "you do not have to trouble yourself."

"It would be my honour."

She must have seen something in his eyes because she stopped protesting and agreed, the two of them making their way back towards the house in silence.

Alexander knew she would lead him straight towards the kitchen, which was exactly where he needed to be to find a maid who might be familiar. For some reason, despite not even knowing her for more than a few minutes, the silence they shared was hardly uncomfortable.

Something about her just felt right.

The house finally appeared before them, and he followed her inside as she entered the kitchen through the small back gate, but Alexander surveyed the entire place as quickly as possible.

“You can leave it here.” He placed the basket on the kitchen counter as the few maids in the kitchen turned to look at him.

Suddenly, an elderly woman entered the kitchen, her hair completely white from age and Alexander felt as if the risk he had taken was finally successful. It was Lara. She had been Eliza’s nanny when she was a little girl, and even though she had gained several years, there was no denying it was her.

He needed to find a way to talk to her.

“Thank you for helping me carry the basket,” Beth said, and he turned back towards her.

“Of course,” he replied, “I will see you some other time.”

“Goodbye. Don’t lose Dyson again!”

She called after him as he chuckled, leaving the kitchen from the back gate, but his mind was already on Lara. He needed to talk to her one way or the other, and he needed to do it soon.

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“What about the refreshments? Has everything been finalized and the necessary ingredients bought?” Beatrice asked Eliza, who stood before her in the parlour as they discussed the masquerade already upon them.

It had only been one week since they had arrived in London, and the masquerade was to be held tomorrow at what was now called the Russel Estate. Like every other event hosted by the family, the arrangements for it had also fallen on Eliza’s shoulders.

She had designed the invitations and made sure they were promptly sent to the entire guest list, which Beatrice and Edgar had also decided with little tweaks here and there. She had also decided on the refreshments, the musicians that were to be called, and the general arrangements for the entire party.

It almost felt as if she hadn’t slept at all through the past few nights since she had to help Beatrice and Victoria finalize their dresses for the masquerade as well.

It had been nothing short of torture. But she was glad that it would soon be over.

“Everything has been finalized. The kitchen is stocked with all necessary items, and the cook and other kitchen maids will begin preparing everything early tomorrow morning for it to be ready before the masquerade begins in the evening. I will make sure of it myself.”

“Good.” Edgar nodded, sipping his cup of tea, “and I hope you remember the most important thing about the evening, Beth.”

Eliza felt as if something was stuck in her throat, but she quickly swallowed past it,

forgetting about the hurt that had taken root in her heart. She had other, much bigger things to worry about than Edgar's behaviour towards her.

"Yes." She nodded. "I must stay away from the party and ensure no one from the ton sees me."

Edgar was too scared someone would recognize her, so whenever such an event was hosted at the estate, he asked her to stay away from anyone who might come too close and discover her identity.

Eliza knew how baseless her fears were since she could not remember anyone close enough to remember who she was, especially since she was just a little girl the last time they would have seen her.

She was stuck with being a servant in the house that no longer belonged to her.

However, Edgar's fear was representative of his guilt, and Eliza enjoyed his misery over thinking what might happen if someone did indeed discover Eliza's true identity. She wondered the same, but the idea seemed too good to ever become a reality.

"Yes," Beatrice replied, smiling cruelly. Her very existence made Eliza feel terrible about herself, and she wanted nothing but to stay as far away from Beatrice as possible.

"And if anyone does ask about you, which is unlikely yet still a possibility, you are still very much alive but have moved to France to live with family while we are taking care of the Grafton Estate behind you."

"Absolutely." She nodded at them, simply wanting to leave.

"Oh, Edgar, I almost forgot to tell you!" Beatrice suddenly turned towards her

husband, beginning to look excited, making Eliza curious about the matter. She had still not been asked to leave, so she stood there because they would have made her apologize for no reason if she had left of her own will.

“What is it?” her uncle asked, appearing disinterested already.

“The neighbouring estate, which has recently been bought by the Earl of Eastwood, is finally occupied, and from what the servants tell me, a handsome young man resides there. Do you think the earl might have a son?”

“That,” Edgar nodded. “Or the man is the earl himself.”

“My goodness, yes!” Beatrice was even more delighted at the prospect, “Why did I not think of that. The estate might belong to the young man himself since no one knows who the earl is and has never seen him around much. Oh, it will be lovely if Victoria can somehow meet him, and he falls in love with her, and the two begin courting even before the Season begins and our daughter makes her official debut in society.”

“Do you think this might be a possibility?” Edgar sat up, turning to look at his wife.

“Of course!” Beatrice vacated the sofa she had been occupying and strolled around the parlour leisurely, “It would be so lovely to see our Victoria married to an earl who is both young, handsome, and wealthy. You must make introductions with the young man, and when he attends the masquerade ball, you must make sure he and Victoria are formally introduced.”

“I will do just that.”

The pair must have suddenly realized that Eliza still stood there as they stopped talking and began to look at her. She stayed put, flustering under their gaze, and

blurted out, "I came across the stable hand of the Eastwood Estate, the right hand of the earl's valet."

Oh God, why did I say that?

She did not know what had got into her, but she had suddenly become nervous and said the first thing that came to her mind. Although, George had not left her mind since she had first met him in the woods three days ago. She could not deny that she had enjoyed seeing him, unsure of why that had been the case.

Something about him had simply made her feel comfortable and at ease. For a reason that Eliza could still not discern, his smile had almost felt too familiar, as if she had seen it before. It somehow reminded her of her childhood, the smile being too intimately known to her.

Alexander, her childhood best friend's face, suddenly came before her eyes.

She quickly shook the thought away, knowing full well that it was entirely fruitless. Alexander was nowhere near her and certainly never to return.

After they had moved away from beside them in the countryside, Eliza had lost all contact with both him and his mother, and her life had gone completely downhill. She knew that by now, Alexander would have turned into an impressive noble lord.

George, on the other hand, who was right before her, was just a kind, handsome, stable hand.

"What do you mean you came across him?" Aunty Beatrice asked, her eyebrows rising in horror, "Beth, I do not want you going around meeting strangers."

"Especially no one who had anything to do with the Earl of Eastwood," Uncle Edgar

chimed in, appearing just as horrified as his wife.

Eliza sighed inwardly, noticing how the two of them were desperate to keep her away from anyone who might prove to be of consequence.

“I had no desire to meet him, and it was hardly anything. He lost control of his horse and entered the estate grounds where I met him. It was more a matter of accident than will.”

Both Uncle Edgar and Aunty Beatrice looked calmer at her explanation.

“Alright,” they nodded together, Aunty Beatrice sitting back down.

Eliza was just about to leave the parlour when the butler arrived, bearing a note in his hand. She wondered who had come to visit the Russels this early in the morning and hoped it was not one of Victoria’s acquaintances.

“Lord Campbell, The Count of Fife, is here to see you, My Lord,” he announced, and Eliza suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

Lord Henry Campbell was a family friend of the Russels and the only person outside the family who knew what had become of Eliza at the hands of the Russels. Although, being a man with no morals, he had stayed completely quiet about the cruelty.

Ralph had told Eliza that another reason behind his silence was how her uncle, Edgar Russel, had helped Lord Campbell by acting like a fake witness to provide an alibi when he had been accused of impregnating a lord’s wife.

The accusation had been true, of course.

He was much older than Eliza, even if he hadn't lost his good looks yet, but what troubled Eliza was his lack of manners and how he continued to make lewd comments towards her, even asking her to marry him again and again. She couldn't even stand to be in the same room as him.

"Make him sit in the drawing room. I will be there shortly," Uncle Edgar informed the butler just as Eliza began to turn around and leave through the other door, "You, girl!"

"Yes?" She turned back around.

"Make sure that when tea is served for us in the drawing room, you are the one to bring it for us. I do not want any other servant there. Do you understand?"

"Certainly."

She quickly left the parlour, fuming with rage at Uncle Edgar's request, but she knew why he did it. He was well aware of how uncomfortable Lord Campbell made Eliza, and this was simply his attempt to bring Eliza even more misery and scare her into believing that he just might agree to Count Fife's demands and give him Eliza in marriage.

Although, she knew it was never going to happen.

Eliza, with her inheritance and everything still in her name, was much too precious, and Uncle Edgar would never want to let her go in this manner. The moment she gained access to London society, revealing her true identity in front of everyone would hardly be a problem, and the Russels' secret might be exposed.

They would never risk such a thing.

I must stay strong. I must stay strong. I must stay strong.

She kept repeating the mantra, trying to bring strength into her heart, if not for her sake, then for Ralph and Lara.

She had already decided that she would not remain in this house much longer; escaping from here would be the only thing that would help her feel in control again. And when she did escape, she would take Ralph and Lara with her.

They were the only two servants who still remained in the house and had even come to London with her, while every other servant had been replaced by Aunty Beatrice ten years ago after she had turned Eliza completely into a servant and had taken away everything from her.

She needed to stay strong for their sake.

Quickly breathing in as deeply as possible, she made her way back to the kitchen but what awaited her there quickly forced her to forget about everything else and focus on the extremely tall man in front of her.

George was back.

She remembered how he had said he would see her another time when he had parted from her the first time they had met, but she had not expected him to actually show up, and that too this quickly. Although, she would be lying to herself if she did not accept that she had been hoping for him to come.

“George?” She called out his name, unable to take her eyes off his handsome face.

He was much too good-looking for his own good.

“I had to come see you since I promised earlier.” He smiled, and Eliza had a similar pang of nostalgia as it once again reminded her of Alexander.

But George was not Alexander. Eliza needed to remind herself of that.

“I am so glad you did,” she replied honestly, already beginning to feel at home in his company. He made her feel comfortable without even doing anything to prompt such a response, but every time she was around him, her heart felt content.

His beautiful, dark brown hair was tied in a bun at the back of his head, his face only appearing bigger and stronger. Eliza quite enjoyed looking at his square jaw as he spoke, every inch of his skin reminding her that men, too, could be beautiful, and George was a living, breathing proof of that.

“I assure you I have come without Dyson, so you will have no need to rescue my horse today,” he joked, and Eliza could not help bursting into laughter.

“I must introduce you to everyone else.”

The few maids in the kitchen had been eyeing the two of them curiously, and without wasting another second, Eliza introduced George to everyone present, noticing how kind and affectionate he was with everyone. He was naturally charming and friendly, his countenance gentle. Eliza was already beginning to like him a little too much than necessary, unsure of her feelings.

He walked ahead, standing beside her.

Eliza felt extremely small beside him since he was much taller, but it also seemed as if she was both safe and protected. Just as she turned to talk to him once again, the swinging kitchen doors opened, and Lara came inside, her eyes falling on the two of them.

When he had been here the last time, even then, Lara had been a little too curious and had asked Eliza several questions about him, but Eliza clearly told her that she hardly knew the man since they had just met themselves. However, she did not understand the reason behind Lara's interest in him.

"Lara!"

Lara's gaze darted from George to Eliza, trying to understand what was happening.

"I must introduce you to George, who is the stable hand on the Earl of Eastwood's estate, and George, this is Lara. She is one of the oldest maids in the house and has been extremely patient with me for as long as I have known her."

"I am pleased to meet you." George smiled at Lara, but she refused to smile back.

Eliza could feel how the questioning and close analysis was about to begin, and she wanted to send George away before that, but when Lara motioned for him to sit down on the chair in front of her, Eliza knew it was already too late. She would not be able to save the poor man from this ordeal.

"So you are a stable hand?" Lara asked, perching herself on the chair beside Alexander as the two of them stayed embroiled in conversation.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And how long have you been working for the Eastwood family?"

"For years now, ma'am. I travel with Lord Eastwood whenever he needs me and have been everywhere alongside him."

"He travels with you? A stable hand?"

“Not everyone is capable of taking care of his prized stallion, Dyson; hence, I am the only one who can keep a check on the wild fellow.”

“I see.” Lara nodded. For some reason, Eliza could sense Lara’s intent of almost interrogating the poor man as she fired one question after another. However, George was certainly not backing away one bit, answering everything aptly.

Despite that, she could see how uncomfortable he was with the whole thing as well, probably confused about an elderly maid’s sudden interest in his personal life, and Eliza was just as uncomfortable.

She knew why Lara felt the need to go about this in an interrogative manner, her eyes trained on Alexander. She was only doing it for Eliza’s sake since she wanted to make sure that if Eliza was in the company of a young man, he was worthy enough for her.

However, Eliza did not need it. She had no intention of keeping George’s company for much longer or, at most, only becoming friends. She did not have space for anything else in her life.

“I brought this for you.”

Eliza watched as he suddenly produced a basket, picking it up from the ground.

She had failed to notice it earlier.

“Thank you.” Eliza took the basket and noticed it was filled with fruits of different varieties and flowers that must have certainly been taken from the earl’s garden. She smiled, realizing how he must have noticed the contents of her basket the other day and was trying to imitate just that.

She felt touched.

“I hope you enjoy the fruits. They are perfectly ripened and very sweet.”

“Did you steal them from the earl’s garden?” she could not help asking. Even though her intentions were only teasing, George became serious.

“Never.” He shook his head, “I have the earl’s permission to pluck fruits and flowers if I wish.”

Eliza laughed, his compassion contagious.

“I must thank you again for this. You are very kind, George.”

“Thank you.”

“Here, eat something.” Lara suddenly emerged again, a board of cold meat, cheese, and bread in her hand, placing it in front of George.

“You must not try to ruin me with such hospitality, ma’am.” He laughed, addressing Lara.

“I absolutely must.”

They sat down around the board, eating and talking, and Eliza could not help thinking about his smile again, which was exactly like Alexander’s. The man before her was much too familiar, almost too familiar to be real, and everything about him screamed as if Eliza had already met him.

But she knew he could not be Alexander. Alexander would never be a stable hand.

Then who was he? And why did he tug at Eliza's heart like only someone from her happy past could?

She needed to find out. But how?

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Alexander slipped the mask over his face, knowing fully well that the mask covered him in a way where no one would be able to recognize him at the masquerade.

As he stood at the gates of what was now the Russel Estate, he knew there would be no better time than right now to go about his investigation. He simply needed to find Lara, and a part of him was certain she was going to be in the kitchen.

The only problem was, dressed as a noble lord, he would not be able to slip into the kitchen unnoticed, but he would have to take the risk.

“Let’s do it,” he whispered to himself, ignoring the front entrance to the house, which everyone used to enter the ball, and moving towards the back.

He already knew where the back gate was located in the gardens since the servant girl, Beth, had led him to the kitchen through it.

A part of him hoped to find her in the kitchen as well, his heart already wishing to see her again. Even though they had just met yesterday, he enjoyed her company immensely and wanted to do nothing but get to know her better. Although yesterday, he had almost been scared of Lara’s sudden interest in him.

For a second, he felt as if Lara knew or recognized him.

However, now, he would have to go ahead and tell her himself. Only disclosing his identity to her would make her reveal the truth about Eliza once she realized that George was actually Alexander and had come with good intentions. He moved towards the back door, thankful that the place almost appeared empty through the

windows in the garden.

All the servants must have been occupied somewhere throughout the house.

Where are you, Lara?

He hastened forward, raking his gaze over the almost empty kitchen, when he suddenly saw a familiar face. Lara stood just by the large sink, her eyes on the plates she was washing, and Alexander felt as if he had done the right thing. Although, he would still need to pull Lara outside, away from all the other servants.

He had no other choice but to call her attention towards him. Alexander stood there, concealed in the shadows, waiting for a few servants to be at some distance before he finally called her out through the open window.

“Lara,” he whispered loudly in the night air, but Lara’s gaze did not once turn towards him.

He tapped lightly on the windowsill, which finally got her attention, and she turned towards Alexander at last. Her eyes widened as she saw him, the furrowed expression turning to worry. He could see she was confused about the whole thing.

“Come here,” he whispered, making a come-hither motion with his hand, which Lara must have understood.

She wiped her hands on a cloth by the sink, looking around to see if anyone was focused on her but thankfully, each servant in the house was too occupied to consider what the old maid was doing.

Alexander moved away from the window, not wanting anyone else to see him, and quietly made his way into the shadows of the gardens. He turned around at last,

finding Lara standing right behind him, her face still turned up into a scowl.

“Who are you?” Her question was bold and unhesitating, and Alexander could see she was not afraid of him.

He had no desire to prolong things, simply taking off his mask and watching how her scowl turned to confusion. He could not blame her.

He was playing a dangerous game.

“George?” She eyed him from head to toe, registering the black evening coat and breeches fitting snugly over his tall frame, making him appear nothing short of a noble lord. Just yesterday, he had been in her kitchen, pretending to be a stable hand, but now, everything was different.

“My name is not George,” he sighed. “I am Alexander. Alexander Blackwood, the Marquess of Lennox.”

“Alexander,” Lara whispered as recognition finally dawned in her eyes. A huge smile appeared on her face as she stared at him, and Alexander could sense she remembered everything about him. Lara had been excellent throughout the time he had known her, and his parents had been extremely kind to her as well.

Moreover, on several occasions, she had accompanied Alexander and Eliza when the two of them went on their daily adventures. Besides their parents, she was the one who knew their friendship intimately and always appreciated the way Alexander treated Eliza with love and kindness.”

“I gather you remember me?” He smiled charmingly, Lara nodding.

“Of course, My Lord,” she said with a laugh. “When I met you yesterday as George,

something about you felt familiar, but I could not place my finger on it. That was why I was so rigorous with my questioning, but now I finally understand what it was that had been so familiar. My goodness, you are all grown up!”

“And I am here to find Eliza.”

“Lady Eliza,” Lara breathed, her happy laughter turning into a sad smile.

“Yes, Lara,” Alexander nodded, putting his mask back on in case anywhere wandered into the gardens. “My mother feels guilty about not remaining in contact with her, and I miss my friend, but when I came to London, I simply could not find her anywhere. Both the country house and the London Estate have been taken over by the Russel family, and no one could find any traces of Eliza. Where is she? I must know.”

“You have already met her, My Lord.”

Alexander’s heartbeat fastened as he realized what Lara was saying. It couldn’t be true. The mere thought of it was too cruel for him to bear.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Beth. Lady Eliza has been forced to turn into Beth.”

Alexander felt as if his world was crashing down. He had felt something about her was too familiar, and here was the truth right in front of his eyes.

He had not been wrong about Beth’s placement of beauty marks being exactly like that of Eliza. Her hair, eyes, and ever her laughter and her smile had all been familiar. The immediate familiarity he had felt towards her was because they had known each other for too long, a little too long ago.

Beth was Eliza.

His Eliza.

And he was going to make sure that all her miseries came to an end. No matter what lengths he had to go for it.

Eliza quickly made her way to the back of the estate, feeling flushed with all the work she had been doing since early in the morning.

She had never been more exhausted, and she still had the entire masquerade to suffer through. She knew it would go on till early morning, at least, which only meant she wouldn't get any sleep at all.

Although, she had no choice.

She needed to push through. She made her way inside the kitchen through the back entrance, making sure all the refreshments had been sent out since the guests were beginning to arrive, and it would only be a short time before the entire ballroom was packed with the London nobility.

“Beth!” Amelia called out to her, and Eliza turned to look at her friend, who appeared much fresher.

She had not been as occupied as Eliza and had gone to her room in the servants' quarter to catch some moments of sleep in the afternoon. It was important as well since she needed to be in front of the guests, her duty being to make sure the punchbowls were filled.

On the other hand, Eliza had been staunchly advised to stay as far away from the guests as possible, and no one cared about how she looked.

“Is everything alright, Amelia?”

“Everything’s a’right by me.” Amelia smiled. “Just refilling the punchbowls since it is already half eight. The guests must have arrived parched because the ball is not even in full swing yet.”

Eliza laughed. “You must rush. I will see to things here.”

Amelia waved at Eliza before leaving, who was satisfied after seeing that everything in the kitchen was organized. If more refreshments were needed out there, the kitchen counters would already be filled with trays, and the servants would just have to carry them out.

The dinner was also fully prepared and ready to be moved to the dining room when the dinner would be announced. She breathed in deeply, feeling all the strength leave her body.

She needed fresh air.

Without wasting another second, she opened the small back gate of the kitchen and stepped outside, her gaze falling on the broken flower pots just by the door.

“The cats,” she whispered to herself, blaming the several cats that visited the estate for the mishap. She had half a mind to clean up the mess, but she was too tired to care much about it at the moment and decided to leave it for later or for someone else.

Surely, she was not the only servant in the house and not the only one who needed to attend to anything and everything.

“I must find a place to sit down for a few moments.”

She strolled out into the darkness of the gardens, already feeling a little bit at peace after escaping the hustle of the house where all the servants were running about for anything and everything the nobility might require to have a good time at the masquerade.

Both Uncle Edgar and Aunty Beatrice had been on edge since the morning now, having reputations to maintain in front of the ton.

As she walked further, she suddenly heard the crunching of a leaf coming from the shadows behind the large tree and wondered if someone was there. Unhesitatingly, Eliza stepped forward when a hand reached out to her from the dark, grabbing her towards him.

She shouted, unsure of what was happening as someone pushed her against the tree, his heady scent of cinnamon and spice invading Eliza’s nostrils.

As she looked up, she realized it was a tall man dressed elaborately in a dark jacket, his smooth dark hair all slicked back away from his face as if caught in a handsome ponytail. His face was hidden behind the mask he wore, and Eliza immediately knew it was a guest from the masquerade.

But what was he doing here? And why had he pulled Eliza towards him?

His gloved hand shot up to her mouth, stopping her from shouting or even uttering a word as the two of them stared at one another. Once she had stopped shouting, he finally removed his hand from her mouth slowly, and Eliza could finally breathe again.

“Who are you?” she asked, not struggling to pull away. She might simply be acting

na?ve, but he did not really scare her, his presence almost comforting.

“A guest at the masquerade.”

“I already gathered that.” Eliza rolled her eyes, hoping he had not seen it in the dark, but the chuckle that escaped his lips was enough to tell her he had. His voice was velvety and rich, too heavy and masculine. It sent tingles down her spine, making her feel things she had not imagined one could feel.

“So let me ask you, who are you?”

“A maid at the house,” she replied quickly, trying to push him away and duck from underneath his arm, but he was standing much too close, and Eliza felt as if escape was impossible. “We must not be here together. It is not right.”

“Who said so?”

“Rules of propriety. Let me go at once.”

To Eliza’s surprise, he moved away without saying another word, giving her room to move, but Eliza stayed standing by the tree. Now that he was further away, the scent of cinnamon and spice that had invaded her nostrils became faint, and a part of her missed it.

What had the man done to her? And why was she not moving even though he was no longer pinning her to the tree trunk?

“You haven’t moved.” He smiled, noticing what she had noticed, and Eliza blushed scarlet.

Her only consolation was that he would not be able to see her face in the darkness of

the night, hiding her reaction from him. The mystery man backed away even further, and Eliza finally moved, beginning to leave.

“You must head back to the ballroom.”

“And where will you go?”

“Certainly not in the ballroom.” She smiled at him, even though her heart was filled with sadness.

“Why not? Someone as beautiful as you deserves to be in a beautiful gown dancing with a Prince Charming at the ball. Don’t you think?”

“And who will be my Prince Charming? You?”

“I am afraid I am not dressed in white, but I did come here on a horse. I can be your knight in shining armour, My Lady.”

Eliza chuckled.

“I am no lady. Perhaps you can find one inside the masquerade and propose to be her knight in shining armour.”

“I believe you are more of a lady than you are willing to accept or believe or reveal.”

For a second, Eliza felt her heart stop beating at his words as if somehow he could see inside her soul and listen to all her secrets. As if he could see her heart beating and read everything that went through her mind. She suddenly felt exposed and much too vulnerable in front of his masked existence, yet she still did not feel scared.

“You must leave now, My Lord,” Eliza said, feeling an urge to escape from his dark

eyes, which were steadily trained on her face. “I am sure someone inside the ballroom must be looking for you. And someone behind the ballroom must be looking for me. Have a good evening.”

Eliza curtsied briefly, turning around when he blocked her path with quick steps. She stopped, not wanting to run into him.

“May I know your name before you leave?”

“My name is of no importance to you.”

“I still wish to find out.”

“You did not tell me your name; thus, I cannot tell you mine. These are rules of a masquerade, after all. Maintain your air of mystery and let others maintain theirs.”

“But you are not even wearing a mask, My Lady.”

“Yet I hide more secrets in my heart than you could ever imagine even knowing, much less hiding.” Eliza smiled, the light from the house falling on her. She knew he could see her. “Please let me go now.”

“I already know your name.”

Eliza looked up at him sharply, unsure of what he was trying to say or do to her. Something about him just felt wrong, yet another part of her kept whispering that everything was alright.

“Truly?”

“Truly.” He smiled, his lips still visible despite the mask.

“What might it be then?”

“Meet me again inside the house, and I will tell you. Good evening, My Lady.”

Without another word, he turned around and made his way towards the house, leaving Eliza dumbfounded behind him. She did not know what that interaction meant at all or who the man was, but he left her intrigued. She did indeed wish to see him again.

Who was he?

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Chapter 5

Alexander breathed in deeply, standing just at the top of the stairs of the ballroom, ready to go inside. Despite the energy and fervour of the place around him, with the London nobility behind masks and ready to do whatever they wished, the place was in an uproar.

He could hear loud laughter springing from everywhere as people moved around with abandon.

Every single one of these people would have never behaved in this manner if the masks had not been in place. Although with a mask on and their identities concealed, everyone simply lost their minds completely.

“Do you wish me to announce you, My Lord?” the butler standing at the top of the staircase questioned, but Alexander shook his head.

He had no desire for his identity to be revealed.

As he stood at the top of the staircase, several people looked up to stare at him, but Alexander ignored every single one of them.

He knew it was not exactly his looks but his air of regality and nobility that always set him apart from the rest, and living in France all those years had set apart his fashion sense from the uncultured lords of England.

His confidence was caught on by everyone around him as he descended the stairs,

sudden silence ensuing around the ballroom.

He had no desire to make his entrance grand, but it had happened without him even trying, and he was not going to act meek now. Alexander always had a way of grabbing attention wherever he went, and tonight was no different. Although tonight, his motives for the evening were entirely something else.

I need to find Eliza again.

He needed to make sure he came across Eliza as soon as possible, and after he had left her outside, he was sure she would find him.

That had been his motive, to intrigue her enough so they could talk later in the night. He needed to tell her he knew who she was to instill hope in her heart, which had clearly been lost.

Lara had told him everything.

Eliza and Lara did some embroidery and mending work on the side to gather money for their escape. Eliza had decided that the only way to find freedom was to escape this life along with Ralph and Lara and find another place to live. But Alexander was not going to let that happen.

Anything and everything that belonged to Eliza was going to be rightfully hers soon enough.

“My Lord.” Lord and Lady Leicester stood just at the bottom of the stairs and greeted Alexander as he entered the ballroom, several eyes still trained on him.

For some reason, he could see several ladies of the ton making their way towards him, clearly seeking an introduction.

“My Lord, My Lady,” Alexander greeted the hosts with a bow, and they bowed back in response.

“Welcome to our humble home,” Lady Leicester said, and Alexander felt himself growing angrier than he thought imaginable.

If it were possible, he would have revealed their truth right now in front of the entire ton, but that would be an entirely fruitless thing to do. The way Lady Leicester had called the estate her home made him furious because he knew the house belonged to Eliza and Eliza alone. The money spent on this ball belonged to Eliza as well, and the Russels deserved to have nothing.

Nothing at all.

Yet here they were, flaunting the money as their own.

“You have arranged a beautiful ball here, I must say. I am certainly impressed by being here.”

“Thank you!” Lord Leicester said, his marks dangling from his neck rather than being on his face.

“Please enjoy yourself,” Lady Leicester chimed in, “I can see several ladies are already gathered right there seeking introductions.”

Alexander laughed, not replying to the remark. He simply walked ahead, ignoring the group of ladies, who, as per Lady Leicester, were waiting for him.

He had no desire to mingle with any of them and certainly could not care much, even if they did want to see him. He had far more important things to accomplish, and for that, he needed to stay around the Russell family and gather who their close friends

happened to be.

If he could successfully find the secrets of the family and the way they had stolen Eliza's inheritance, he would be able to accomplish a lot and get everything back for Eliza.

But for that, he would need to be tactful. And he also needed to find Eliza again.

"My Lord?" He turned around and, as a hand touched his arm, found a set of blue eyes and pale blonde hair standing in front of him.

If he had not been looking closely, he could have mistaken her for Eliza, but upon closer inspection, he noticed that her hair was much shorter and her eyes a lot less blue than Eliza's.

She was slightly taller and rather plain under her mask, and the sweetness that Eliza possessed was completely missing from her. This was someone else.

"Yes, My Lady?" he asked her, staying within formal bounds.

"I demand an introduction this instant." She laughed playfully, standing closer to him than propriety allowed, but people were clearly not themselves behind these masks, and the woman in front of him already seemed slightly drunk.

"I refuse to give one."

"Well then, I must give you mine so you could perhaps change your mind," she continued smiling, the pink gown she wore entirely unflattering on her, "I am Lady Victoria Russel. And you are?"

Victoria Russel.

Alexander immediately knew she was the daughter of Lord and Lady Leicester, yet another person who had been involved in stealing everything that belonged to Eliza from her.

Lara had told Alexander how everyone in the household behaved terribly with Eliza, almost to the point of cruelty, and Victoria was a part of it as well. Alexander felt furious with her, but he did not let his face betray his true emotions.

“As I already told you, My Lady, I am incapable of telling you my name.”

Noticing Victoria standing with Alexander, several other ladies in the ton also gained the courage to walk up to him, and within seconds, a plethora of women surrounded him, all of them wanting an introduction. He had not even tried to gain this reaction, yet here he was, accidentally receiving all the attention he simply did not want.

Certainly not from these women.

“Why so, My Lord?” another young lady questioned.

Alexander could see anger on Victoria’s face towards all the other women who had gathered around them, and he knew she wanted him only for herself.

He had already disliked her at first glance, and now he could notice that she seemed both mean and full of herself. Alexander realized that someone like her was definitely capable of practicing cruelty towards Eliza, and she probably tortured the poor girl a lot.

His heart leapt in worry as he reminded himself that very soon, he would pull Eliza out of everything that troubled her.

“What is the point of this mask I am wearing if I am to reveal my identity?” he asked

the young women, who nodded at the question, some of them laughing at the air of mystery he was trying to maintain.

Although, he could see how every single one of them enjoyed it.

“You can perhaps remove the mask and tell us your identity then?” Victoria countered, but Alexander simply shook his head.

“If that is what you wanted, you should have persuaded your parents against arranging a masquerade.”

“Had I known you were coming, I would have.”

“Too bad you were uninformed.” He shrugged, “I am afraid you will have to do with simply knowing me as the masked stranger because that is the closest you ladies will get to my name tonight.”

“I might forgive you for this secret if you dance the next set with me,” she extended her hand towards him, and Alexander stared at it for a few seconds.

He knew that humouring Victoria might mean extracting information from her if she proved to be one of the weak links in the family. He doubted her to be the weak link since she seemed both mean and cruel, but it was still worth a try.

He needed to be as close to the Russels as possible to find some information about them, or else the revelation of the truth might get slower, and he wanted Eliza free from this torture as quickly as possible.

“I would love to lead you in this dance, My Lady,” Alexander replied, taking Victoria’s hands.

He excused himself from everyone else as he led Lady Victoria towards the dance floor, where several other couples were assembling as well. The two of them stood in front of one another as the new set began, and the couples got into position and began dancing.

All Alexander could think about was finding a way to make Victoria talk, and he knew it was not going to be difficult. He could see she loved talking about herself.

“Won’t you say something, My Lord?” she finally began the conversation, and Alexander smiled from underneath his mask as she twirled around him.

“I have merely been wondering about you, My Lady,” he answered smartly.

“What about me, might I ask?”

“Anything and everything,” he replied, “Tell me more about you so I can get to know you better. You seem like a beautiful and rather interesting young lady.”

Victoria chuckled at the praise as he fed her ego, and just as he had imagined, she immediately perked up, ready to carry the entire conversation on her back.

He listened patiently as she droned on about being accomplished at everything a young woman should be accomplished in, the list of her attributes much too long. Alexander was almost sure she was lying simply to impress him but had no desire to call her out.

“You have an impressive list of accomplishments, My Lady.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“Do you read?”

“Read? As in books?” She looked flustered.

“Yes.”

“Well, I have always been a person of activity rather than one who could just sit for hours absorbed in a book. My disposition does not allow that, and I always run away from reading. Although Russel House has a beautiful library. You must come to call on me tomorrow morning, and I will show you all the books we keep here.”

Alexander knew she was right since he had been in this house on several occasions in the past, knowing the place as well as the back of his hand. The library had been personally built by the duchess herself, who was fond of books and reading, and she always advised both Eliza and Alexander to read as well.

Alexander also remembered borrowing books from her on several occasions. Now, Victoria laid claim to a library she had never even bothered to look into with such ease that it angered Alexander immensely.

“I would love to,” he replied shortly, “Do tell me about your family. I hear you have siblings?”

“I do.” She nodded, clearly not as eager to talk about anyone but herself. “You have already been introduced to Mama and Papa, but I also have an older brother named Henry and a younger sister, Margaret.”

Alexander waited for her to mention something about Eliza or perhaps her dead uncle, who was the Duke of Grafton, but she remained quiet as if both Eliza and her parents were entirely nonexistent. He had been right. Victoria Russel was too cunning to be considered the weak link of the family, and he would need to try a different approach.

“That sounds marvellous.”

“You have asked me every possible question about me, yet I still do not know anything about you. Mind telling me your name now, My Lord?”

Alexander laughed. “A secret will remain a secret no matter how many times you ask, Lady Victoria.”

“Ah.” She smiled.

“Well, to be fair, I have been away from England much too long and resided in France with my family. I only returned to London a few days ago, and I am a little surprised at the changes that have happened here.”

“What kind of changes?”

Alexander knew this was his moment to press Victoria to see if she would break. A part of him told him the attempt was futile and might raise unnecessary questions, but he had to at least try before giving up entirely.

“Last I heard, the Duke and Duchess of Grafton owned this estate, or am I mistaken? It was many years ago, but they also had a little girl,” he said, pretending to think about it. “What was her name? Elena perhaps. Oh no wait. It was Eliza. Yes, Eliza Gordon. Whatever happened to the Grafton family and Lady Eliza?”

He could feel Victoria tense up in his arms, the smile on her face fading. For Alexander, this was revelation enough.

“Of course.” Victoria suddenly laughed, her smile returning albeit artificially. “The estate did belong to the Duke of Grafton, who happened to be my uncle. After he and his wife passed away, poor Eliza, who was about my age, went to France to live with

her mother's family, and the Russels have simply been taking care of the house."

"That is so noble of you," Alexander said, hoping he did not sound sarcastic.

"Why are you interested in the details?"

"Should I not be?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

"As you said, it was many moons ago. Hardly anyone in England even remembers the deaths of the duke and duchess much less about Eliza. You certainly have an excellent memory to recall so far back."

"I do have excellent memory."

The set began to come to an end, the final rhythms being played by the musicians. Alexander stopped in front of Victoria as she curtsied, and he bowed in response, quickly escorting her away from the dance floor. He had no desire to be in her company any longer than it was absolutely necessary. She and her sense of superiority repulsed him.

Loud boisterous laughter reached him, and he saw Lord Leicester laughing with his friends in one corner.

Alexander had already noticed Edgar's need to be flashy with his money, and the masquerade was just another example of such behaviour. Alexander knew flashy people were the weakest links, especially when under the intoxicated influence of alcohol.

I must gamble with him.

He knew the gambling table after he had a lot to drink would be the best place to dig

secrets out of Edgar, and Alexander was going to do just that. He simply needed to wait till the card games were opened, and the men finally sat down to play.

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Chapter 6

He had told her he knew her name.

Eliza had never met someone who had confused her in the manner the handsome stranger from the garden had confused her. She could not place knowing him anywhere, even though he had felt familiar.

His height and stature were similar to that of George, and for a second, Eliza was confused about whether it was George, but the idea seemed entirely ludicrous.

Why would George come to the masquerade dressed as a noble lord?

The stranger had asked her to find him inside the house, but that seemed extremely unlikely or impossible. Eliza was terribly occupied and had been asked to keep away from the guests as religiously as possible, but the man was clearly a guest. If Uncle Edgar or Aunt Beatrice saw her talking to a guest, they would be extremely angry with her and Eliza had no desire to create unnecessary trouble for herself.

Hence, the chances of running into him seemed low.

“Beth?” Amelia’s voice pushed her out of her train of thought, and Eliza turned to look at her as she held a bowl of empty punch in her hands.

“Yes?”

“Are you alright? I have been calling your name for quite some time now, but ye

have not been responding. Are ye feeling okay?”

“Perfect.” Eliza smiled, shaking her head to clear away her thoughts about the stranger in the black tux, his deep voice still rumbling inside Eliza’s head. “I had just been lost.”

“Lost where?”

Eliza certainly could not tell Amelia the truth about what she had been thinking, so she had to think of a story. Just a few minutes ago, she had heard several ladies from the ton whispering about a young man with a mysterious air who, according to them, was the most enigmatic and handsome man in the entire ballroom.

“Whispers,” she quickly said, trying to satisfy her friend’s curiosity, “I just heard a few ladies whispering about some enigmatic man in the ballroom who everyone is curiously talking about. I wonder if I can catch a glimpse of him to see what the commotion is about.”

“Oh, Beth.” Amelia suddenly became excited, coming to stand beside Eliza so the two of them could talk in whispers. “I just saw him when I went to refill the punchbowl. The ladies are absolutely right. The man is a sight for sore eyes; his handsome looks are out of this world.”

Eliza wondered if it was the same man who had met her in the gardens. For a second, she was almost sure it was him.

“Even with a mask on?”

“Oh yes, even with a mask on.”

“What does he look like?” Eliza asked, her curiosity getting the best of her as she

tried to find out if it was the same man indeed. Although, it felt as if she already knew the answer. It was the same man.

“He is wearing a dark black tux that fits him to perfection, and he is both tall and muscular, standing above all the other men present in the room. His dark hair is slicked back into a ponytail, and his dark eyes are absolutely beautiful, and for a second, when he looked at me, I felt flustered just by that one look. His jaw is sleek and sharp, and everything about the man shouts perfection.”

Oh yes, it was the very same man, alright. Eliza knew.

She became even more confused about why the most handsome man tonight had taken such an interest in her and had even told her he knew her name.

She simply could not understand anything that was happening around her, and all she needed to do was find the truth about him. Although, how was she going to see him again?

“He does sound handsome,” she said plainly, too confused to show any more enthusiasm.

“Ye will have to see him to grasp the seriousness of the situation, Beth. Trust me.”

Eliza chuckled. “I do trust you, my friend. Fully.”

For a second, his description once again reminded Eliza of George and how he looked slightly similar to the man, but his hair was much lighter, and his eyes not as dark as the strangers had been.

Where the stranger had smelled like cinnamon and spice, George always smelled like birch and a hint of spice, more earthen than rich. George was natural, while

everything about the stranger screamed nobility.

“I must head to the kitchen to see if any of the candles need replacing.” Eliza stood up, excusing herself, but in truth, she just wanted to be alone.

The events that had unfolded tonight were confusing enough already, and Eliza simply needed to be in her own company for a little while to create distance between her and the ballroom where the stranger was the topic of conversation for every young lady.

He must have made quite an entrance and created some impression to achieve such a thing, but Eliza didn't care. She did not need to run into him again.

She walked a little further into the house, taking the servants' stairwell to go upstairs to the attic so she could be alone in her room for a little while.

The house was a bustle of activity, and she hoped her absence wouldn't be noticed for a few minutes. As she stepped onto the staircase, she almost screamed, her eyes falling on the stranger who was comfortably seated at the top stair as if it was perfectly normal for him to be present there at this hour.

“What are you doing here?” Eliza whispered, looking behind her to see if anyone else was following. Thankfully, no one was there.

“Did I not ask you to meet me inside the house? Since you made no attempts to find me, I had to find you myself, of course.”

“How did you even know I was going to be here?!” She had never been more shocked.

It seemed as if he knew the house almost as well as she did, and he even knew her

whereabouts. Who was this man, and why did he know so much about her? Eliza should have felt terrified of the intimate knowledge he had of her, but once again, the comfort of his presence transcended any and all fear she might have been feeling.

All that was left was confusion and curiosity.

“I know you, My Lady. I already told you that in the garden earlier.”

Her belly fluttered as he called her my lady, butterflies coursing through her blood. A part of her reminded her that she had never felt this way around a man, but rationality continued to scream that almost every woman in England would react similarly to him, including all those ladies and even Amelia. She was no different than the rest, his handsome mystery appearing to be charming. Although, what confused her was the way he kept addressing her as my lady and how he had left the ball where he was much wanted to come see her instead.

A mere servant.

“What do you want from me, My Lord?”

“Your name.”

“My name is Beth,” Eliza said, sighing deeply, “Now that you have it, please return to the ball before someone sees you here with me and ruins my reputation. I cannot handle that one bit.”

“No one is going to raise a single finger at your character, and your reputation will remain intact,” he assured her, the confidence in his voice making Eliza feel strangely calm. “Now you must tell me your name again, and this time I would like to hear the truth.”

Eliza was confused. What did he mean?

“I do not understand,” she frowned, “My name is Beth, My Lord.”

“It is not.” He stepped down a few stairs to stand beside her, his hands placed on Eliza’s shoulders as he held her tightly. “You are Lady Eliza Gordon, the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Grafton. I already know the truth, so please do not try to deny it and insult both me and you. I am sure you can do better than that.”

Eliza was stunned. This was the last thing she had expected to hear from the handsome stranger in front of her, for she had thought he was merely curious about her identity. However, whoever this man was knew her real name.

But how?

“You must not speak so loudly and never utter that name in front of me ever again.”

The colour from her face must have faded at the revelation from the man, and Eliza felt all the energy leaving her. Tears tugged at her eyes as she heard someone address her in this manner after so many years, but she did not allow them to leave her eyes. She was not going to cry in front of a man she did not even know.

“Why must I not?” he asked, still holding onto her. Eliza removed his hands from her shoulders, backing away slightly.

“I do not want anyone to hear you say that. I do not care what is it that you think you know, My Lord, but you must keep it to yourself and maintain distance from me.”

“Why would you want that, Eliza?” She felt elated as he said her name again as if it was the most casual conversation in the world.

“That is just the way it has to be,” she replied. For now, at least.

“Eliza, I need to know what happened to you after your parents died. How did your situation change so much that you had to become a servant from the lady of the house and even assume a new name? None of this is right, Eliza and I cannot stand here silently watching you suffer in this manner.”

Who is this man?

“Why do you know so much about my life? Who are you?”

“I am just a curious passerby with more questions than answers. But I need those answers from you so I can stop this cruelty from going on. You must tell me the truth about all things.”

Eliza was almost on the verge of telling him the truth, but something stopped her from revealing her biggest secret. What if all of this was just a trap?

She wondered if the man had been sent by Uncle Edgar or Aunty Beatrice or one of her cousins to see if Eliza would betray them and reveal the truth about herself to a complete stranger.

If this were the case, she would never be able to escape from this house, especially now that freedom was almost upon her. She could not take such a huge risk and let everything go from her hands.

I need to be smarter than that.

“Eliza?” his voice forced her to return to the present, and she looked into his russet-coloured eyes, their familiarity almost shocking her.

“I am Beth,” she said firmly, gulping the tears forming in her throat, “I am Beth, and I am a servant in the house. I do not know who you are or what you are saying or trying to prove, but I do not know Eliza or the Duke and Duchess of Grafton. Please leave me alone now. You have all of your answers.”

She turned away from him, ready to run away and disappear into the comfort of her room, but the stranger held her by the wrist, not letting her escape so easily.

He pulled her towards him, extremely close to her once again, and Eliza felt the butterflies in her belly return. Why did he have such an effect on her? She failed to understand.

He came extremely close, almost whispering in her ear.

“You are Lady Eliza Gordon, the beloved daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Grafton. Do not let anyone convince you otherwise. It is about time you start assuming your identity once again.”

Eliza looked at him, tears in her eyes, but stayed silent. He lifted his other hand, softly patting her head, and she leaned into the touch, shocked by its familiarity. A strange flashback came to her mind of sitting by the stream she used to go fishing in with her childhood friend Alexander, their legs dipped in the water.

Her parents had just died, and Alexander was comforting him, his hand petting her blonde hair affectionately, and she had leaned into the comfort of his touch.

She opened her eyes, entirely shocked, but did not know what to say. She knew if she opened her mouth, only tears would come out, and she was still not ready to cry.

“Excuse me, My Lord.”

Without waiting for him to reply, Eliza freed her hand and ran upstairs as fast as she could until she reached the attic. She opened the door, bolting it shut behind her, and finally broke down into the tears she had been holding for too long. She did not know what she was crying for.

Was it for her lost identity or because someone knew about her lost identity? She simply couldn't place it, but all she knew was that she needed to escape as quickly as possible. The stranger had awakened the need to be known as herself inside her, and that was not something Eliza had any control over.

She believed in acceptance, and he was asking her to act otherwise.

But who was he?

Who are you?

It was clear that he was a member of the ton, but he had still felt familiar to Eliza as if she knew him, but it could not be Alexander. Alexander had left many years ago, and he would not return simply to look for her. Even the thought of it was absurd. But if not Alexander, who else could it be?

And what had he been doing at the staircase as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be there. Had he really come there to look for her?

Did he really know the entire truth about her?

And why was it that it seemed as if he really wanted to help her? Eliza felt protected in his embrace, but she needed to keep her distance. She could not let her thoughts consume her because all she needed to focus on was making enough money to escape this prison.

Although, she could still not stop thinking about the stranger.

How was she even going to find out his identity?

But she knew she needed to.

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Chapter 7

Once Eliza had stalked off, Alexander immediately returned to the ballroom, not wanting his absence to get noticed. He was certain no one had seen him with Eliza on the staircase, but being careful was absolutely important to make sure Eliza's reputation remained untainted. No one was supposed to see them together no matter what happened, or it would only result in disaster.

"My Lord ..." A young lady's voice forced him to turn around, and he smiled at her customarily. She had been following him around for a while now.

"My Lady." He nodded slightly.

"We missed you in the ballroom. Wherever did you disappear?" So his absence had been noticed.

"I was right here." He smiled candidly, staring straight into her eyes. "You must have not been looking closely."

She blushed deeply, unable to meet his stare, and Edward decided this to be the perfect moment of escape. He bowed to her and excused himself, quickly consumed by the sea of colours that adorned the ballroom. Despite everything around him, his mind was still on Eliza.

He had never intended to pull her this close to him, but the proximity had allowed him to know that she smelled faintly floral, a mixture of flowers emanating from her skin.

The scent had been heady enough to make him lose focus, and she had used that very instance to run away from him. She tantalized his senses in the most sensuous ways, and Alexander could feel his attraction towards her growing with every passing day. She was doing things to him that he had no means to either understand or escape from.

However, he could not let the attraction he felt towards her overtake all of his senses. His feelings were not as important as Eliza's condition, and he had already taken an oath to restore her to her former glory. Hence, nothing else could get in his way except what needed to be done to make sure Eliza had it all.

Everything that belonged to her was going to be hers again, and Alexander would make it happen.

I need to find Edgar.

He looked around the ballroom, hoping to catch sight of Lord Leicester, but the man was nowhere to be seen. It was important for Alexander to sit and have a conversation with the man, especially when he was tipsy, and find out as much as he could.

Alexander quickly realized how several older gentlemen were missing from the ballroom, which only meant they were playing cards.

He took directions from a waiter and made his way towards Edgar's study, where cards and drinks had been set up.

Alexander stepped into the room with quiet confidence, his gaze sweeping over the group of men huddled around a rich oak table, being used for their decks of cards as they played poker.

He breathed in the air, thick with the scent of whisky and cigar smoke, and easily assumed a position on an empty, plush leather sofa, which looked as if it had been waiting for him.

The men, their masks off, stared at him silently, no one willing to challenge Alexander's lion-like stride. Edgar, too, sat at the table, half slouched in his chair, his drunkenness apparent on his rapidly ageing face.

"My Lord," Edgar finally greeted Alexander, and the table erupted into quiet chatter once again, the discomfort dispelled entirely.

"Mind if I join, gentlemen?"

"The stakes are rather high," an older man with hawk eyes replied, "are you certain you can join?"

Alexander chuckled, motioning to the dealer to shuffle the deck as he placed a hefty number of chips on the table to silence all those around him.

Everyone stayed quiet as the dealer shuffled the deck with a quick flick of his wrists, the cards snapping as they slid across the table. Alexander was hardly worried about the game or the stakes, having enough money even to lose without any damage to him, but despite that, he was a skilled poker player.

He hardly ever lost. Unless he needed to.

Alexander let his cards remain untouched, simply reading the table as everyone looked at the hand they had been dealt. The other gentlemen maintained their poker faces, but Alexander had seen too much of this world to be fooled by them. He could win this game with his eyes closed, but he needed to lose.

Edgar was already drunk on victory, and Alexander needed to rouse him slightly before bringing him down. He needed to make a friend out of Edgar rather than an enemy, and he needed to make sure Edgar respected him enough to divulge what Alexander needed to know.

“All in,” one of the noble lords said, folding his cards.

Several others folded right after until Alexander viewed his cards. Edgar folded, easily winning the round, while Alexander stayed put. He kept going on in that manner, losing rather easily to Edgar, who was already on the way to believing that he had it all tonight.

He looked around the table, sensing everyone was becoming comfortable with him, no longer viewing him as a stranger who could turn out to be better than them all.

No sweeter time than this to attack.

“I am going all in.” Edgar smiled, putting all his winnings from the night and some other money into the game, and Alexander did the same wordlessly.

Edgar revealed his hand, and Alexander smirked as the suspense built around the table. He flipped his cards – a full house. Silence ensued all around him as everyone looked at him in surprise while Edgar eyed him closely. He pulled the chips towards him, not bothering to count, and tipped his head slightly towards the man who had organized the ball today.

“Are you cheating? How did you win the biggest hand after losing so many?” a noble lord asked Alexander, and he laughed.

“Just luck.”

With a nod at the gentlemen, Alexander stood up and made his way towards the bar, ordering a whisky.

He knew with quiet assurance that Edgar would follow after him, and that would be the perfect time to lay down his questions in front of the man. All Alexander needed was to goad Edgar enough for him to get ready to reveal anything and everything.

“You.” Alexander turned around, and just as he had expected, Edgar stood behind him, using the wall for support.

He was drunker than he would care to admit, and Alexander moved away, allowing the man to rest against the bar instead. Despite already being completely gone, he ordered a drink and angled his grey eyes on Alexander.

Despite being hazy, Alexander could see nothing but greed and malice in them, showing how the man before him possessed no ethical or moral values. After what he had done to Eliza, his own niece, Alexander did not doubt that.

“Congratulations,” Edgar said, raising his glass towards Alexander, who nodded and took a sip. Edgar downed the whole drink in one go, slamming the glass on the wooden bar.

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“Who are you? I, too, have to wonder if you are nothing but a cheat behind that mask.”

“The whole point of a masquerade is to be your real self behind a mask. I would rather be anonymous and my true self rather than put on an air of facade with my mask removed.”

“Fair.” Edgar laughed.

“I must compliment you on the lovely masquerade you have arranged here, My Lord. I must say that I have travelled the world and spent my fair share of time in gatherings both noble and exquisite, but I have never been to a ball as fine as this one.”

Edgar’s eyes glinted. It was enough indication for Alexander to know that he enjoyed the praise immensely.

“You do seem like a man of the world,” Edgar replied, “and your interest in this ball is the perfect indication of your fine taste. I do wish to ask you who you are, but I respect your wish to remain anonymous. However, I would like it if you could introduce yourself to me at some other gathering where we are not separated by a mask.”

“I will do so, My Lord.” It was Alexander’s turn to chuckle. “Who in their right mind would not wish to be acquainted with the fine Russels.”

“Damn right.” Edgar raised his second glass of whisky towards Alexander and took a sip of the clear liquid.

“Everything about the Russels is rather endearing, I must say,” Alexander continued to flatter. “Even your daughters are lovely, adding much to the allure of the evening.”

“Ah.” Edgar beamed, his smile growing with every compliment Alexander threw his way, “In that case, you must have met my beautiful English rose, Lady Victoria. What did you think of her?”

“Your description of her beauty is rather precise, My Lord.” Alexander smiled. “She is indeed an English rose. Even the house you have here is exquisitely charming. If

you are feeling up to the task, I would love to look around and have a tour.”

“Now, now, young man.” Edgar laughed, “I might be older than you, but I am just as spirited today as I was twenty years ago. I would be delighted to give you a tour of my prized jewel – this estate.”

“Lead the way.”

Alexander exited the room along with Edgar, finally able to breathe again after being rid of the insufferable smell of cigar smoke. The entire house, along with all the servants, was entirely involved in ensuring the ball was being catered to in high fashion, and all else was left empty.

Edgar led Alexander away from the main hall into a string of corridors, which Alexander already knew by heart. The end of these corridors opened into a large verandah and directly into the back gardens, which were a prized part of the house, adding to its beauty. Edgar was truly looking to impress.

“I must ask, My Lord,” Alexander spoke, cutting Edgar’s monologue short, “how you came in possession of such a beautiful estate.”

Edgar laughed softly, a sigh escaping through his mouth as he contemplated the reply. Alexander already knew he was certainly not going to get the truth from the old man, but he was at least hoping for some clue that he would be able to hold against him. Edgar was already rather drunk, and his senses diminished.

“I only came by it because I was wise enough to grab onto an opportunity with no remorse when it came my way. I simply was able to understand that my God was trying to bless me for my patience and good deeds, and I took control of all that rightfully belonged to me.”

Rightfully. What a hypocrite.

Alexander had the urge to slam his fist into Edgar's face, but he controlled it, not wanting to cause a scene both prematurely and unnecessarily.

Before he could ask another question to get more information out of Edgar, they heard footsteps approaching them into the empty corridor and shortly afterwards, Lady Leicester appeared, her eyes widening as she saw her husband with Alexander. Being the perfect hostess, she did not allow her surprise to remain on her face and immediately smoothed it into a smile.

"My Lord," she greeted Alexander before turning a curious glance towards Edgar.

"Lady Leicester." Alexander smiled from underneath the mask. "Your husband here was showing me this beautiful estate. I must tell you that you have a beautiful house."

"Oh, this is nothing." Lady Leicester laughed, enjoying the praise. "You must see the country house. It is far bigger and much grander. You will enjoy being there even more."

"I do not doubt it for one second."

"Edgar, you should have asked me to accompany you for the tour. You must have bored the poor man with unnecessary details." Alexander was annoyed at her unwanted presence, feeling as if she knew her husband was going to say or do something that he should not be doing. She was there to save him from divulging too much, and Alexander was certainly not happy about it.

"He did no such thing." Alexander chuckled lightly.

"But you must return to the ballroom at once, My Lord," she addressed Alexander,

“several young ladies have been asking about you, and I believe you should not keep them waiting. You are clearly quite a favourite of the ton tonight.”

“Well, if that is the case, we must not keep them waiting.”

He silently followed Lord and Lady Leicester back inside the ballroom, the dance floor fully occupied as the music blared. Alexander sighed deeply, knowing full well that the evening might not bring him any other new revelations since any revelation that could have come through Lord Leicester was curbed by his wife.

He was slightly disappointed, but not so much. His agendas for the evening had been achieved, and he could simply slip out unnoticed.

“Mother!”

Alexander eyed the pale blonde hair and blue eyes hidden behind a barely-there mask on a man dressed in a perfectly white coat and breeches. He knew this must be Henry, the son of Lord and Lady Leicester.

From what Alexander could tell just by staring at him, he was both young and spoiled, brought up on nothing but the perks brought about by money. Money that did not even belong to him. Alexander would not be surprised if he was just as mean and spineless as his parents.

“Henry,” Lady Leicester turned to him while Lord Leicester simply stalked away.

Alexander knew he should have moved away, letting the mother and son have some privacy, but he was too invested in the conversation to care about propriety. He needed to find out as much about the family as he could, and the only thing that would help him do so was to have these interactions.

“Where is Beth?”

Beth? Why did he want Eliza? Alexander felt uncomfortable in the man’s presence; his tone and expressions were too entitled. It seemed as if he had not cared about anything or anyone in his life and was too full of himself even to consider the feelings of another. Moreover, the way he took Eliza’s name unsettled Alexander. It almost felt like he believed he owned her.

“Why do you need her?” Lady Leicester threw a nervous smile towards Alexander, clearly remembering he was still there. Henry, on the other hand, had refused even to acknowledge Alexander’s imposing presence.

“The masquerade is too tiresome, and I require something stronger than champagne for myself and my friends. I need Beth to serve us in my private study.”

Private study. Alexander felt rage build up inside him, but he could not react. He simply needed to make sure that Eliza stayed away from this man.

“She is busy elsewhere, my darling,” Lady Leicester said softly, “you must ask another maid to do so.”

Henry’s expression changed entirely to one of pure inconvenience, as if he was a child who had not been handed his favourite toy. Alexander could feel that this was not the first time he was talking about Eliza in such a manner, but he must treat her similarly on a regular basis.

The mere thought of this man being close to Eliza boiled Alexander’s blood, but he continued to breathe in and out slowly to remain calm. That was all he could do.

“This is absurd,” he frowned, and Lady Leicester laughed to hide his bad temper.

“You are being terribly rude, Henry.” She threw another glance at Alexander. “You must greet ... this gentleman right here. I am sorry, but I do not remember you telling me your name.”

“I prefer the mysterious air the mask gives me,” Alexander replied, “although I do assure you that I did indeed receive the invitation, and I am a part of the guest list.”

“I never once doubted that, My Lord,” Lady Leicester said quickly, pretending as if such a notion had never even crossed her mind.

“I do hope you do not think the worst of me, My Lady.”

“I can never! This is a masquerade, and you have every right to be as mysterious as you wish to be.”

“You must excuse me as you continue with this enlightening discussion,” Henry chimed in, leaving the two of them with a bow.

Alexander was glad that Lady Leicester had asked her son to get another maid to serve him and his friends, or else he would have done something to intercept it.

There was no way he would have stood by doing nothing while Eliza was subjected to the whims of someone as rotten as Henry. As soon as he was gone, Lady Leicester’s expression changed from embarrassment to quiet fury as she stared at someone behind Alexander.

“You must excuse me for a moment, My Lord,” she said, walking away, and Alexander turned around to look at the subject of her anger.

A young lady dressed in an ill-fitting, brightly coloured yellow gown, which only turned her complexion sour, stood there, silently listening to whatever Lady Leicester

was throwing her way. Her grey eyes were exactly like Edgar's, and Alexander immediately guessed her to be the second daughter, Lady Margaret. She was not as beautiful as her sister and slightly fatter, and considering the kind of people the Russels were, this was enough to secure immense hatred for the poor girl.

Without caring about barging into a private conversation, Alexander barged in between the mother and daughter, noticing the resemblance Lady Margaret shared with her father. Her eyes were not evil or cunning like the rest of the family, and she clearly appeared to be innocent.

Lady Leicester stopped with her round of insults the moment Alexander walked in and smiled.

"My Lord," she said, flustered, "This is my younger daughter, Lady Margaret."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, My Lady." Alexander smiled, taking her gloved hand in his to place a kiss over her knuckles.

She blushed deeply.

"May I have the pleasure of your company for a dance?"

"Me?" she appeared slightly confused. Alexander felt guilty because what she might view as affection was nothing but a ploy to extract some information from her for him. Although, he did wish to rid her of her mother's stern gaze.

"Yes."

"I would love to."

He nodded at Lady Leicester, who seemed confused before whisking Lady Margaret

away to the dance floor. The couples were already settling in, and they quickly assumed their positions as the set started. Within the first few seconds of the waltz, Alexander understood that she was clearly rustic at the steps, stepping on Alexander's feet rather often.

"Look at me, Lady Margaret," he said to her, for she was only staring at their feet, trying to do all the steps right. His tone made her look at him.

"Yes?" she stuttered out.

"You must keep all your focus on me and me alone. Alright? I will guide you through the dance."

She nodded, fear shining in her eyes, but Alexander easily took control of her movements and guided her along with him. His expert hands twirled her in a way that he stayed completely out of the way, and she moved with perfect momentum, not faltering even slightly.

Her fear was replaced by another happy emotion, her eyes beginning to shine slightly as she looked at Alexander. He was glad to see she was enjoying herself. He could see she was very unlike her brother and sister, but that hardly meant she had no part in Eliza's humiliation. She was weak herself, but she could still be dangerous, and Alexander was not going to underestimate her at all.

"Tell me about yourself, Lady Margaret."

"About myself?" She seemed confused as if no one had asked her this before. "Well, I enjoy playing the pianoforte, and I do love dancing, even though I am not very good at it."

She laughed.

“All it needs is practice,” Alexander said, smiling. “You must dance at every ball, and you will be rather perfect in no time.”

“I hope so.” She stared at him shyly.

“Your house here is rather beautiful, and the ball your parents have thrown is rather grand. I have lived away from London too long and have only returned a few days ago. I am glad I chose this gathering to be the first gathering of being in the middle of the ton again.”

“I am quite glad you like it.”

“Although, I do have a few questions if you would care to clear up my confusion?”

“Anything, My Lord.” She looked too eager to help him.

“Last time I was in London, which I must tell you was many years ago, this estate belonged to the Duke and Duchess of Grafton. Did it not?”

“Who?” Lady Margaret gulped nervously, her nervousness beginning to show on her face. Sheens of sweat began to form on her forehead, and Alexander wondered if he pressed her enough, would she divulge something worth knowing?

Although, he could sense she was much too weak to make such a mistake. This was not the right time.

“The Duke and Duchess of Grafton? I do not know if I remember this correctly, but I believe they even had a daughter. Lady Elena, or was it Eliza? I seem to be forgetting. It was many years ago, of course.”

“Lady Eli ... Eliza?”

Her movements once again became still as tension filled her shoulders, and Alexander was scared that if he pressed her any more than he already had, she would run away from him.

Terror clouded her expression, and he immediately decided to let it go, knowing he could not let her suffer more than she must already suffer being Lady Victoria's sister.

"Oh, but forget it," he said offhandedly, sounding casual, "I am sure I must be remembering wrong. My memory does get the worst of me at times."

Lady Margaret laughed nervously, the tension beginning to leave her body at last.

"Of course." She sighed deeply.

"I must tell you that I have always had quite a fancy for hair as dark as yours." He smiled. "It looks beautiful on you, especially with the red ribbons."

Lady Margaret blushed again, clearly not used to compliments. Alexander was certain she had spent all her life in the shadow of her sister and constantly being reprimanded by her mother and father. He could see the miserable life she must have led, and he simply wished to boost her confidence only if slightly. Lady Margaret deserved this much, at least, and Alexander wanted to be there to give it to her.

"Thank you, My Lord."

"You must get compliments from young men all the time. You are truly marvellous to look at."

"Are you jesting?" she asked, despite being crimson from the praise Alexander was administering to her.

“I am being entirely honest, My Lady,” he reassured her, “you must take my word for it.”

“I must thank you for your kindness.”

The set came to an end, and he quickly bowed to her, excusing himself. Dinner had been announced, and Alexander needed to discern and find out all the people who were close to the Russels. Anyone close to them could give him potential information regarding the family and the clearly uncouth means they had used to steal away all that belonged to Eliza through her father’s will.

He walked through the maze of people into the drawing room where Lord and Lady Leicester were already seeing to the comfort of their guests.

He settled down, his mind only on one thing. He needed to make sure the Russels saw the end of them, and he needed to do it soon.

Chapter 8

Three in the morning, good God. Eliza groaned loudly, walking into the kitchen, which was still filled with servants as they cleared up the dishes from dinner and the refreshments earlier. The ball was still not over, almost half the guests still present and dancing as if the night had just started.

She failed to understand where they found the courage to have such an exhausting routine night after night, but she promptly remembered that none of them had been awake since the wee hours of the morning.

Eliza had been, though. She had woken up at first light and made sure all the preparations for the masquerade ball were underway, with nothing left behind. She had been on her feet all day with very little sleep, and the night was still not over. Not for several hours, at least.

“Are you okay?” Lara whispered from behind, and Eliza turned to look at her kind face.

She shook her head, too tired to speak.

“My dear,” Lara sighed, “who asked you to volunteer to be the last one to fall asleep amongst the servants? You need more sleep than all the others since you have been working all day for the ball.”

“It is alright, Lara.” Eliza smiled, even though her legs were sore with discomfort from walking all day.

“You must step outside for a little while and rest in the open night air. I will see to anything that needs to be done here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” Lara lovingly touched her shoulder, and Eliza instantly felt comforted.

She opened the back door of the kitchen and stepped into the gardens, which were marked with shadows.

The early morning breeze greeted her with open arms, and she breathed it in, having felt claustrophobic for the past hour after being around the ballroom. Her head hurt from the music and the noise, and all she wanted was a little bit of silence and some peace.

“If there are any ghosts or fae in the garden right now, pardon me for disturbing your sleep. I have only done so for I seek a little bit of rest myself and mean no harm,” she whispered into the darkness, staring at the line of trees ahead.

She had always believed in the existence of ghosts, fae and other magical creatures, their presence more apparent at night.

She remembered her mother telling her that the veil between this world and the magical world was thinner at this time of the morning, which was why one must never step out in fear of disturbing and angering something more powerful than oneself.

Eliza had followed that staunchly to this day, and whenever she needed to step out into this part of the night, she loudly apologized.

Her eyes met with an empty bucket, placed by the wall, and she quickly upturned it to

use as a stool. As she sat down on the uncomfortably cold metal, she wished she had not volunteered to sleep last. She knew she would only be getting one hour to sleep or perhaps even less than that, and she would have to be up rather early, even tomorrow.

Aunty Beatrice was never going to give her a break.

However, her only comfort was in knowing that despite being up, the family would easily be asleep till noon, and she just might get the chance to go about her chores slowly, even finding time between them to catch a few minutes of sleep here and there.

She would need that to be able to survive tomorrow before she could comfortably greet her bed and fall asleep for hours. The cold breeze wafted through her face and her hair, making her feel even more comfortable.

Sleep touched her eyes, and she closed them, leaning against the wall behind her. The handle of the bucket bit into her leg, but she hardly cared about the discomfort when sleep was twinkling by her with such sweetness.

She breathed in deeply, and before she knew what was happening, a darkness overtook her senses, and she stumbled into a deep, deep sleep.

The wall was breathing.

That was the first thought that came to Eliza as she opened her eyes, unsure of where she even was. She remembered sitting down on the upturned bucket, leaning against the wall until falling asleep just like that.

The coldness of the night was replaced by warmth, and she felt cozy under the

thickness of the coat placed upon her. An all too familiar scent of cinnamon and spice greeted her nostrils, and Eliza finally woke up with a start.

It was not the wall but the handsome stranger who was breathing, his arms casually wrapped around Eliza as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She looked up, realizing she was seated comfortably beside him, almost clinging, and till just a few moments earlier, her head had been resting on his shoulder as he cradled her like a child.

His black coat, which smelled distinctly like him, was draped over Eliza, keeping her protected from the coldness of the night.

How long had she been asleep? Was the ball over? Had someone noticed her absence?

Questions invaded her mind as she became worried, hoping that no one had been able to see her here. Especially with him.

Her movement might have alerted him since his eyes jerked open immediately and Eliza was once again met with those russet-coloured irises, their colour so beautifully dark that, for a second, she forgot everything she had been worrying about.

“You are awake.” He broke the spell.

“What am I doing here?” She jumped up from beside him, and he did not stop her.

She looked around, realizing they were in the garden alcove, her worries calming down slightly. Hardly anyone from the guests would saunter into the alcove, and the servants certainly had no time to be afforded the luxury of midnight walks to the alcove in the middle of the ball. She hoped that had been the case and no one had

happened upon them.

“Did you have a good sleep?” He asked his own question, her concerns going unanswered.

“I asked you, what am I doing in your arms when I remember falling asleep against the wall on the bucket? Did you bring me here? And if you have, who asked you or allowed you to do such a thing?”

He stood up as well, his tall stature and masculine figure intimidating her, but Eliza stood her ground. She was not going to let him consume her senses this time as he had done earlier, especially after the conversation they had on the staircase. Part of her was glad he was not bringing up the subject again.

“You seemed rather uncomfortable sleeping on the bucket with your head turned to the side. I figured this might be more comfortable, considering you absolutely do need sleep, and you leaned onto my chest yourself and placed my coat over you. I simply stayed still so you could continue sleeping for even I can see that you obviously need it.”

“You should never do such a thing again.”

“I was only trying to help.”

Eliza knew he was right. She would never have been able to sleep comfortably on the bucket, and even if she had slept, she would have woken up with soreness in her neck and her body.

Sleeping over the handsome stranger had allowed her to have a comfortable enough sleep and she felt slightly fresh, ready to go about her chores once again.

“Thank you,” she sighed, trying to smile, “You did a kind thing, and I must thank you for being such a gentleman. Now, if you will excuse me, I have chores to attend.”

She should have waited to hear his reply, but the situation had filled her with enough embarrassment for one lifetime, and she did not think she could even face him.

Instead, she dashed back towards the kitchen and entered the house from the back, Amelia standing in front of her. Eliza’s heart almost jumped out of her chest at the sight of her friend, her breathing ragged.

“Where have you been?!” Amelia asked, clearly exasperated as her slightly thick country accent became more prominent than usual.

“Right here.” Eliza knew Amelia could see through her lie, but she was glad her friend did not press for details.

“Lady Leicester has been asking for you for quite some time. I gave her the excuse that you were seeing to the preparations of the bedchambers for those who wish to nap right here and will be with her shortly.”

“Oh, thank you, Amelia.” Eliza smiled, clasping her friend’s hand in gratitude. “Can you tell me where she is?”

“Her private parlour.”

Without wasting another second, Eliza ran straight from the kitchen towards Aunt Beatrice’s private parlour, not wishing to anger her any more than she must have already been angered over Eliza’s absence.

Eliza knew Beatrice had the tendency of causing drama at the slightest bit of her faults, and she would do the same right now. Despite that, the nap allowed her to take

all of it.

Eliza knocked on the door and entered, finding Aunty Beatrice sitting regally on the sofa, her loud, plum-coloured dress spread all around her. The fact that she was resting comfortably only indicated that the party must have been over, everyone returning to their homes or already asleep.

“Where were you, Beth?” Aunty Beatrice raised her voice only barely, but Eliza flinched at the coldness in her tone.

“Seeing to the bedchambers for those who might wish to sleep here, My Lady.”

“I do not care!” she shouted, “When I have been asking for you, you must leave everything else and rush immediately to me.”

“I will make sure I do just that in the future.”

“Good,” Aunty Beatrice sighed, finally calming down a little. “I need you to go straight up to Victoria’s bedchamber and see to her. She had a little too much to drink and might need some attention or some help, so you should attend to her personally.”

“At once, My Lady.”

Eliza knew this only meant that Aunty Beatrice did not wish the other servants to see Victoria in such a condition or make a fool out of herself in her drunken state.

The servants were bound to gossip, but it was not something hidden from the ton. Victoria’s drinking problem was known to everyone in both the country house and the London estate, but no one dared mention it due to her parents. Despite that, Eliza could sense how Aunty Beatrice still wanted to be as discreet as possible.

She entered Victoria's bedchamber, and just as she had expected, Victoria lay on her bed appearing entirely dishevelled when just a few hours ago she had appeared to be the perfect young lady. Without saying a single word, Eliza helped Victoria stand up as she moaned in protest but quietly listened to Eliza.

"You must keep standing," Eliza said, quickly undoing the buttons on her gown and taking it off.

Once the gown was off, she undid the corset and removed it along with the trousers and petticoat she was wearing underneath. With everything gone, Eliza helped Victoria slip into a silk nightgown and wiped her face and hands with a washcloth as if Victoria was not a woman her age but a child instead.

Once everything was done, Eliza took Victoria back towards her bed and helped her get in, tucking her in comfortably. However, rather than leaving her there, Eliza sat down beside her, not wanting to leave her cousin alone until she was fast asleep.

That was the least she could do.

Victoria turned around and faced Eliza, her eyes half closed with sleep and the alcohol in her body. Eliza only hoped she did not puke since it would only mean she would have to clean up after Victoria, and Eliza was too tired to indulge in such strenuous work at this hour.

"Beth?"

"Yes?"

Victoria laughed loudly, her eyes opening and closing.

"That is not even your name," Victoria said, "but you are Beth now."

Eliza felt hot daggers being stabbed into her chest, but she stayed silent, not taking the bait Victoria wished for her to take. It was not the first time Victoria was saying something mean to Eliza, but she only needed to show that she did not care. The best thing to do was keep her head held high and not react to any insult thrown her way.

“You must go to sleep, Lady Victoria.”

“I sometimes laugh, Eliza,” she stuttered out, her words overlapping one another, “I laugh at how you used to have it all since you were just a little girl, and now you are nothing but a servant who empties my chamber pots.”

Eliza stayed quiet, forcing herself to stay silent even as tears glazed her vision.

“Such a sad, sad life.”

Victoria fell asleep only moments later, and Eliza finally allowed the tears she had been controlling to fall out of her eyes. If it had not been for the handsome stranger who had forced her to remember her true identity tonight, Victoria’s words would not have felt this scalding. Now, with her truth just beneath her fingertips, it hurt her even more, and she had no control over her feelings.

She quickly stood up and exited Victoria’s bedchamber, closing the door behind her. It was almost morning, and the house was finally falling asleep, the chores that needed to be completed already done.

Eliza ignored all else and made her way to the attic, opening the door as silently as she could. She simply needed to be alone right now and perhaps find some moments of sleep-induced peace in her heart.

As she stepped inside, her eyes fell on the tiny package placed just beside her open window. Eliza walked closer, noticing that the package contained a soft pillow filled

with goose feathers, a beautiful mirror, and several sweets and edibles, which she knew were both delicious and expensive. She looked at the gifts that had been left for her, a small note attached to them, 'From your fairy godmother.'

Fairy godmother? Who could it be that had suddenly decided to send her gifts? She felt sceptical, unsure if this could simply be a trap by her aunt, uncle, or one of her cousins to somehow cause her more damage.

What was even more horrifying was how someone had entered her room to place the gift. However, the placement of the gift right beside the open window was an indication that whoever the intruder was had come through the gardens.

"But who is it?" she whispered, looking down from the window. Only a large vine ran beside it, which was supported by a thin stem. If someone had climbed it, they had to be someone both very young, almost weightless, or extremely agile.

Should I be accepting these things?

Her heart truly wished her to, as her mouth salivated at the sight of the sweets just waiting for her to be eaten. Her mind was against it, though, slightly scared of the consequences this might lead to. What if she got in trouble?

She was entirely confused and even slightly scared but still grateful, popping one of the sweets into her mouth. The sugary sweetness melted onto her tongue, and she smiled, still unable to believe how this could even be possible.

Despite that, she thanked God for whoever had suddenly decided to bless her with such pretty things, and she knew that the happiness she felt at this moment would help her get through this day.

Only she knew the amount of courage she needed to face everything waiting for her

already. She stared at her tired reflection in the looking glass and quickly turned her frown into a smile, not wanting the mirror to find her unhappy.

She needed to find her happiness herself. And now, she was going to do just that.

Henry had not been able to believe his eyes. For a few initial minutes, he had been certain that it was just the brandy speaking, creating hallucinations before his eyes. However, when he rubbed his eyes thoroughly and looked again, the scene had not changed even a little.

Eliza had still been there, comfortably asleep while being wrapped in the arms of the stranger from the party. When Henry had seen the man enter the ballroom, throngs and throngs of young women attracted to him almost immediately, he had sensed trouble.

The trouble had only intensified when he had easily overtaken Edgar at the poker table, dealing the winning hand and taking all the money as if it was the easiest thing he had ever done.

What confused Henry the most was how the man refused to reveal his identity, give anyone a name, or simply even take off his mask. Everything about him felt like a perfectly crafted charade, as if an image was being set up. He was not himself but someone else, but that was not Henry's concern. His concern was Eliza and what she had been doing in the man's arms.

"My Lord?" His butler forced him out of his thoughts, and Henry looked up questioning. "The men you called for have arrived."

Henry had called for some of his most trusted advisors to have them look into the

stranger's identity because he was not going to let this go unnoticed.

He quickly explained the details to the three men he had called and dismissed them once he was done, his mind unable to shake the image of Eliza wrapped in his arms.

He had always assumed that she only said no to his marriage proposals because she was not interested in marriage at all.

The thought that she might someday agree – especially since he had promised to make a lady out of her again – had given him hope, but that one image had shattered all hopes.

She was supposed to be unattainable. For him and anyone else.

It angered Henry immensely that she would choose to be this close to a man who wasn't him, but watching the two of them reminded him that he had competition, indeed.

He had no choice but to keep a closer eye on the stranger and Eliza, making sure they never met again. His intentions were still unclear but certainly not noble, and Henry was not going to let this stranger enter and take Eliza away from him. No man was going to have her, but he himself, and now he simply needed to make sure of that.

Chapter 9

Alexander stretched comfortably, the muscles in his thighs feeling slightly sore after his early morning horse ride. He walked inside the house, still dressed in his riding breeches, and headed straight towards the parlour, which faced the gardens up front.

He enjoyed the sunlight filtering into the room and had his breakfast there every day. His valet, John, immediately came to his side silently as Alexander made his way to the parlour.

The servants must have known he was returning since the breakfast tray was already waiting for him when he entered, and he sat down wordlessly. No matter how he tried to indulge his mind otherwise since last night, his thoughts would always return to Eliza.

She had felt warm and absolutely perfect in his arms as he had held her while she had slept, and even though he had never expected that moment to happen, it had been the highlight of his night.

When he had seen her uncomfortably asleep against the wall while being seated on the metal bucket, his heart had gone out to her, and he had known he couldn't allow her to sleep in such discomfort.

Hence, he had only wanted to place her on the bench in the alcove and cover her with his coat for warmth, but she had been so snuggled up against him that he simply could not find the courage to disturb her sleep-induced mind.

The perfection of that moment refused to leave his mind one bit, his heart wishing to relive it again and again, night after night.

Only if that were possible.

“My Lord?” John’s questioning voice made Alexander shake the thoughts away and look at his trusted valet, staring at him with concern.

“Yes?”

“Are you quite alright? Your tea has turned cold, and you still haven’t touched a morsel of breakfast. Do you fancy something else this morning?”

Alexander shook his head. “My mind was occupied with some thoughts.”

“Do you wish to relieve them on me so you can feel lighter?”

Alexander smiled, realizing how much his servants cared for him, especially John. However, he could still not tell anyone about what he was actually thinking and reveal everything that had transpired between him and Eliza. Although, other things worried him just the same, especially everything about the Russels.

“The Russels have me curious about everything they are hiding. Interacting with the family last night revealed a lot about their true faces, but I must find out more. As much as I can.”

“Were you able to find out something momentous last night?”

“Nothing of that importance, no.” Alexander shook his head, “Although, I am certain about the fact that Lady Beatrice Russel is the one who holds most power in the house, and everyone revolves around her command. Lord Leicester, on the other

hand, is nothing more than a peacock who enjoys flaunting the wealth that does not belong to him at all.”

“And the children?”

“I simply could not stand Henry, but he seems like a weak man with no morals. I am certain he has some vices that can be used against him when needed, and for that, he must be closely watched. Lady Victoria, on the other hand, is too full of herself and considers herself to be superior to everyone else. She is definitely not a kind person and is certainly rather clever like her mother, but Lady Margaret is softer and weaker and might be influenced by the right amount of pressure employed on her head.”

“What will you be doing next?”

Alexander took a sip of his tea, trying to think of his next step. “I need to take a closer look at the family and snoop in their house for proofs and clues. That might help me find something of importance that I would be able to hold against the Russels.”

“Finding a way inside the house and looking around without being discovered is impossible, My Lord.”

“It is not impossible.” Alexander sighed, a smirk on his face as he plotted. “The family will just need to be outside the house. But where?”

“A ball, perhaps?”

“No,” Alexander shook his head, turning to look at John, “The earl must invite them to dinner.”

“If you are going to invite them for dinner, who will sneak inside the house?” John

was clearly confused.

“I cannot be the earl in front of their eyes, John.” Alexander stood up, making his way towards his valet. “They might have already seen me visiting the estate as George, a stable hand, and I cannot risk everything by being two people at the same time. You must pretend to be the earl and invite them over for dinner and while they are here, I will look around the house.”

John’s eyes widened in horror.

“You are surely kidding, My Lord.” He laughed nervously, “How can I ever be the earl?”

“You will have to do it for me, John,” Alexander said straight away. “There is no other way to go about this, and if there is anyone who can pretend to be me, it is you. You have seen me closely enough and know everything about me. I am certain you can do it.”

“I will try my best not to disappoint you, My Lord.”

“I am sure you won’t.” Alexander smacked John’s back in praise, quite ecstatic about his agreement to the deal.

“But you will need to find a way to navigate through the house without being seen by the servants.”

“I know the ins and outs of the house, and I am sure I will manage,” Alexander reassured John, suddenly remembering another important task he had handed over to Mrs Carlyle, the housekeeper. “John, you must immediately go and fetch Mrs Carlyle and bring her here to me. I have something terribly important to discuss with her.”

Without another word, John left the parlour, and Alexander resumed his breakfast. He could not lie to himself and claim that he was not worried for Eliza, living the way she was in that house, but he had faith in himself to reveal the truth in front of the world.

That was all he needed to do to make sure Eliza's reputation was restored in society. The door opened, and Mrs Carlyle walked in beside John.

"You asked for me, My Lord?"

"I asked you to get some gifts delivered to the girl who lives in the attic in the Russel Estate. What happened about it?"

"It is already done, My Lord." Mrs Carlyle smiled. "It was not an easy task, but I made sure it was done. We first left the gifts on the path outside the mansion, but before she could find them, another maid saw them and stole them. Hence, the second time around, I took the help of the gardener's son, who easily climbed over the vine fence, which led straight to the attic window, and deposited the gifts directly inside. He is very young and light enough for his weight to be handled by the fence, and I gave him a small amount so he would keep his mouth shut about the matter."

Alexander was thrilled. He wanted Eliza to have everything she deserved to have, and he was ready to go to any length to get those things to her.

"Make sure this continues happening and keep sending her fine things."

"I will do just that, My Lord."

Alexander nodded, dismissing her. He needed to see Eliza immediately.

Dressed in breeches and a shirt fit enough for a stable hand, Alexander made his way towards the woods at the back of the Russel Estate, hoping to find Eliza.

A part of him hoped for her to be comfortably snuggled in her bed after the work she had done last night, but he knew better than that. No one in the house would let her sleep at such an unreasonable hour, and there was a much higher chance that he would find her working instead.

As he went further into the woods, his eyes landed on a familiar head of strawberry blonde hair tied into a messy braid, and he knew he had been right. Eliza stood ahead of him, completely oblivious to his presence as she foraged through the woods.

She was bent over a tiny shrub, which Alexander could not see, carefully tearing away leaves or fruits or perhaps even flowers. He walked closer, his feet crunching on the dried leaves, alerting Eliza of his presence.

“George!” She smiled warmly at him, waving him over.

He could see the tiredness of last night evident on her face, but she looked just as beautiful, the light on her face visible still. He made his way towards her, his heart already melting at the sight of her smile and last night came rushing back to him. Although right now, he was just George and not the stranger she had clung to as she slept.

“I am surprised to find you here after last night.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Do you have the energy to forage in the woods after staying up all night due to the ball?” he asked, making her chuckle softly.

“What can I say? Life must continue to go on even after a busy night. I certainly cannot say no to work and rest all day.”

“Then at least let me carry your basket while you look around and pick up everything you need to?” He took her basket from her before she could either agree or deny, and to his relief, she did not protest as she quietly gave up the already heavy basket. Alexander could see she had already picked up various fruits and flowers.

Despite that, the pair walked around in silence for several minutes as Eliza continued to pick up a flower or some leaves from one plant or another, her face a mask of concentration.

He could see she enjoyed doing this, and he was simply glad to be awarded her company even if both of them remained completely quiet.

He stared at her simple olive-green dress with its chequered pattern and apron tied around her waist and realized how beautiful she looked even when dressed so simply.

“Are you tire-” he began speaking just as she spoke up as well.

“Did the earl-”

They looked at each other, both stopping mid-sentence and instead broke out into laughter, Eliza’s eyes shining as she dissolved in giggles. He had never seen her laughing this openly before, and he was glad to see her this happy. Once the laughter had faded, Alexander shifted the basket from one hand to the other and nodded at her.

“Please go ahead and continue saying whatever is on your mind.”

“I was just asking you if the earl enjoyed the ball. He must have attended last night, I am sure.”

“He did attend,” Alexander replied, “and I heard him saying that he enjoyed it immensely and the ball was organized beautifully. I am certain it was all because of you.”

Eliza blushed.

“I tried my best for it to be successful.”

“And it was just that.”

She nodded, her eyes darting from left to right as if something was weighing on her mind. Alexander wondered if she could be thinking about the stranger from last night and the conversation she had with him. He could not blame her for constantly thinking about it since that must have given her a lot to consider.

“You must thank the earl for his praise,” she finally said, sighing deeply.

“I will,” Alexander promised. “Is something troubling you, Beth? You seem rather worried.”

She immediately became flustered, blinking quickly before looking at Alexander, and a smile pinned on her lips. Eliza shook her head as if it was the most absurd thought one could have ever had and rejected the question entirely.

“Not at all,” she said enthusiastically, “Although I must return to the house now.”

“I will walk you there. I do not wish you to be carrying this heavy basket all the way to the kitchen.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, George,” she protested.

“I insist.”

She wordlessly allowed him to walk beside her, and the two made their way back to the house.

“Thank you,” she finally said.

“That is entirely unnecessary.” He smiled, “I completely forgot to tell you that the earl is planning to invite the Russels to dinner later this month. The entire family, of course.”

“That sounds delightful.”

“I was wondering if I could come to the house during the dinner and perhaps become a part of the traditional game of cards that goes on between the servants.”

“How do you know about the game?” Eliza looked at him squarely.

Alexander had seen the card game happening once when he was a little boy and had assumed it still went on, but he definitely could not tell Eliza that. Although, if he remembered right, he had heard two footmen just by the gate discussing the winnings of the card games the night of the ball.

“I accidentally overheard a few servants bragging about their skill and winnings in the card games held here.”

Eliza laughed.

“You are right, the games do happen, but I have never participated,” she replied, “I will ask Lara about who organized the game and make sure we have a seat for you. You are more than welcome to join.”

Alexander nodded, knowing this might be the only chance he would get to find proof against the Russels. He could not let this opportunity go.

“Who is he?” Victoria stared across the garden from the parlour window, watching Eliza as she walked through the garden with a man beside her.

Margaret stood up from her position on the sofa to stare at what Victoria was looking at and turned towards her sister, “I think that is George. He is a stable hand on the earl’s estate and has been coming to the house after he accidentally met Beth a few days ago. The other day, I saw him in the kitchen with the other servants and heard a little bit of their conversation.”

“A stable hand?” Victoria asked suspiciously, unsure about the theory. “He does not look like a stable hand.”

“Just because he is handsome, he does not have to be noble, Victoria,” Margaret replied, returning to her tea.

“Handsome?” Henry chimed in, finally gaining some interest in the conversation. “Let me look at the man.”

He stood up beside Victoria as the two of them stared at the pair, but Henry immediately shook his head.

It could simply be that he was still hungover from last night and had no energy left in him to think rationally or to think at all really, but the chap hardly looked handsome to him, or even important for that matter.

“He is as common as they come, Vic,” he addressed his sister, returning to the settee

he had been reclining on. “You are worrying yourself over nothing.”

“He is a commoner, yes,” Margaret added, “but I do not know what it is about him that gives off a noble air. Perhaps it is his manner of walking that seems almost regal, but despite all that, he just seems like a simple man. I believe a little too simple to be considered one of them, although from what I heard in the kitchen, he appears to be both kind and friendly.”

Victoria sighed, hardly registering what Margaret had even said about the man. She did not care about Margaret’s opinion anyway and was simply voicing her doubts about the man, although, she felt as if the doubts could only be about Eliza’s presence beside him.

Victoria always felt the urge to take all happiness away from that girl, and she seemed to be laughing with George. Victoria did not enjoy that sight. She turned to look at Henry, who was already dozing off on the settee, his cup of tea forgotten beside him.

“Did you see the enigmatic stranger at the party last night?” she asked Margaret instead, who nodded enthusiastically.

“He is such a wonderful dancer,” Margaret replied, making Victoria roll her eyes. She had seen her sister dancing with him and had concluded that he must have taken pity on her.

“He is,” Victoria replied with an air of superiority, “although I do wonder why he would not give us his name. That seemed rather suspicious.”

Margaret said something in reply but, Victoria did not hear her sister, her eyes on George as he strolled away from the house. She wondered why the man had something peculiar about him, for he certainly did not look like just another servant.

She could be worrying about nothing, but she worried all the same. Victoria shook her head, not wanting to think any longer about it, and motioned towards the maid standing in one corner.

“Go call Beth.”

The maid scurried off and returned with Eliza just moments later.

“Yes, My Lady?” Eliza asked with a curtsy.

“I am too tired from the ball. Come give me a foot massage.”

Victoria knew she could have asked anyone to give her a foot massage, but she enjoyed humiliating Eliza in this manner.

The others were just servants aiming to please, but Eliza was one of them, her very own cousin, demeaned to this position, and Victoria enjoyed taking full advantage of it. Without a single word of protest, Eliza quickly began to rub Victoria’s feet.

Although, despite humiliating her from time to time, Victoria still never felt satisfied because, in her heart, she knew how Eliza was better than her in every way possible. She was more beautiful and far kinder, qualities that Victoria did not possess.

That was what angered her.

“Children!” They all looked up as their mother walked in, her eyes falling on Eliza rubbing Victoria’s feet.

“Go fetch me a pot of tea, girl.”

Victoria pushed Eliza away with her foot, and she scurried away without a single

word, making Victoria and Lady Leicester laugh at her humiliation. Henry, who had woken up sometime in the past few minutes, joined in the laughter, but Margaret remained silent, not wanting to be a part of this unnecessary humiliation.

“You seem never to enjoy our treatment of Beth, Margaret? Why is that?” Victoria asked teasingly, but Margaret simply remained silent. She knew replying to Victoria would only give her sister more reason to come at her.

“Is it because you think you are just as unfortunate as Beth? A wallflower with no suitors and no prospects.”

Tears glazed through Margaret’s eyes, and she silently exited the parlour, sick of the taunts Victoria sprung on her now and then.

However, it was not just Victoria who was mean to her, but her mother, father, and brother behaved the exact same way as well. She had never once felt loved in the family, and none of them had ever been kind to her.

Before she could escape to her room, she happened upon Eliza, who had a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits in her hands. Upon seeing her, Margaret quickly wiped away the tears that were not all over her cheeks, not wanting a servant to see her crying.

A servant?

She knew Eliza was anything but a servant, but the way she had been turned into a servant by her family angered Margaret.

Despite that, she had no confidence to stand up against her family in outrage at what they had done to poor Eliza.

“Would you like a biscuit, Lady Margaret?” Eliza asked kindly.

Margaret shook her head no, realizing how Eliza had never been unkind to her even once. She had never been unkind to anyone, the goodness of her heart apparent to everyone in the house.

Margaret wished she could do something for her cousin, but she was entirely powerless against her family, a prisoner in her own home. She could do nothing even if she tried, and that pained her immensely.

Chapter 10

“Beth, what are you doing!?” Amelia stopped Eliza from pouring the tea, holding her hand from turning the pot towards the cup.

The sudden action forced Eliza to look down at the cups in the tray, and she realized how they were all overflowing with tea, the excess falling into the tray.

Eliza had not even realized she had not been looking and had caused such a mess. She quickly stopped and stared at the tray in horror, unsure of what had got into her.

This was certainly not the first time she had made this mistake since, for the past few days, she had found herself to be quite scatterbrained. She could not blame herself as her thoughts had been elsewhere, but now the other servants were beginning to notice.

“Pardon me,” she sighed, “I was not looking.”

“Are you quite alright, Beth?” Amelia asked, already removing the cups from the tray to clean it while Eliza stood at one end, simply staring.

“I think so.” She shrugged, unsure of how to answer the question.

She certainly could not tell Amelia that her thoughts were constantly on the stranger from the ball who had made an impression on her, which was simply not leaving her mind.

A few days had gone by since the ball, but he refused to leave her memory, his touch still lingering on her wrist as he had pulled her close. She still remembered the warmth she had felt while being snuggled against him underneath his coat, as she had slept soundly.

She simply could not deny her attraction to the man, even though the thought troubled her conscience.

But just as she could not stop thinking about the stranger, she could not stop thinking about George either. His kind nature, cheerful manner, easy conversation, and warm eyes drew her in like no one ever had before, and she always looked forward to spending time with him.

Eliza went to the woods every single day, hoping to run into him, and felt almost disappointed when he was absent. She was drawn to George, his laughter bringing her happiness.

This had been troubling her immensely for the past few days, and her mind was constantly occupied with these stressful thoughts.

Twice already, she had mixed up the family's morning tea and had once even forgotten to add cream to Henry's coffee. She had also been forgetting little chores assigned to her and had been spilling and breaking things.

It had been so extreme that Victoria's insults no longer bothered her, and Eliza listened to them with no attention or interest. Everyone around her had noticed this, and several other servants had been concerned about her health.

"Why don't you go up to your room and rest for a while? You have not been yourself for a few days now."

Eliza nodded at Amelia, even though she knew Amelia hated to do anyone else's chores, but the offer was too good to let go.

Amelia must not have expected Eliza to agree so easily because her expression immediately turned sour, but Eliza ignored that entirely and quickly hopped up through the servants' stairwell to reach the attic.

Once inside her room, she left it unlocked since hardly anyone ever came up here. The attic was all the way at the top of the house and was both dark and gloomy, with several servants even claiming it to be haunted. Hence, Eliza never felt the need to lock her door since she knew no one was going to look for her.

Oh God, what is happening to me?

She propped down on her bed, staring at her room, which hardly looked like her own anymore. Since the mysterious fairy godmother had started sending her gifts almost every day, Eliza's room had transformed, no longer appearing dark and gloomy.

It was now filled with mildly scented wax candles, sweets she had come to love and treasure, new bed sheets and soft cotton covers for her bed, hardcover books of fiction as if the fairy godmother knew her love for books, high-quality underthings, silk night suits, a brush, perfumes and about everything a young lady might require.

On days when Eliza did not have enough to eat in the house because Aunt Beatrice had the habit of being offended and forbidding her food, the fairy godmother would even send her food as if she somehow knew Eliza's troubles.

It almost felt as if these things were sent by someone who knew her closely, but why did they feel the need to help her?

She had too many questions and no means to find answers to even one of them, and

her confusion only increased. She had also wondered if this could be a trap of some kind and if she would eventually get caught for having these things, but the idea seemed rather ludicrous.

No such magical thing had ever happened to her in the past, but suddenly, everything seemed to be happening altogether.

“Who are you, fairy godmother?” she whispered into the empty room, staring at the ceiling.

Just as the words left her mouth, the door to the attic suddenly opened, and to her surprise, Amelia stood there, her mouth agape as she looked at Eliza’s room.

Eliza’s eyes widened at the unexpected surprise, not used to having anyone barge in on her in this manner. She should have locked her room, but now it was too late since Amelia had already seen everything.

“Beth?” Amelia whispered, closing the door behind her. “Where in the world did you get all of these things? Have you been stealing!?”

Eliza’s eyes widened at the accusation, and she stood up from her bed, pulling Amelia inside. She made Amelia sit down on the bed and sat down beside her, knowing she had no choice but to tell her the complete truth about these gifts.

“Do you really believe I could steal, Amelia?” Amelia was still looking around in wonder and Eliza could clearly see greed in her eyes as she stared at the treasure that belonged to Eliza.

“Of course not,” Amelia replied quickly, “but where else could you be getting these things from?”

“I will tell you everything, but you must swear to secrecy and that this will remain between the two of us?”

“I promise,” Amelia quickly agreed.

“I have a fairy godmother.”

“A what?” Amelia was confused.

“I am afraid I do not know who it is, but someone has been sending me gifts. They are waiting for me in my room when I return almost every day, and they all come attached with a note,” Eliza picked up her goose feather pillow, extracted the notes she had been keeping safely, and handed them to Amelia. “See. They all simply mention that it is a gift from my fairy godmother.

When I found the first one, I was naturally worried and even tried asking the guards and footmen if they had seen anyone outside my window, but no one had seen anyone.

I even waited for Lady Leicester or Lady Victoria to somehow come here and accuse me of stealing their things as a ploy to humiliate me, but none of that has happened either.

I do not know who this person is, but I am very thankful to them for taking care of me in this manner because I have come to believe that this is not a trick, and someone truly wishes me to have these things.”

Amelia went through the notes before handing them back to Eliza, a rather artificial smile on her lips. Eliza could feel the anger emanating from her friend, and it was evident that she was jealous.

However, Eliza could not understand the emotion. If the situation had been reversed and it was Amelia who was getting the gifts, Eliza would have felt nothing but happiness for her friend. But Amelia was clearly trying to hide her true emotions behind a mask.

“That must make you feel rather special,” Amelia said, sounding odd. “I am quite pleased for you.”

Eliza wished to scoff because it was clear how unhappy Amelia actually was.

“Why don’t you pick anything you would like to have?” Eliza quickly said, hoping this offer would curb Amelia’s unhappiness and jealousy. She had no desire to lose a friend over these things, and if sharing her thoughts with Amelia might be helpful, Eliza would do just that.

“Truly?” Amelia’s eyes were shining.

“Of course.”

Amelia stood up immediately, looking around the room while Eliza remained seated on her bed. She stayed quiet as she watched Amelia pick up more things than was polite, but she had no desire to interject and make her feel inferior or possibly even more jealous.

Amelia picked up several of the sweets Eliza had come to love, along with a few underthings and a nightgown. Eliza felt as if she wished to pick up everything she saw but had to control her urges. Her greed was evident through her actions, yet Eliza was not going to act like her.

She understood that Amelia came from a family with no means and no money, and all this luxury was new to her. She could not blame the poor girl for wishing to have it

all.

Despite that, Eliza would have happily shared everything with her if she had not appeared jealous, but her jealousy had almost been the undoing of her friendship.

Eliza felt as if she needed to stay careful from now on. She could no longer trust Amelia with everything in her heart.

Eliza made her way towards the woods, finding a little time for herself after completing her last afternoon chore. She enjoyed walking here since she knew the woods like the back of her hand, and they were so well concealed behind the house that no one would be able to find her here unless someone came looking.

She enjoyed the privacy and the hope of a chance encounter with George. This was where they had come across each other the very first time.

Only a few moments later, the sound of barking reached her, and she looked up to find George coming towards her, his two large Mastiffs by his side.

She could not explain it, but the dogs somehow suited his personality, them being just as large, imposing, and protective as George was. The first time she had seen him with them, she had been reluctant to pet them, but the beasts had been oddly warm, letting her come close.

The dogs apparently belonged to the earl, but George looked extremely comfortable with them.

“Beth!” He called her out, and she smiled at him, waiting for him to reach her.

“Good afternoon, George.”

She wondered if he had somehow known she was going to show up in the woods at exactly this time, and he had been waiting for her. Their meetings, even though purely based on chance, seemed too ideal more often than not, as if they were meant to happen or were designed to happen.

“Good afternoon.” He smiled his customary smile, warmth radiating from his russet eyes. “I am really glad to see you. It has been quite some time since we last met.”

“Four days, to be precise.”

“Have you been counting?” Eliza blushed at the question but quickly shook her head to hide her embarrassment. She certainly could not accept that she had indeed been counting and praying for these days to be over so she would be able to see him again. That was all she had wanted, after all. His company.

“I just tend to remember things.” She shrugged, sitting down on the log behind them.

George left the dogs on their own and sat beside her, turning around in a way that he faced her while she looked ahead. Eliza could feel his eyes on her face, but she remained steady, not letting the intensity of his gaze affect her thinking abilities, even though it was rather impossible to do. George had a certain effect on her, which was unparalleled to all else.

“What has been happening with your life, Beth? Tell me something new. I feel as if it has been days since we have had a proper conversation.”

Eliza felt her heart lurch at the question as an urge to tell him almost everything filled her. Lara and Ralph were motherly and fatherly figures to her, and she certainly could not share everything she felt with them.

Amelia no longer seemed like a friend. Hence, Eliza was left with no one to whom she could pour her heart out. The intensity of her thoughts and emotions overwhelmed her, and she needed to speak to someone about it.

And George was right there, his understanding gaze trained on her as if he would gladly listen to anything she had to say.

“You really care to know?” she asked softly, finally looking at him.

“Of course.” He nodded enthusiastically. “I always enjoy knowing things about you.”

“Oh, George,” Eliza sighed, “a lot has been going on in my head.”

“Tell me, Beth.”

“My life has never been as chaotic as it is right now, and things just seem out of control.”

“How so?” he asked, clearly invested.

“At the masquerade a few days ago, I met a man who was clearly a noble lord, and he left quite an impression on me. He had dark hair tied into a ponytail and wore a black evening coat with breeches. I do not know what it was about him, but he kept seeking my company and wanting to have a conversation with me despite being the most enigmatic man of the evening and all the ladies asking for his time and attention. He kept leaving the ball and finding me, and I cannot seem to put him out of my mind now. It just made me curious about why a noble lord was seeking my company over the ladies of the ton and made me wonder if he could have dishonourable intentions.”

“Perhaps he saw in you what none of the other ladies possessed. Did he try to get too forward with you?”

“No, he didn’t. But I am just a servant, and even if he was respectable, it simply made me feel confused.” Eliza sighed, “On top of that, I have a fairy godmother.”

“A fairy godmother? My goodness, how did you come about that?”

“I wish I knew.” Eliza chuckled, no longer sure if her life was more real or a complete fantasy. “She has been sending me gifts and other things of the finest quality. She sent me books, food, sweets, clothes, and everything I have always wished to have. I can hardly understand how this is even happening or how she even knows what I need or who I am. I am grateful for the gifts, but I am afraid they might cause me some trouble.”

“What trouble?”

“What if the other servants, a friend of mine perhaps, see them and get jealous?” She had almost named Amelia but decided not to, knowing fully well that at some point George might come across Amelia, and it would only make him sour towards her.

Amelia was not a bad person, and Eliza understood her jealousy, but could she really be called a friend?

“Beth, if someone is truly your friend, they will never be jealous of your health, wealth, and happiness. And if you do sense even the slightest bit of jealousy in their demeanour towards you, you must understand at once that they are anything but a friend. It is as simple as that. You are worrying too much over nothing. I think you are extremely lucky to have found a fairy godmother, and you must cherish everything she is sending you.”

“You are right,” she sighed, slumping against the tree bark behind her.

“Now, as for the matter of the stranger from the masquerade, have you come to grow

a liking towards the man?"

Eliza blushed crimson at the question, unsure of how to answer it.

"I won't call it liking the man, but I am simply intrigued about his identity. He gave no name and never removed his mask to show his face."

"Ah." George smiled as if knowingly. "Was he about my height and rather strong? Because I do recall seeing someone who matched your description."

"Yes, for a second, I thought it could have been you." She laughed softly. "But I dismissed the thought, knowing how could you be there at the masquerade dressed as a noble. It made no sense."

"You are right," he replied, "but I know who you are talking about. I ran into this enigmatic stranger when I came to pick up the earl in the early hours of the morning. The earl was still inside, and the man was just leaving, and we had a chance to have a little bit of a conversation."

Eliza sat up straighter, completely shocked at the revelation. She could have never expected George to have met the stranger.

"Are you quite serious?"

"Absolutely." George chuckled, "Do you wish to see the man again?"

"Do you know the man?" Eliza was taken aback.

"I do not know him, no," he immediately said, shaking his head, "but I do happen to have excellent tracking abilities, and I can find him if you wish to see him again. I would do this for you. Moreover, I happened to see the two of you together in the

garden, and I believe he saw me as well, which is why he stopped to have a conversation with me so I do not get the wrong idea.”

Eliza was stunned.

“What were you doing in the garden?!” Eliza knew no one showed up to the alcove, especially at night.

“Well ...” he shrugged. “I tried searching for you in the kitchen, but a servant told me you had gone outside. I couldn’t find you anywhere, so I came to the alcove looking for you.”

She could never have thought that George would end up seeing her with the stranger while she was asleep on his lap without even knowing about it. She had deliberately left out the intimate details of their encounter while telling George about him because it just felt wrong.

It almost felt as if she was cheating on George, betraying him one way or another. Although, he seemed completely comfortable with the conversation.

“Did you say something to him about seeing the two of us together?” Eliza asked.

“I simply warned him off for taking liberties with you, and the man claimed he only had honourable intentions and no untoward feelings or ideas towards you.”

Eliza had never been more embarrassed. She had met George at least twice after the masquerade, and he had not once mentioned this encounter, yet here he was, recounting all the details.

Her heart leapt out even more to him, for she knew he must have only hidden it from her to make sure that she was not embarrassed of the details.

“I hardly expected to find myself in the stranger’s arms upon waking up. I had slept on the bucket leaning against the wall, but he gathered me in his arms so I could sleep more comfortably.”

“He definitely did the right thing.” George smiled. “Besides, I am certain you will never do anything to taint your pristine reputation even one bit. I am simply glad he could make you comfortable enough to sleep leaning against him, for I know you needed that sleep after working tirelessly the entire day. If there is anyone who knows how hard you work at the house, it is me.”

Eliza’s belly fluttered at George’s intense gaze as he stared at her, her heart taking a leap in her chest. Something about the way George said things to her made her always want to simply sit down and continue staring at him with all the love she could muster.

He invoked feelings of care in her heart, and she wanted to spend all her time in his company, even if that were impossible.

She could never have expected herself to be one of those women who would fall for two men at the same time without hardly knowing either of them well enough.

She still had so much to find out about George, and the stranger from the masquerade was both nameless and faceless to her. For some reason, both of them felt oddly familiar to her, their aura comforting. Perhaps that was simply part of the charm they possessed, which drew Eliza in towards them like nothing else ever had.

“Beth?” he called out to her, waving his hands in front of her face. It snapped her back to her senses, and she looked at George.

“Yes?”

“Can you come meet me here in the woods tomorrow? At this time only?”

“Why?” she asked, confused. They had never made plans to meet in this manner before, and all their meetings were pure coincidence and luck.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise for me?” Eliza giggled. “Why do you wish to give me a surprise?”

“I would like to think we are friends,” he said with a smile. ‘Aren’t we? Can a friend not give his friend a surprise?’

Eliza knew her attraction and feelings towards George extended far beyond simply friendship, but she stayed silent, simply nodding at him.

She enjoyed being around him because he was different from anyone else she had ever met. He was her friend simply for the sake of it, no ulterior motives attached to it.

She could sense he cared for her and would always be there whenever she needed him. That was what drew them even closer to one another since Eliza could feel a sense of kinship with him, as if they were meant to always be together, beside one another.

Besides, she had already decided that he was the only person left in her life with whom she could share things. She had no other friends or listening ears, and she needed someone to come to when her heart felt too heavy.

George was her person. She had poured out her problems to him today, and he had replied sensibly, helping her understand things she was choosing to ignore or not pay attention to.

She knew he was going to be there for her through everything, and she needed that comfort in her life.

“Of course we are friends,” she finally replied, smiling at him at last.

“In that case, I will be waiting here for you tomorrow at this time only. I expect you will come?”

“I will find a way to make it. I promise.”

George clasped her hand in excitement, and she let him, even his touch oddly familiar.

“Thank you,” he whispered, drawing closer to her until the two of them were just side by side, both staring ahead.

Eliza breathed in deeply, his faint earthen scent enjoyable for her and leaned into his shoulder as the pair sat there in silence. That was the most peace Eliza had felt in days.

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Chapter 11

The next day, Alexander made his way from the house towards the woods just behind the Russel Estate, no longer dressed like George.

He had already been planning to reintroduce Eliza to the masked stranger from the party, but he needed to be extremely careful with the execution of this plan. He only wished to do so, for he wanted Eliza not only to be able to trust George but also trust the masked stranger, and that could only happen if the two of them had ample interaction.

The only problem with the entire situation was that without the mask, Eliza would recognize him, and he could not afford that to happen.

Not yet, anyway.

At the masquerade, he had done an excellent job at making George and the masked stranger look like two entirely different people, but he would need to continue this charade rather staunchly.

Hence, simply slicking back his hair into a ponytail wouldn't be able to cut it, and he would need to completely hide his face to make sure Eliza did not discover his true identity.

Just at the edge of the woods, Alexander slipped on the full-face mask he had decided to wear instead of just a half mask before meeting Eliza.

He hoped for his serious demeanour, slicked-back hair, deeper voice, and gentleman's attire to be enough to draw Eliza's attention away from him being George, and that she would only see him as the masked stranger from the party who knew her true identity.

This way, Eliza would be able to trust both of them, and Alexander would be able to keep both of his identities.

Being George would allow him to infiltrate the house, but having the identity of the mysterious stranger would allow him to use it whenever it was required.

He quickly made his way to the exact spot where they had met yesterday and sat down on the log, his eyes on the scenery ahead of him. With evening almost approaching, the birds in the skies were beginning to return to their nests, and Alexander was engrossed in watching the colours in the skies.

"You!" Eliza's voice behind him made him turn around, realizing how he had completely failed to hear her footsteps.

He smiled at her shocked expression and cleared his throat to make sure his voice came out much heavier and more velvety than George's voice. He certainly could not afford for Eliza to find any resemblance between him and George and ruin this entire charade.

"Hello, Lady Eliza." She flushed as he called out to her but came closer still. "George told me you wished to see me?"

"That was not what I said," Eliza stuttered, clearly feeling at a loss for words. Her pale skin had stained scarlet, and Alexander understood she must be feeling caught. She had perhaps never expected George to somehow find the masked man and bring him here to meet with her. Her shock was clearly visible through her eyes.

“Should I leave then?” he asked, his tone indicating his jesting manner, and Eliza shook her head.

“Please, no!” she interjected, “Now that you are already here, leaving would be counterproductive. You must stay.”

Alexander remained seated on the log but angled his body to face Eliza. He watched as she took a few tentative steps towards the log and sat down as well, exactly where she had been seated yesterday when she had been with George.

She was uncomfortable and perhaps even nervous, but Alexander understood all of those emotions. The last time she had met him was several days ago, and their meeting had been tainted with mystery, and now here he was again, still behind a mask.

“How are you doing, Lady Eliza?”

“Can you stop calling me that?”

“I can only call you by your real name, and I know that to be Lady Eliza. I will not be calling you Beth and becoming a part of the forces that have stolen your very identity from you.”

She sighed.

“Who are you? And why are you still wearing the mask?” she asked, staring into his eyes. “And why do you feel oddly familiar, as if we have met before or I know you?”

Alexander wanted to do nothing more than reveal his identity, her pained and confused expression beckoning him to do it almost immediately.

However, he knew this was not the right time. It was much safer to remain anonymous for both his and Eliza's sake until he had concrete proof to expose the Russel family.

"You must think of me as a friend," he replied at last, "a friend who knows who you really are and would be honoured if you decide to confide in him about your true feelings, emotions, and everything that has happened to you in the past few years."

"Why would I choose to confide in a man who refuses to reveal his name or his face?"

She was right.

"You have no reason to confide in me except for the trust you might feel towards me in your heart." He smiled underneath the mask. "Although, you must remember that people often find it easier to confide in strangers than to the people they know closely. This mask is for both of us so you can talk to me about yourself openly without worrying about who I am or what I might think about your situation. I am simply a friend, even if both nameless and faceless."

Eliza blinked, her face tilting to one side as she regarded him with interest.

"There is an appeal to that idea of talking to a nameless face."

Alexander felt as if he was going in the right direction and just a little more coaxing would make her reveal the truth about herself and everything that went on with her in the Russel house. He needed to hear the details from Eliza alone to make more sense of the situation, and for that, he would need to make sure she trusted him enough to divulge the truth.

"You can be honest with me, Lady Eliza," he replied. "You must tell me what

happened with you about twelve, thirteen years ago? How did you end up being a servant in the very house that belongs to you?"

Eliza stayed silent, staring at the tree behind him. He could see she was lost in her own thoughts.

"What happened to your inheritance, My Lady? What happened to all the old servants of the house who knew you?"

"How is it that you know so much about me and my life? No one knows these things about me but you. How could this be possible?"

"Just consider me a good friend, Lady Eliza," he replied. "Everything about me will be revealed to you in good time, but the time is not now. You must simply take my word and trust me enough to tell me what happened. I must hear it all from you to make sense of the situation."

Her face shifted as she turned to look at Alexander, her eyes turning softer. Alexander felt as if, at that moment, she looked at him differently, and part of her was ready to trust him. Eliza sighed deeply, smiling a sad smile as she stared into his eyes, for it was the only part visible through the mask on his face.

"It was rather difficult after my parents died. Things were very difficult because I had to grapple with their loss along with settling in with a new family, which had moved into my house and was living there as if they owned it. Everything felt wrong, but I still had all the old servants who loved me, cared for me, and wanted the best for me. Despite that, it only took Uncle Edgar and Aunty Beatrice a few years to gain complete control of the house."

"What do you mean?"

“Just two years after my parents’ death, Aunt Beatrice casually started asking me to do chores here and there, and I never thought much of it until one day she fired all the old servants, and a new set came in. My room was taken away from me, and I was asked to move to the attic, and they told me that from now on, I was going to be a servant in the house rather than the lady of the house, and I must do everything asked of me. They told me my new name was supposed to be Beth, and everyone was going to call me just that because Eliza no longer existed.”

Tears stung her eyes, but she remained steady, not sobbing one bit even when the shiny wetness stained her cheeks. Alexander had the urge to get closer to her and wipe away the tears from her face, but he knew it was not appropriate. He forced himself to stay put.

“Did you not protest?” he asked, his words soft.

“Of course I did.” She was no longer trying to hide her tears. “But they shut me up in the attic when I tried to write letters to friends of my parents or contact anyone who might help me. I was too young to do much, and they took away all the means for me to contact anyone outside the house. I was trapped.”

“And then you gave up?”

“I had no choice,” she sighed, wiping her cheeks. “When I was a little older and had enough freedom to finally contact someone, I had no recollection of any names or addresses, and I knew no one would believe me since I had no proof either. I had no choice but to simply accept my fate and be strong in order to survive.”

“You have been strong enough, Lady Eliza.”

“It feels like distant history now.” She chuckled sadly. “I can’t even remember what it was like all those years ago when I was not a servant but a lady, and I know I can

never return to that life. It is no longer meant for me, and I must learn to accept it and move on.”

She breathed in deeply.

“I must apologize to you for crying like a little girl.” She chuckled, wiping her face once again. “I had no idea it was weighing on my chest so heavily. Thank you for listening to me.”

“You have every right to cry after all the terrible things that have happened to you, My Lady. I feel immense anger towards Lord and Lady Leicester for putting you through this tragedy and even getting away with it. They are living on nothing but your inheritance right now, and they have no right to it at all.”

Alexander could feel himself getting worked up.

He shifted a little closer to Eliza, who remained quiet at his comment as if being angry towards her aunt and uncle wouldn’t bring her any peace either.

Alexander understood the severity of her emotions and how giving up on hope must have felt like the easiest thing to do, especially when one was faced with survival. She could not have resisted forever. He tentatively put a hand on Eliza’s hand, feeling uncertain about the touch.

“Isn’t it funny?” Her question made him look at her.

“What is?”

“Just a few nights ago, you had no apprehensions about letting me sleep on your lap, and today, you look uncertain about holding my hand to simply comfort me.”

Alexander laughed at her comment, knowing she was right. He felt no such thing when he pulled her close and held her against him at the masquerade, but he suddenly felt conscious of his actions.

Despite that, her words gave him courage, and he held her hand confidently, growing bolder when she did not pull away. Instead, he took both her hands in his and held them in her lap, looking deep into her eyes.

They were as beautiful as ever, even with tears swirling in them.

“I admire your courage and bravery, Lady Eliza. I truly do,” he sighed, “and I wish I could tell you enough how proud I am of you, but my words will do no justice to the emotions in my heart. Despite everything that happened to you, you still did not allow bitterness to enter your heart, and not everyone is capable of being this kind. I wonder how you did it and maintained your own warmth through this tragic fate, but you somehow did it.”

Eliza’s eyes were lined with tears once again, and he could sense the effect his words must be having on her. That was just what he had wanted: for her to feel at ease around him. With this one meeting, he felt as if he had accomplished the task.

“Why are you so kind to me?” she whispered, her expression vulnerable.

“Because I have never met a person in my life so fully deserving of love and kindness as you are, and it is about time someone shows you that you are worth everything. I will never take anything about you for granted and keep reminding you who you truly are in your heart and mind and how perfect you are in every way imaginable.”

“You say all of these things which make me hope again when all I have ever known is for hope to break hearts.”

“I know life has disappointed you, Lady Eliza, but you must learn to trust fate again. This time, it just might surprise you.”

She laughed softly.

“I will try.”

He gently squeezed her hands and sighed, not wanting to part from her one bit. Although, he knew it was time for the masked stranger to leave. The temptation of revealing himself to Eliza was stronger than ever, but Alexander controlled it, not wanting to mess things up.

“I must take your leave now.”

“You are going?” she asked, appearing slightly disappointed.

“It is time for me to leave, but you must wait here. George asked me to let him know once I left so he could come see you, too.”

“That sounds reasonable.” She smiled. “Will we see each other again?”

“If you wish to see me again, I promise you I will come meet you. Do not worry one bit.”

“I look forward to it.”

“I am glad.” He smiled at her, definitely in no hurry to leave her.

“I have another question,” she said.

“What is it?” His eyebrows furrowed underneath the mask, and for a second, he felt

that despite the mask, she could easily read his expressions, their connection one of the soul.

“Does George know?”

“About the truth of your identity?” he asked, immediately understanding what she meant.

“Yes.”

“It is not my secret to tell, Lady Eliza,” he replied, “George knows nothing except what you have told him about yourself. He only knows you as Beth unless, of course, you wish to tell him who you really are. He will never hear it from me, I promise.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at him, and Alexander felt as if everything in the world was right again. The power of her smile made him feel a thousand things, and one of those things was a sense of peace in the world.

“Until next time, My Lady.” She nodded wordlessly, keeping her hands back in her lap.

He stood up and walked slowly away from her, only beginning to run once he was certain she could no longer see him. He quickly needed to change clothes and meet her as George, and he needed to do it all in a manner where she did not suspect them to be the same person.

He knew he had only made things more difficult for himself with double identities, both of them false, but this was the only way to come close to Eliza.

This was the only way to bring justice to her, and he was on his path to do just that.

Chapter 12

The peace of the woods around her made Eliza feel a lot calmer once the masked stranger had left her, but she could still not stop thinking about him.

He looked just as handsome and polished as he had the night of the masquerade, his dark allure even more pronounced because of the mask.

Eliza could feel her heart go out to him as he had been immensely loving and understanding towards her, making her feel as if everything she had gone through had been completely unjustified.

No one had ever shown her this support in the past, and she could feel the man getting under her skin. Although, George had got under her skin just the same, and she could certainly not forget about him either. Just then, she heard quick footsteps approaching, and George stumbled before her, a wide smile on his face.

“Beth!” he greeted her enthusiastically despite looking a little breathless.

All Eliza could focus on was his hair, which was slightly wet and drawn open, his curls even more pronounced because of the moisture. She could not help thinking how much more handsome he looked with his hair in that manner and had the urge to touch it, to see how it would feel underneath her fingers.

“George,” she said, smiling, “I was waiting for you.”

“I apologize for being late,” he quickly replied, his gaze following Eliza’s eyes,

which were trained on his pronounced curls.

“Did I keep you waiting long?”

“Not at all.” She smiled. “He has only been gone for ten or so minutes. You are right on time.”

“I am glad,” George sighed, sitting down on the log. “Did you enjoy my surprise? I hope I did not offend you in any way by sending him here before consulting with you. I just wished for you to meet him again, and I thought you would be happy seeing him.”

“I am not offended at all.” Eliza smiled. “I am certainly glad you sent him here. I was actually quite happy to meet with him.”

“Thank goodness.” George laughed.

Eliza still could not look away from his hair; its dampness was only all the more inviting. Whenever George had come to see her in the past, his hair had been perfectly tied behind his head, but this was the first time it had been let loose in this manner, making Eliza feel things.

Her gaze strayed to it more often than it stayed on his face, and she was sure he had already noticed the object of her interest.

“If I am not wrong, you have been staring at my hair.” He laughed, touching them self-consciously.

“This is the first time I have seen it like that. I simply could not help it.” She shrugged, replying honestly.

“Do you wish to touch it?”

Eliza was taken aback at the offer but nodded quickly, unable to resist. That was exactly what she wished to do.

He laughed, making Eliza blush. He simply leaned in closer, making sure his head was within reach of her hands.

Eliza almost felt embarrassed that he had read her expression this easily but wordlessly ran a hand through his wet curls, twirling one of them between her fingers. It was as soft as she had imagined it to be.

“I must say I love your curls,” she said with a smile, “I have always liked curly hair, especially because mine is just wavy.”

“But I absolutely love your hair.”

His confession had been so quick and so hearty that Eliza knew he was not lying. His russet gaze was as warm as ever as he stared at her, pushing away a lone strand of hair from her face. Eliza smiled at the touch.

“You do?” she asked.

“Of course,” he nodded, “You have such beautifully golden hair that shines when the sunlight catches onto them. You must believe me when I say this, but when that happens, I cannot stop looking at your hair. And it is so impossibly long, even when you wear it in braids that it makes me wonder how much longer it could get. It also appears rather soft and makes me want to touch it to see what it feels like between my fingers.”

Eliza was so stunned by his description that she quietly took off the cap that was

covering her hair and allowed it to fall down her back.

The soft breeze teased her long tresses, which blew about, making Eliza feel special in front of George's eyes.

"Just returning the favour, I believe." She laughed, bringing them to the front so George could touch them.

His gaze fully drawn to her hair, Eliza breathed in sharply as he touched her tresses, running them between her fingers just as he had claimed he wished to do in the past.

She stayed still, his touch sending tingles down her spine. He truly had a life-altering effect on her, and she failed to understand what it meant.

At that moment, as Eliza witnessed his expression, she could not help wondering if he felt the same way about her as she did about him, the thought filling her with warmth and happiness.

The two of them laughed at the exchange, and Eliza was happy to feel such comfort in George's presence. She was just about to tell him about the masked stranger and thank him for the meeting when a twig twitched nearby, forcing both of them to stop laughing and look about.

"What was that?" George asked while Eliza quickly put her hair back inside the cap, neatly securing it.

"A branch must have broken somewhere."

"You are right," George sighed, still staring suspiciously around the woods.

"I must return to the house; it is quite late already," she said smiling, "but thank you

for finding the masked stranger and bringing him here to meet me. I do not know how to pay you back for this favour.”

“You must simply promise to continue being my friend, and I will consider the favour returned.”

“I will do just that.”

Eliza smiled at him and turned around to make her way back to the house. In just a span of one afternoon, she had come across and talked to the masked stranger and shared an intimate moment with George.

Both the men made her feel in ways she had never felt before, and Eliza had no clue how to decipher these emotions.

Although right now, she probably had a thousand chores already waiting for her and needed to focus on them.

Amelia rushed back to the house before either Beth or George decided to search for the source of the noise in the woods, but from the looks of it, they had not searched at all.

Although, she could not afford to be discovered spying on Beth, who was supposed to be her friend, and had known returning immediately would be the best thing to do.

When she had accidentally stepped on the twig, she felt certain that she would be found, but now that she was back inside the confines of the house, she felt as if she could breathe again.

It had been close.

Since she had found that Beth had been receiving gifts from some fairy godmother who was an anonymous person, she had not been able to help herself in taking a closer look at Beth. Amelia failed to understand why someone as ordinary as Beth was getting all of these luxurious gifts, and the very thought angered Amelia.

However, what she had seen today in the woods had angered her even more.

She had not been close enough to be able to hear the conversations since they were talking very softly in whispers, but she had still seen Beth.

Amelia could simply not understand this sudden special treatment that was being given to Beth by all those around her. After all, what was it that she had that Amelia did not have? Jealousy filled her heart as she washed the dishes that were waiting for her, her mind still on Beth.

“Why is she getting all of this attention? Why is it that only she can attract everyone and everything? She is just like me and any other servant in the house, so why must she be treated differently?” Amelia whispered to herself, feeling the bitterness in her heart grow even more. She had never been one to control her resentment, and now the emotion rose in her heart towards Beth as hatred filled her heart.

She was not going to sit silently as Beth got everything that Amelia deserved just as much.

When Amelia had come into the Russel Estate to work as a servant, she had been rather happy to meet Beth and finally come across someone who was treated even more miserably than her.

All her life, Amelia had grown up believing that no one had a worse fate than her but

seeing Beth had given her some hope that the poor girl had it even worse. Despite being a servant, she was treated more like a slave and was clearly hated by those in the house.

Rather than feeling sorry for Beth, Amelia felt happy for herself because, for the first time in her life, she felt as if she had things better than someone else.

Beth was more beautiful and more accomplished and did the most work in the house, but despite that, she had no respect or love. She was clearly unwanted by all, and that made Amelia feel quite happy.

But now, out of nowhere, Beth was the one getting gifts from an anonymous person, and from spying on her today, Amelia could see that it was not just the gifts but also two men who were clearly interested in her.

The handsome stable hand from the earl's estate had looked rather close to her when the two of them had been talking in the woods, but what was even more shocking was how the enigmatic stranger from the ball was after her as well.

He had been the most sought-after individual at the ball, every single young lady from the ton clearly seeking his company, but he had discarded them all for Beth. Beth? Who was nothing more than a mere servant?

It made no sense to Amelia, and she just did not know what to do. How was she supposed to cope with the reality of this?

She could not help imagining the horror of the situation if Beth ever transcended her status as a servant and rose above Amelia in station one way or the other. She was supposed to have nothing in life, and her fate was not going to change this dramatically.

Amelia was not going to let it happen.

She had just reached the forest when the stranger from the party had been holding Beth's hands, the two of them staring at one another romantically.

Anyone looking upon them would label them as lovers, but the mere idea of that sounded too good to be true.

Moreover, Amelia knew Beth closely, and she had never appeared the kind of girl who would allow a strange man to take liberties with her. That sight had been shocking enough already for Amelia, but things had got even worse after the stranger had left.

George had arrived just then, making matters even more confusing for Amelia and even more out of her realm of understanding.

George was interested in Beth as well? But why? He was both handsome and kind, and even Amelia had fancied herself attracted to him, but she finally understood why he had not even looked at her. Why would anyone look at her with Beth present in the same room?

Beautiful, innocent Beth.

Amelia felt as if someone had stabbed her in the back, her hatred for the girl she had once called her friend growing with every passing second.

She needed to do something because she was certainly not going to sit silently and watch things unfold. This was not going to happen. Not when Amelia's own happiness was at stake. She had to do something.

"Oh, darn it." She threw the dishes in the sink, her heart dropping at the mere thought

of it.

Amelia could see how beautiful and delicate Beth was, but she had always been carefully kept concealed away from the eyes of the public, and even then, she had managed to grab the attention of not just one but two men.

Count Fife, the family friend, already salivated at the mere sight of her, and from what Amelia had heard, he had also offered her marriage, but Beth had refused the proposal.

Something was not right. Amelia could feel it.

“Amelia?” a maid called out to her, and Amelia smoothed her expression before turning around.

“Yes?”

“Lady Victoria is calling for you in the parlour.”

“Lady Victoria?” Amelia was confused.

Whenever Lady Victoria needed any work done, she only asked Beth to do it and hardly ever called Amelia. However, now, she was specifically calling for her, and that worried Amelia a little. What could the matter be?

She nodded at the maid, quickly making her way towards the parlour where Lady Victoria was seated already. Amelia went in and curtsied before her, hoping she would not ask Amelia to do some work for her. She was awfully particular and critical.

“Amelia,” she began speaking, eyeing Amelia from head to toe, “You must do

something for me.”

“Anything, My Lady.”

“I believe Beth is up to no good, and I want you to keep a closer eye on everything she does. Whatever she does, no matter how large or small, you must report back to me immediately. Is that understood?”

For a second, Amelia wanted to do nothing more than tell everything to Lady Victoria, but the unspoken rule between servants of never ratting out one another stopped her from saying anything.

“I will do just that, My Lady.”

“Bravo.” Lady Victoria smiled. “You can leave now.”

Amelia quickly turned around to leave, unable to understand the events that had taken place today. Although, now she knew exactly who she needed to go if she felt the need to reveal the secrets Beth was keeping from everyone, and she would use them against her at exactly the right time.

Victoria barged into her mother’s bedchamber, finding her mother laying comfortably on the settee in her room, a maid massaging her feet. She turned to stare at Victoria as she entered but did not comment.

Instead, she closed her eyes once again as if trying to ignore her very own daughter. This angered Victoria even more, and she paced around the room, already worried about everything Count Fife had just revealed to her.

“I believe I must ask you what is wrong,” her mother finally sighed when Victoria stayed silent, “But you will tell me yourself in just a few moments, I am sure.”

“I am delirious with anger right now, Mother,” Victoria said, breathing in deeply. “And you will be, too, once you hear what I am here to tell you.”

“I am sure.” Her mother rolled her eyes and got up from her lying position to sit on the settee.

With a flick of her wrist, she dismissed the maid so she and Victoria could finally be alone in the bedchamber. Once the maid was gone and just the two of them were left behind, Victoria finally sat on the sofa in front of her, still unable to control her anger.

She did not understand if what she felt was anger or annoyance, but the emotions were intense, and she needed to do something about them immediately.

“Count Fife just came to call.”

“I hope you did not receive him alone, my dear,” her mother immediately interjected. “Despite his advanced age, he is still a man, and his intentions never look noble to me. You must keep your distance.”

“Of course I didn’t meet with him alone,” Victoria sighed impatiently, “Margaret was with me.”

“Now, what is it that he did or said that has sent you into a flying rage?”

“He casually mentioned how he had seen Eliza with the enigmatic stranger, the mystery man of the ball on the night of the masquerade!”

“First of all, her name is Beth,” her mother corrected, “where exactly did he see them together?”

“According to him, the pair were together in the alcove and upon asking what they were doing in the alcove all alone, he simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

In fact, he said that you must consider giving Eliza to him in marriage as soon as possible before she does something truly heinous, which would tarnish the family reputation.”

“Why would anything a servant does tarnish the family reputation, Victoria? Do not be ridiculous. Beth is as irrelevant as a person can be, and I do not even think Count Fife might be telling the truth. He could be making things up just so we would somehow let him marry Beth. I strictly told her to keep away from the guests, and she would not deny me in such a manner. Moreover, she is of noble breeding and would think twice before tarnishing her reputation in such a manner. Count Fife is spreading nothing but lies!”

Victoria was annoyed. She had already expected her mother not to believe her.

“But what if it is not a lie? What if it is the truth?”

“If it is the truth, it will come out in front of us itself, but I am certainly not going to believe Count Fife’s word about something this absurd. Imagine what the masked stranger might be even doing with a servant all alone in the alcove? I am sure he has better taste than that.”

Victoria knew her mother was making a point, but she still felt angry. What she was mainly angry about was how she herself wanted the enigmatic stranger, but according to Count Fife, he had been interested in spending time with Eliza.

Victoria could not help feeling jealous, for she certainly could not think about a man who she wanted to be with wanting Eliza instead.

“I still believe you should seriously consider Eliza’s proposal for Count Fife. He is desperate about marrying her, and it will be good riddance for us all.”

“Do not be ridiculous, Victoria.” Her mother stood up, walking towards the open window. “The reason our lives run this smoothly and we have everything we need before we even ask for it is because of Eliza. She is the one who handles the entire household, and you simply want me to get her married and get rid of her? That is never going to happen.”

“Really, Mother? I am sure someone else can take over the responsibility and manage just as well as Eliza does.”

“You are right,” her mother retorted, “but they will also ask for higher pay and more perks, and we are in no position to give anyone that. Let’s not forget that we are only living on Eliza’s large inheritance since your father has never worked a day in his life. We cannot just push Eliza out of our lives.”

Victoria sighed, knowing her mother was right but feeling annoyed all the same. She wished for Eliza to leave their lives as quickly as possible and stay away from the masked stranger as well.

She would only need to think of another reason for her mother to finally get her married and make her leave the house, even if it took Victoria a little longer to hatch another plan.

Chapter 13

Eliza patiently waited for the Russel carriage to disappear from the driveway and be out the door before rushing to the footpath between the earl's estate and the Russel estate.

She truly couldn't understand why the family had been so insistent on going to the earl's house for dinner in a carriage when it was right next door, but Uncle Edgar's need to maintain appearances was well known to her.

However, she was not to worry about anything. She was simply glad they were finally gone.

She peered down into the tree line, unable to see George making his way towards her. When he had asked her about the card game that might take place between the servants after the family was gone for dinner, she had immediately asked Lara to put his name down.

She had even formally invited him and could not lie to say that she looked forward to meeting him.

He was the reason she had decided to wear her best dress, a beautiful mint green colour, which made her eyes look brighter. Her hair was brushed and left in a half-braid, just the way he liked it.

Eliza had even taken care of applying the perfume her fairy godmother had sent her. Earlier, she had gone through the pains of steeping the flowers she collected from the

forest and mixing them with oil to scent her hair and skin, but she was delighted to see how much better the perfume was.

“Beth!” George’s sweet voice reached her as he called her name, and Eliza looked up at once.

To her disappointment, his hair was tied up, but despite that, he looked extremely handsome. His white shirt was left open at the top, revealing the bronzed skin underneath. Eliza had to force herself to keep staring at his face lest her gaze stray to places that might not be appropriate.

As much as she had begun to like him, she was still unsure about his feelings and had no desire to give him the wrong idea.

“George!” she shouted back as he almost ran along the tree line towards her, stopping right at the footpath where she stood.

“I didn’t know you were coming to get me.”

Eliza blushed deeply, her eyes widening at his comment, even though she knew he did not mean to embarrass her one bit.

She had simply been so caught up in the excitement of seeing him that she had decided to get him herself without thinking of how it might appear. Although, she shrugged quickly, fixing a smile on her face.

“Well, you are my guest tonight, which is why you will be getting special treatment,” she lied, trying to hide her real intentions. “Of course I had to come get you myself.”

“That was a very wise thing to do, My Lady.”

Eliza's eyes widened as he called her my lady, suddenly remembering how the masked stranger did exactly the same thing. George blinked, his smile faltering for a second, but Eliza felt as if she was thinking too much over nothing.

George and the masked stranger were two completely different people, and she knew that because she had met both of them. She couldn't be having any doubts about it.

Moreover, the masked stranger knew the truth about her identity, but to George, she was simply Beth.

"Should we head to the kitchen?"

"Absolutely," he nodded, "after you."

She quickly walked ahead, but George fell into step beside her, the two of them leisurely making their way towards the kitchen.

Eliza was certain the card game would have already started by now, considering how the servants were extremely hyped up about playing tonight, but she felt as if George didn't mind so much. He matched her pace, even though they were walking quickly.

Eliza felt rather comfortable with him, knowing they had reached a point where being silent with him was just as comfortable as having a conversation.

"Beth?"

"Hm?" She looked up at him, realizing he had stopped walking.

"There's a wall ahead, and you are about to walk into it."

Eliza quickly looked ahead, finding herself facing the kitchen wall. She burst out

laughing at herself, realizing how lost she had been in her thoughts.

She could not help being a little disappointed at having reached the kitchen so quickly, not wanting to share George with everyone else in the house. For some reason, she simply wanted to keep him to herself.

He opened the door for her, and she walked inside, George following in right behind her. Eliza quickly looked around, finding the card game had already started just as she had expected. The loud noise of the kitchen immediately quietened down as the pair entered, all eyes on her and George.

“Hey, everyone!” she said, beaming. “This is George from the earl’s estate. You must have seen him here before.”

To her surprise, several of the servants began to nod as if they knew George, and Ralph quickly pulled out a chair for him at the table.

Eliza was surprised as she noticed how warm everyone was when they greeted him, quickly making space for him to enter into the evening’s festivities.

She was still disappointed at not having George all for herself, but the way he meshed in with everyone filled her heart with happiness. He was definitely friendly, and everyone was simply attracted towards him.

“Well, Beth here said you wanted to participate in the game?” Lara said, resuming her position at the table.

“I did want to, yes.” He nodded quickly. “But I see you all have already begun.”

“We have room for one more, don’t you worry,” Martin, one of the head servers, added, raising his glass of beer towards George.

Everyone around the table began to nod, clearly welcoming George into the inner circle. Eliza was a little surprised to see this because she knew how much these card games were valued and enjoyed by the servants. The way they were opening up to George was heartwarming.

A part of her felt as if they were doing it for her since her friendship with George was known to all.

“It is alright.” George shook his head. “I will simply be an observer this time and definitely become a part of the game when I am here the next time.”

“Are you sure?” Ralph asked, beginning to deal the cards.

“Positive.”

He backed his chair slightly, staring at everyone as the cards were dealt amongst the players. Eliza knew he could have easily joined in still and wondered if the only reason he might not be playing was due to the fear of losing money.

She was certain he couldn't be making much, working as a stable hand, and she did not know if he had family to support. Why had they never talked about his family? she wondered.

Amelia entered the kitchen just then, her eyes quickly falling on George, who was laughing alongside everyone else. Now that Eliza had come to see Amelia's true side, she had pulled away from the girl she once used to consider her friend.

The two had not had a fight, but Eliza was simply maintaining her distance. If Amelia had noticed it, she still hadn't pointed it out. For some reason, Eliza just did not like the way Amelia was staring at George, and she wanted to push her out of the kitchen.

Could it be jealousy?

“You must be George!” Eliza’s eyes widened as Amelia introduced herself, walking towards the table to stand just behind his chair.

To keep herself from staring or doing something stupid, Eliza quickly busied herself with the other maids, pulling out food from the fridge to place it on the table.

Whenever these little parties were held, the servants had a feast of their own, consuming whatever was left over or unwanted. The entire kitchen counter was laden with different kinds of bread, cheese, and ice cream. A few maids were heating up stew, and the entire kitchen wafted with the sweet scent of caramelized onions.

“I am,” she heard George’s reply, “and you are?”

Eliza tried to ignore the interest she thought she heard in George’s voice, quickly placing pitchers of lemonade and ale on the table.

“Amelia. I am Eliza’s friend.”

Eliza almost wanted to laugh at the statement, wondering if Amelia even knew what the word friendship meant. Eliza could feel how Amelia was simply using Eliza’s friendship as an excuse to find a reason to converse with George.

“Good to meet you, Amelia.” Eliza turned around, noticing how George was now out of his chair and standing in front of Amelia.

“You do not have anything to drink,” Amelia said, lightly touching his arm. Eliza felt needles prick her heart at the sight, no longer denying that she was jealous. Despite not having any reason to be jealous since she and George were supposed to just be friends, the emotions were very much alive in her heart, and she could not ignore

them any longer. Amelia added, "We have been very bad hosts. I will get you something at once."

"Oh, that is unnecessary."

Before Amelia could come towards the counter, Eliza immediately poured ale into a tall glass and handed it to George, who was now making his way towards the counter himself. Without wasting a single second, Eliza deposited herself right in front of George, and he gratefully took the glass from her.

"He just arrived, Amelia," Eliza said, "I am a very good host, I can assure you."

"Of course." Amelia must have heard the anger in Eliza's voice because her smile completely faded, and a few other maids around them also turned to look.

Oh God. I must not make a scene.

With a deep sigh, Eliza quickly shook the anger off and poured ale for herself as well, wanting to loosen up a bit. She had never been much of a drinker, but she felt as if a little bit of drinking would not hurt her tonight.

After all, the family was not supposed to return for hours, and she could simply enjoy herself, especially now that even George was here.

"I did not know you drink," George said, taking a sip from his glass as the pair stood by the counter.

"I don't." Eliza giggled, almost drinking half of her glass in one sip. "I just thought, why not?"

"I think you should slow down a little." George took the glass back from her and

gulped down the rest of it, placing it back on the counter.

Eliza suddenly felt more aware of her surroundings, realizing how closely George was standing with her. She could not help wishing to be alone with him right now, once again wanting him to herself.

She knew she should be slightly afraid of how quickly her feelings for him were growing, but for some reason, it did not feel wrong. Despite the fact that he had never once claimed to feel the same way, Eliza could not control the effect he had on her heart.

A loud noise from the table broke their stare, and they turned around as Marcus danced in his seat, collecting all the money. Both George and Eliza began to laugh at the scene and made their way towards the table.

“Guess I should be scared of you the next time I play, Marcus,” George said, raising his glass to him.

“Oh yes.” Marcus nodded, “I will take all of your money.”

Eliza felt annoyed as she noticed Amelia approaching the table to stand right beside George, laughing at the situation. The entire thing seemed completely fake since Eliza knew Amelia had never taken part in such gatherings.

Whenever the family was away, she would barge in on the gathering, take food for herself to eat in her room, and fall asleep. The simple fact that she was suddenly trying to be a part of it now that George was here was enough to tell Eliza her intentions.

“Hey, come on, Marcus,” George replied, completely ignoring Amelia, who was staring at him. “You are scaring me into never playing with you.”

Before Marcus could reply, Amelia began to laugh, lightly slapping George's shoulder as if he had just said the funniest thing in the world. Those busy in their own conversations glanced at Amelia sceptically, but she went on laughing, even making George turn to look at her.

"Has anyone ever told you that you are very funny, George?" she said, holding eye contact with him.

Eliza felt her skin turn crimson as she was flushed with anger, wanting to do nothing more but push Amelia away from George. What angered her even more was how George did nothing to deter her but only laughed. It was evident he was trying to be polite since he hardly knew Amelia, but Eliza knew he was not dimwitted at all and could certainly sense what Amelia was trying to do.

"I am afraid no one has." He shrugged, looking at Amelia.

You cannot create a scene, Eliza. You cannot create a scene.

"Well, then, I believe I will have to be the first."

"Thank you so much, Amelia." He nodded his head at her slightly, turning back towards the table. Everyone else had already returned to their conversations as well, ignoring Amelia, but Eliza could not stop herself from immediately taking hold of George's elbow.

He must have been surprised because he immediately looked at her but did not say anything or push her away. Instead, he just leaned in closer, letting Eliza hold his arm.

To anyone staring, the two of them would clearly look like a couple, but Eliza no longer had an issue. If that were what it took to give a signal to Amelia, she would

take that.

“All of you must excuse me for a moment,” George suddenly said, addressing the table and briefly glancing at Eliza. “I have had enough ale, and I must walk it off before returning. I will be back in about ten or so minutes.”

He carefully slid his hand out of her grasp, but Eliza wanted to do nothing more than to go along with him. She was very hurt that he did not ask her to come along, but it might simply have been because he had not wanted to give anyone the wrong idea.

Or perhaps he simply just wanted to be alone, and Eliza was thinking too much about it. She could have followed after him to join him on his walk, but all the other servants would notice that, and she had no desire for rumours to spread in the household about her relationship with George.

It was nothing more than friendship, no matter what her feelings were.

“Beth?” She looked up to find Lara standing in front of her.

Before Eliza could reply, Lara took hold of her arm and gently led her away from everyone else to a more secluded corner of the kitchen. Eliza almost dreaded the conversation ahead because she was certain it was going to be about George. Having known Eliza since she was just a child, Lara always understood her emotions and feelings.

“Is everything alright, Lara?” Eliza asked innocently, hoping to be wrong about the whole thing.

“You tell me that, Miss Eliza,” Lara whispered, “why are you behaving rather territorial with George?”

“I am not!”

“The anger on your face every time Amelia came close to him was not hidden from me. Is something going on between the two of you?”

Eliza blushed deeply, unsure of what to say. She was worried if Lara had noticed, could the other servants have guessed her feelings too? She did not want to be a laughingstock among everyone, her feelings on display for all to read.

“Nothing is going on between us.” She shook her head. “We are just friends.”

Lara’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Eliza knew she could easily read her face. Lara shrugged, a mischievous smile on her face.

“Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad after all, even if something was happening. You are almost twenty-two now, and a little romance will be good for you.”

“Don’t be silly, Lara.” Eliza’s eyes widened at the suggestion, not having expected Lara to be supportive of such a thing. However, this just showed how much Lara liked George because she would have never approved otherwise.

The door opened, and Eliza turned to look, seeing if George might have come back, but it was only Sarah, another maid in the household. However, the interest in Eliza’s eyes was not lost on Lara, who immediately began to chuckle as if she had just been proven right about something she wanted to be right about.

“I am just saying ...” Lara continued chuckling, but Eliza ignored her, quickly fixing her composure.

“I am going up to my room for a moment.”

She immediately almost ran out of the kitchen, quickly taking the servants' staircase to reach the attic. In the privacy of her own space, she finally breathed openly, realizing how eventful the past few hours had been.

Although, now that it was almost time for George to return, Eliza simply wanted to look presentable. She stared at her reflection in the mirror she kept right beside her new feather pillow and noticed the crumpled state of her hair.

"My goodness," she whispered, immediately looking for the brush inside the side table but not finding it there.

Suddenly worried, she looked everywhere in her room, but she found the brush to be missing, which was rather curious since she remembered having it this morning.

The perfume her fairy godmother had sent her was also missing, making Eliza wonder if someone could have taken those things. Although, the only two people who knew about them were Lara and Amelia, and Eliza knew Lara would never steal from her.

Could it be Amelia?

She shook her head, not wanting to think about it. Without wasting any more time, she ran her fingers through her hair to make it look presentable and used the flower oil she had made earlier to scent her skin and hair. Feeling a little more presentable again, she took the grand staircase to come down since the family was absent from the house, wanting to reach the kitchen quickly.

"George must be back by now," she whispered to herself, smiling at the thought of it.

Just as she was about to turn a corner to make her way towards the kitchen, she noticed a very familiar shock of brown hair and a glimpse of George's white shirt

disappearing down a passageway.

Her eyes narrowed because she knew the passageway was a secret shortcut around the house, and only someone who knew the house well would be aware of it.

“Is it George?”

Completely confused, she followed him quickly but found the passageway empty. Unperturbed, she continued to look around but found George to be nowhere, hence she made her way back to the kitchen. To her surprise, he was standing right in the middle of the little party, chatting away with Ralph and Marcus, his smile widening when his gaze fell on her.

Eliza breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she must have imagined it. What business would George have snooping around the Russel house after all?

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The moment Eliza walked back into the kitchen, her confused blue eyes searching for him, Alexander knew he had been right. While coming downstairs, she had seen him disappear into the passageway, but gauging the situation quickly, Alexander had returned to the kitchen before she could.

All he needed to do was behave as if nothing had happened because the relief on her face was enough to tell him that she did not think it was him in the house.

After all, according to Eliza, he was just a stable boy named George who had no reason to snoop around the Russel house.

Besides, he had already found what he needed. After excusing himself from the kitchen, Alexander had quickly made his way directly towards Edgar's study, completely shocked at what he had found out. The documents he had needed were lying in plain sight right in the bottom drawer of Edgar's desk, waiting for Alexander.

The papers clearly stated how Edgar's sole finances were being met through Eliza's inheritance, along with a copy of the late duke's will, which stated how everything belonged to his daughter, except for what legally went to the new heir.

It even contained the deeds to all properties, which mentioned how the country estate went to the heir as per legal rights, but the London estate belonged to Eliza. Moreover, bank details, which mentioned Edgar stealing Eliza's inheritance, were also included.

Even though those documents were more than enough, Alexander still needed more proof to make sure the Russel family was properly held accountable for their crimes.

And for that, he would need to wait a little longer.

He had been tempted to steal the documents right then, but that might raise too many questions. For now, he was simply glad about finding them so he would be able to use them later when the time was right.

The fact that Edgar had not even bothered to hide those documents was evidence of how careless the man was, comfortable enough to think that no one was on the verge of discovering the truth behind his money.

Edgar certainly believed that his sin of stealing his niece's inheritance would never be found out, but Alexander was not going to let this go.

He would make the Russels pay.

"George." Eliza came to stand beside him, her smile intact. The faint scent of flowers, which always lingered about her, filled his senses, making him heady with desire for her.

"Beth." He smiled back, nodding.

He had not failed to notice Eliza's growing affection towards him or at least towards George.

Whenever Amelia had tried to come close to him, he had been able to see the anger and jealousy on Eliza's face, even when she was trying to do an excellent job at hiding it. She had failed miserably before him, warming his heart towards her even more.

"The games are over?"

“Yes.” Alexander nodded, not breaking eye contact. “The family must be about to return. Dinner time is almost over.”

“You are right.” She blushed, quickly looking away. He had noticed how she could never hold eye contact with him, her shyness setting his heart aflutter.

“I must head back before someone discovers I have been gone too long.” he placed the glass of ale in his hand back on the counter before turning towards Eliza, “Mind walking me out?”

“I would love to.”

Alexander quickly said goodbye to everyone else present, finally making his way outside the kitchen, where Eliza was already waiting for him. He was glad she had still not mentioned anything about seeing him inside the house, making him sure that she must have believed it to be a hallucination.

He did not want her to think that George could be snooping around the house, trying to steal something, because it would surely ruin her relationship and trust in George.

That was the last thing Alexander wanted.

“I had a really good time today, Beth,” he finally spoke, breaking the silence, “thank you so much for letting me come and making me feel so welcome with everyone.”

“I did nothing.” She glanced at him, appearing beautiful in the moonlight. “You are warm, kind, and friendly, and everyone was simply drawn by your aura. You truly know how to charm people, George, just the way you have charmed me.”

“I have charmed you?” He raised an eyebrow at her, unable to control the smirk on his lips.

To his surprise, Eliza rolled her eyes before she burst out laughing and began to shake her head as if she had just now realized what she had said.

He stopped walking just then after reaching the footpath between the two estates, exactly where Eliza had come to pick him up in the evening. He had definitely been looking forward to this night, and he couldn't believe it was over this quickly.

“So, you haven't answered me yet. I have charmed you?”

“Your home is right here. You must immediately head back,” she replied sheepishly, evading his question.

“Oh no, I must get my answer first.” He came a little closer to her, only a few inches between them. He could see her sharp intake of breath at the closeness, not wanting to pull away at all.

“Which answer might that be?”

“Beth, have I charmed you?” he almost whispered, realizing their closeness.

“You might have.” She shrugged, finally looking into his eyes.

A loud gust of wind breezed past them, a wisp of Eliza's beautiful golden hair falling on her face. Without thinking about what he was doing, Alexander pushed away the strand from her face, lightly tucking it behind her ear as he stared deeply into her eyes.

Everything about her was beautiful, from head to toe, and he simply couldn't get enough. He traced his thumb over her soft, pink cheek, a slight tremble running through her body. The two of them were so close that her breath fanned his hand, but Alexander still didn't pull away, wanting to savour the moment.

“Really?” he whispered, his hands cupping the sides of her face. He pulled her face upwards, making her look at him, and leaned down slightly until the breath that had been on his palm only moments ago was now on his face.

The coldness of the night made him enjoy the warmth of Eliza’s skin, not wanting to pull away. Her eyes were already closed, and Alexander knew she was expecting a kiss. He closed his eyes, their lips just inches away from one another’s, and even though Alexander knew he shouldn’t be doing this, he had no desire to pull away when he was this close.

“BETH!”

As if waking up from a trance, the two of them immediately parted, Alexander almost cursing under his breath. He turned to look, noticing Amelia standing just a few feet away, her eyes on them.

“BETH! It’s late, let’s head back!” she shouted again.

“Coming!” Eliza replied, raising her hand to indicate she had heard her friend.

Alexander wanted to strangle Amelia for ruining their perfect moment, but a part of him was relieved.

He knew this was not the right time to let his feelings for Eliza come to the surface, especially when she did not even know the truth about his identity. He could not let his feelings for her ruin his plans to bring the truth to the surface.

All he needed to do was wait for a little while.

“Good night, Beth.”

“Good night, George.” She smiled at him, her blue eyes shining underneath the moon.

Waiting was indeed the right decision. He wanted to kiss her when she knew he was Alexander, her childhood best friend. He wanted her to know the complete truth rather than keep her in the dark.

She waved at him, beginning to walk away, as he stood there waiting until Eliza had completely disappeared in the darkness of the gardens. All he needed was a little more information to reveal the truth about the Russel family, and after that, he would make sure that he and Eliza were never separated.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:34 pm

Eliza sat on the large log in the middle of the forest, George's note clasped tightly in her hands. She had ventured out into the woods in hopes of finding him; instead, a note had been waiting for her by the stream, which said that the masked stranger would come to see her today.

Even though she had not been expecting this sudden meeting, she was looking forward to seeing him. He was the only one besides Ralph and Lara who knew about her true identity and wanted to talk about her life.

It was refreshing.

With him, she felt like she could simply be her real self and talk about the things that truly saddened her heart. He understood her troubles like no other, making her feel close to him.

She knew she had felt an inkling of attraction towards him, which made her feel torn between him and George, but Eliza knew she was just thinking too much. Neither of the two men had actually confessed their feelings towards her, which simply meant she could like them both.

It was not as if she was pursuing either one of them, and she wasn't even certain if they liked her too. Hence, she was not going to think too much about it.

But George.

She had not been able to stop herself from thinking about George. Eliza sighed deeply, remembering how the pair had almost ended up kissing the other night,

making her feelings for George only grow more.

She was certain he had wanted to kiss her too, and if Amelia had not called her from a distance, they would have ended up kissing. Perhaps that would have solved a lot of problems for her, but then she would have felt guilty about her feelings for the masked stranger.

Everything was too complicated, and her thoughts were beginning to frustrate her.

She ran a hand through her hair, turning around sideways and almost screaming as she noticed someone sitting at the other end of the log, silently staring at her.

“My goodness,” she sighed, realizing it was no one but the masked stranger, “you almost made me shout out loud in fear.”

He chuckled, his voice deep and masculine, pulling at Eliza’s heart. Something about him just felt familiar and affectionate, confusing Eliza even further. Dressed in a deep blue morning coat with breeches, he looked extremely handsome in his perfect dress.

His hair was slicked back as usual, making him appear even more gentlemanly, and his face was covered with a mask. Eliza sighed, the mystery almost annoying her, but she knew he wished to maintain it.

“I have been sitting here for the past five minutes, simply staring at you. But you, My Lady, have been so lost in your thoughts that you completely refused to either notice or acknowledge my presence.”

“Pardon me,” she quickly replied, realizing she indeed had been lost in thought, “my mind was elsewhere.”

He stood up from the other end of the log and came to sit right beside her, the

cinnamon of his perfume becoming all-consuming.

Today, he smelled a little like birch, but rather than being earthen, even the scent of wood seemed fancy, suiting his polished appearance. Everything about the man screamed nobility, making Eliza realize the differences between them. Despite that, she had never once felt self-conscious in front of him since he recognized her for who she was.

“What is troubling you? Is it a matter of the heart?”

Eliza’s eyes widened at his question, unsure of how he had even speculated about something so personal.

She had never doubted his intuitive nature, but she felt as if he was beginning to read her mind and her face, which scared her slightly. However, it also worked to pull him closer to her, and she still could not share her troubles about George with him, especially since the two knew each other.

“It’s nothing.” She shrugged, sighing. “I am just tired. I simply look forward to leaving behind all of this and beginning a new life elsewhere, which I would be able to live on my terms. I just want to leave everything behind and start anew with Ralph and Lara. All of this will simply be a nightmare I have moved on from, and I might be able to find happiness again.”

“No, no,” he suddenly burst out, his voice still perfectly controlled, “you are Eliza Gordon, the daughter of a duke and duchess. You have an inheritance and a title. You have a life that is being taken away from you but could be returned. Why would you give up everything that is rightfully yours and leave it all behind? This is your life, and you must live it. Leaving would be unfair to yourself.”

Eliza could hear the emotion in his voice and see how deeply her decision had

affected him. Her heart warmed knowing how he was a well-wisher and simply wanted what was best for her, but it was not that easy to achieve.

“None of it is worth my happiness,” she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. “I have no desire to fight for money, wealth, title, and status since I will only lose, and it will bring me additional misery. I would much rather be a commoner and live my life with people who would love me instead of being involved in this never-ending trouble.”

To her surprise, the masked stranger took her hand in his, clasping it tightly. His touch sent tingles down her spine, making Eliza look up into his dark eyes. She could sense he was going to turn out unnecessarily handsome underneath the mask, and she longed to see his face.

“You must not give up so easily, Lady Eliza.”

As she stared at him, she wondered what it would feel like to have someone as powerful and strong as him to be there to protect her from everyone and everything all her life.

But she knew it was just an impossible dream. She would never be able to achieve something this dream-like in her life when all she had written in her fate was misery.

She began to draw her hand away, but he continued to hold on, his touch becoming even tighter. Eliza sighed deeply, no longer pulling away.

She stayed silent as he lifted her hand towards his face before bending down a little and raising his mask only slightly to place a kiss on her knuckles.

The touch of his petal-soft lips against her skin sent shivers right down to her very toes, and Eliza felt as if everything in the world had come to a stop. She could no longer deny her feelings for him, wanting nothing more than to have yet another kiss

from him.

What is happening to me?

“Eliza,” he almost whispered her name, finally looking back at her, his mask slid in place, “you are a lady through and through, and no amount of simple, shabby clothing or smudges of dirt can change that or take that away from you.”

He raised his hand and softly rubbed his thumb on her cheek, clearly rubbing a speck of dirt from her face.

A smile appeared on her face as she sensed the affection of his touch since he was trying to touch her as softly as he possibly could. Eliza could see how he did not want to cause her pain.

“You believe that?” she whispered back, unable to stop the tears forming in her eyes.

His words held so much power that she mostly began to believe him, despite whatever the circumstances.

He was the reason she even remembered her old life, his presence constantly reminding her of her true identity. If it were not for him, Eliza knew she would never have been able to believe she even was a lady.

“I completely believe that,” he said. “You are not just a lady because you were born that way, but it is everything that you are inside and out. You are kind, caring, loving, and honest, and lack any sentiments of hatred and bitterness in your heart. You are the very example of what a true lady must look like, Eliza and nothing or no one can take away the goodness of your heart from you.”

She continued to stare at him, her heart filling with affection at his words. Without

realizing what she was doing, her hand inched towards the end of the mask, almost pulling away before he backed off, forcing Eliza's hand to fall.

She wanted to see his face, his true identity, but his sudden distance was enough of a reminder that he was not ready for that to happen.

"I just wanted to see you." She stood up beside him, still staring at his face.

"It is not the right time, My Lady," he sighed. "When it is the right time, I will reveal myself to you in a heartbeat, but you must wait a little longer. I must be going now."

Eliza felt disappointed, but she had almost expected that, knowing he would not reveal himself this easily. If it really were this easy for him to come before her, he would never have worn a mask in the first place.

She could sense their conversations were completely one-dimensional since he never shared anything about himself, but she had no other choice. She had to take what he was willing to offer and be happy with it, at least until he was ready to come before her fully.

"I believe it is goodbye then." She smiled at him, maintaining her distance.

"Until next time."

She watched as he turned around and walked away from her, making Eliza want to stop him from behind, but she knew how inappropriate that would be. With one final wave, she began to walk back towards the house, not wanting to be gone too long. As she almost reached the gardens, her eyes fell on Amelia who was walking towards the house as well, and Eliza quickly matched pace with her friend.

"Amelia!"

“Beth!” she called out to her as the two of them walked beside one another. A gust of wind went past them, and Eliza could smell the faint scent of perfume, which her fairy godmother had sent her on Amelia, making her suspicions correct.

Since the night Eliza had discovered her brush and perfume had gone missing, some other things had gone missing too.

Eliza had been unable to find her sweetmeats, several of her silk undergarments, and a beautiful pot of pink rouge. She had thought about the thief being Amelia, but she did not want to confront her friend without proof. Although now, Eliza was sure.

“Amelia, can I ask you something?” Eliza asked gently, not wanting to offend her friend.

“Of course.”

“Have you taken my brush and perfume? And have you been taking other things from my room as well?”

Amelia’s eyes widened at the question, and she stopped walking, turning to look at Eliza without even meeting her eyes. Her faltering gaze and scarlet face were all the proof Eliza needed to be sure of the fact that Amelia had indeed been stealing from her, although Eliza knew her friend would deny the accusation.

“How dare you say such a thing? Do you not trust me?” Amelia burst out, definitely angry.

“Of course I trust you.” Eliza smiled, affectionately keeping a hand on Amelia’s shoulder, which she shrugged off. “But my things have gone missing, and no one knows about them but you. You can tell me if you have taken them, and I promise I won’t be angry. All I want is for you to tell me you wish to use those things rather

than simply taking them. I would be more than happy to share.”

“You are truly something, Beth,” Amelia replied, appearing even angrier. Although underneath the emotions she was trying to fake, Eliza could see embarrassment in her eyes.

“I just do not want something like this to come in the way of our friendship. Please tell me the truth.”

“I have not been stealing from you, Beth,” Amelia shouted once again, “and whatever friendship we had is now completely over. Darn you!”

Eliza sighed deeply as she watched Amelia walk away from her in a huff, knowing there was no appeasing her until she was in a better mood.

Although, Eliza did not know if she even wanted to make things up with her. If Amelia could not be honest with her, Eliza was much better off without her friendship. She continued walking back towards the house, her heart slightly heavy with sadness.

Amelia directly made her way towards the parlour where Lady Victoria was resting, her steps faltering slightly.

She was filled with anger at the accusation Beth had made of her, even though it had been completely true. She had indeed been stealing from Beth’s room, but she almost felt as if she were allowed to.

Why did Beth have to be the one to get the nice things, and the fairy godmother and the men flocking around her? Just because she was beautiful, she did not have a right

to everything in the world.

Both were maids and commoners, so why did it have to be Beth and not her?

She huffed loudly, remembering how Beth and George had almost kissed the other night, and if it were not for her calling Beth's name, they would have certainly done it. As if that was not enough, she had gone to meet the masked stranger in the woods again today, making Amelia even angrier. Beth was getting a little too much attention from all those around her, and Amelia was not going to let it go.

She might have forgotten about it if Beth had not accused her of stealing, but now she simply did not care. Lady Victoria deserved to know. She knocked quickly before she might change her mind.

"You may enter," Lady Victoria's voice called out from inside, and Amelia walked inside, bowing to Lady Victoria and Lady Margaret, who was also there.

Amelia did not know if it was wise to discuss this in front of Lady Margaret, but what difference would it make? Even though Lady Margaret was disliked by her entire family, the two of them were still sisters after all.

"Amelia ..." Lady Victoria perked up after seeing her, sitting straight from her almost reclined position on the couch, "I hope you have something interesting to tell me. I am counting on you."

"I do, My Lady."

"Good." Lady Victoria smiled. "Go on."

"I went to Beth's room the other day and found out that her entire room has been filled with nice things. She has new pillows, clothes, perfumes, and even a looking

glass. I believe she could be stealing from the house.” Amelia quickly breathed all of it out, choosing not to tell about the fairy godmother since that might sound unbelievable.

Although, if Beth were accused of theft, it would teach her a lesson.

“Is that so?” Lady Victoria hardly reacted, her gaze speculative. “What else?”

Amelia felt almost disappointed with her reaction, knowing she would have to give her something even bigger.

“I have seen her in questionable situations with both George and the masked stranger from the masquerade ball.”

“The masked stranger, you say?” Lady Victoria suddenly looked interested, and Amelia knew she had hit her mark.

“Yes, My Lady. I have seen them together multiple times in the woods, and I have seen her with George whenever he comes to visit her in the house. Beth has been getting comfortable with both of them, and it looks extremely inappropriate.”

Lady Victoria nodded, her face turning blank once again.

“Thank you for your good work, Amelia,” she replied, “You are dismissed.”

Amelia bowed quickly and walked back out, unsure if she had done the right thing. However, she knew this was the best way to get revenge on Beth because Lady Victoria would certainly make her suffer.

“The masked stranger again,” Victoria whispered loudly, her worry growing after hearing everything Amelia had told her, “Why does Beth’s name keep coming up again and again along with the masked stranger? Even Count Fife saw them together the night of the masquerade.”

“I do know one thing,” Margaret chimed in, making Victoria look at her, “she could not be stealing. Beth is anything but a thief, which means this accusation is baseless.”

“I agree.” Victoria sighed, agreeing with her sister for once. “Which means these things she is getting could be gifts from someone. It could be the masked stranger, or perhaps even George since Amelia has seen her with George as well. Although, the masked stranger did seem quite interested in her at the night of the masquerade when we danced.”

“In Beth?” Margaret asked, confused.

“In Eliza Gordon. He asked me questions about her.”

“He asked me things, too. We had a conversation while we danced.”

Victoria burst out laughing at Margaret’s comment, knowing the masked stranger could not have had an intelligent conversation with Margaret. She was almost sure he only danced with her because he felt sorry for her since there could be no other reason for it.

“Really?” Victoria said smugly. “What kind of questions?”

“He told me how he remembered this estate used to belong to the Duke and Duchess of Gordon, and they had a daughter named Eliza. He asked me if she was one of our cousins and if I knew where she was or if she was even alive. I simply evaded the question.”

Victoria's eyes widened as she realized these were the exact same questions he had asked her as well, making her realize how he was doing nothing but fishing for information. Victoria stood up, extremely worried, unsure of what this could mean.

It certainly could not be a coincidence that a strange man came to their house with his identity concealed, asking questions about Eliza Gordon, and later, he was seen with her by not just one but two people.

Something was clearly not right about this.

The parlour door opened, and their mother walked inside, making Victoria breathe a sigh of relief. If someone could get to the bottom of this matter, it was her mother.

"Why are you pacing about, dear?" she asked, walking inside and taking a seat on the empty sofa. Without wasting a single second, Victoria repeated everything Amelia had told her and the questions the masked stranger had been asking both her and Margaret.

Just as she had expected, her mother's worries grew with every word as she took it all in.

"We must do something, Mother," she coaxed, sitting beside her.

"We must not jump to conclusions this quickly, Amelia," her mother advised, sitting straighter, "We must do a little more digging. You need to ask Amelia to keep an even closer watch on Beth so we can see what she is up to and promptly decide what needs to be done. Understood?"

Victoria nodded. She was glad to finally have found something that might finally push Eliza out of this house for good.

Chapter 16

Quickly tiptoeing out through the back gate of the estate, Eliza stepped into the woods, breathing in the early morning air. Now that it was summer, she could wake up much earlier and had been doing just that for the past one and a half weeks.

It was only four in the morning, with just very few servants awake and about the house, which meant she could sneak out easily and enjoy her early morning walks in peace.

Although, the walks had not been as cheerful as she had wished them to be.

Eliza continued down the familiar path she took every day, completely aware of every single bend in the road as she made her way forward towards the hill at the end, where she spent time waiting for the sunrise.

She sighed deeply, looking around the woods for any sign of George, but she knew it was in vain. He had been absent for about a week, making Eliza wonder why he had not been walking the earl's dogs early in the morning.

She had been looking forward to seeing him for a very long time, and he had been absent for too long now. Even the masked stranger had left her a note about one and a half weeks ago that he would be away for business and would not be able to see her for a little while.

She couldn't help feeling disappointed at these developments, not wanting to be away from either of them.

“You must stop thinking about them, Eliza,” she whispered to herself in the empty forest, finally beginning to climb the hill.

The sky was already beginning to turn a deep shade of pink, the darkness disappearing. This was what she loved about watching the sunrise from the top of the hill every single day, the changing of these colours. It almost felt as if she was watching a painter working on his masterpiece before the painting came to life with every passing second.

She sat down at her usual spot towards the very top, her eyes on the skies above. At this hour of the morning, everything felt magical, and she even stopped missing George for a little while.

Nature inspired her in a way, and lately she had been sitting here, simply singing to herself. The beginning of the day filled her with hope and delight, making Eliza feel special.

She had been telling herself how she owed it to her parents to live fully without letting anything ruin her heartiness and kindness. She was going to make the best out of the life she had been given without being bitter about it. That was the most she could do.

“I am going to be just fine.” She breathed in the fresh air, the sky already illuminating with light above her, and closed her eyes to savour the moment.

The light falling on her face suddenly turned into a shadow, and Eliza opened her eyes, almost afraid of what she might find before her, but to her surprise, she was met with an extremely familiar pair of russet-coloured eyes.

“George!” She shouted his name, unable to control the huge smile appearing on her face and threw herself in his arms after standing up. “I have missed you so much!”

Without realizing what she was doing, Eliza held onto him closely, her hands wrapped tightly around his neck as he hugged her back, the two of them locked in a warm embrace.

She had noticed his momentary bewilderment before her face had been buried in his neck, but he had immediately sunk into the hug right after. It would have been an understatement to say she was happy since Eliza felt elated in a way she had not been able to feel the entire past week. It was enough to make her realize how much she valued the man who held her in his arms.

“Beth,” he whispered her name right in her ear, making Eliza realize how close the two of them were to each other, “I have missed you just the same.”

Suddenly feeling embarrassed, she unhooked her arms from behind his neck, letting him go at last. Her cheeks turned crimson after witnessing the huge smile on George’s face, making her wonder what he might be thinking about the hug she had sprung on him in this manner. It was true they were good friends, but Eliza had never shown him this level of affection before.

“I must apologize for taking liberties with you. I shouldn’t have embraced you in this manner,” she quickly said, not wanting to offend him or give him the wrong idea. He was the one person whose opinion mattered to her the most, and she could not let him think wrongly of her.

Before she had even stopped speaking, George began to shake his head. “You mustn’t worry at all. Besides, my dearest Beth, you are allowed to take as many liberties as you might wish with me.”

Eliza rolled her eyes at the playfulness in his voice and sat back down, patting the ground beside her, motioning for him to sit as well. Without wasting a single second, he perched down, their shoulders almost touching as they faced the sky above.

Just being back in his presence, Eliza's heart felt comforted, the sadness of the past week immediately fading away. She had got used to George's company, and not having had it made her realize his importance in her life. She never wanted to let him go, and the very thought scared her.

"How have you been? And where have you been? I haven't seen you in one week!"

"I have felt terrible because I have been unable to do anything except miss you terribly." He glanced at her, making Eliza blush at the comment, "Although, I am extremely happy to be back, and I am already beginning to feel much better."

"I am glad to hear that." She continued staring into his eyes. "Mind telling me what had you so occupied?"

"I was unfortunately away on business for a friend."

"On business?" Eliza frowned, "What business concerned the stable hand of the earl's estate? Or was it something for the Earl's valet of whom you are the right hand?"

"It was for the earl himself," George replied quickly, looking back at the sky. "He wanted me to return to his country seat and handle a few matters there pertaining to his special horses. Thus, I had no choice but to go as quickly as possible."

"That sounds urgent," Eliza commented, still unable to understand.

However, she did not care one bit about what took him away; she only cared about him returning. Now that he was here, things were going to be alright. She just knew it.

"It was." He sighed deeply, turning around to face her. Eliza turned around as well,

the two of them staring at one another, a smile on Eliza's face. The sun had finally ascended fully and was beginning to illuminate the world with its glorious light, and Eliza felt her spirits going up with it.

If it were any other day where George would not have been beside her, she would have been upset about having to return to the house and begin her day. Although, seeing George again had filled her with hope and spirits, and she knew she could manage the day ahead with grace.

"I am glad you could be of help to the earl."

"Forget about the earl." He took her hand in his, his touch making Eliza shiver. "Tell me about yourself. How have you been while I was away? What has been going on at the house? Did something momentous happen which I must most certainly be aware of?"

"You want to hear gossip about the servants now?" Eliza chuckled, tracing circles on his palm with her thumb.

"Why not? All I wish is to keep hearing your voice, so I just need you to continue talking about anything and everything."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely." He nodded, a smile mirroring Eliza's appearing on his face.

She shook her head, beginning to tell him the mundane details of her day and things that had been happening around the house while he had been gone.

Although, even as the two of them laughed together, Eliza couldn't help wondering if she should tell him about Amelia and the gift stealing.

Eliza had hoped Amelia would stop stealing the gifts now that she was accused, but she had been wrong. The gifts still disappeared from her room, making her angrier every single day.

“Is something weighing on your mind, Beth?” George’s voice brought her back to the present, and she realized how she had been staring at him silently.

“Oh, nothing really.”

“You must tell me, Beth. Sometimes, when something is weighing upon us, talking about it helps.” She stared at him earnestly, wondering how he even noticed how stressed she had been. Everything about George reminded Eliza of how close the two of them had come to one another, filling her heart with happiness at the prospect.

If there was someone who really did know her, it was George.

“Well, it is about Amelia,” she sighed, finally deciding to tell him.

“Amelia? What about her?”

“Do you remember how I told you I have been receiving gifts from an unnamed fairy godmother?” George nodded. “Amelia found out about those gifts and has been stealing them ever since.”

“Stealing them?” A frown covered his handsome features, making Eliza squeeze his hand harder.

“Yes. She has been taking things from my room, and when I confronted her about it, she completely denied the allegations and hasn’t even been talking to me with a straight face since. I think she might be angry with me.”

“My goodness, Beth,” he sighed deeply, his palms running across her arms as he comforted her, “I cannot believe a good thing has been turned into something this thoroughly awful. I am truly sorry you had to suffer through something of this sort.”

Eliza was unsure about the guilt she saw on George’s face, making her feel as if he had blamed himself for this problem.

She did not understand it because he was certainly not at fault in the entire matter, completely distanced from it. Although, she could sense the sincerity of his reactions, reminding her how he was only worried about her.

“It is not your fault, George,” she whispered, smiling at him.

“I will do anything in my power to make this problem go away and help you in every way that I can. Is that alright?”

At that moment, Eliza wanted to do nothing more than to believe in his promise. His gaze was warm and sincere, and Eliza could see how he just might be able to help her. She appreciated the honesty of his words and nodded.

“That would be excellent.” She laughed softly. “Thank you.”

“You mustn’t thank me.” He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear as he had done countless times before. “Also, before I forget to tell you, the masked stranger wishes to see you later in the afternoon. Would that be possible?”

“I will come.” Eliza nodded, wanting to meet the masked stranger herself. It had been much too long. “It might take me some time because slipping away is not always easy. But I will try my best.”

“That would be excellent.”

“Can we watch the sunrise now?” she asked him, beginning to look at the sky once again.

“Absolutely!”

George leaned in closer, and Eliza comfortably placed her head on his arm as the two of them continued to watch the beautiful scenery before them in silence. Eliza had never felt this peaceful before.

The forest was silent around him as Alexander waited in the evening, dressed in his usual attire of the masked stranger.

He had been waiting for about fifteen minutes now, but Eliza still hadn't appeared, which made him worried. For some reason he could not understand, the closer he was getting to revealing the truth about the Russels, the more trouble seemed to be brimming under the surface.

Where are you, Eliza?

He continued to pace around the woods, knowing how important it was for him to see her today. He had been away for the past week, digging deeper into the story of the Russels sending Eliza to France as they took care of her properties and inheritance.

Now, he had legal proof that Eliza had never stepped foot in France since the only relatives she had in France were a few distant relatives from her mother's side, and they had assured Alexander that Eliza had never arrived.

Along with this, he also had proof of Edgar Russel dipping into her inheritance without her permission. What had shocked him even more was finding out how Edgar

had tried his best to get the London Estate and all other properties around the country that belonged to Eliza in his name, but the duke had been intelligent enough to put a lot of red tape around the matter.

Hence, the properties were still safely in Eliza's name and could easily be returned to her.

Now, all he needed were the documents in Edgar's desk drawer. But how was he going to get back inside the house?

He was worried, but he knew he would have to find a way to solve the last piece of this puzzle. It was about time Eliza received justice, and Alexander would do anything to make it happen.

Despite this, he had other things to ask Eliza and remind her how he was still on her side, and all she needed to do was wait a little rather than give up so easily.

But where was she?

"Hello, stranger." Eliza's voice from behind startled him, and he turned around to look at her.

"Lady Eliza." He bowed when she curtsied, formalities out of their way. He could not determine what the matter was, but for some reason, she appeared tired.

Almost exhausted. When he had met her in the morning, she had looked better and well-rested, but now, it was evident she'd had a long day already, and the day was hardly even over.

"I apologize for being late. I do not know what the matter is, but Lady Victoria seems suspicious about my whereabouts and held me up for too long rather than letting me

go. I am afraid I will not be able to stay for long,” she said, sitting down on the log as Alexander sat beside her.

“It is perfectly alright,” he said, taking her hand in his. “I just needed to see you.”

“How have you been?” The softness of her smile filled his heart with warmth, but Alexander knew they did not have time for idle conversation today. He would hate her to get in trouble because of him; hence, it would be better if she returned promptly.

“I have been well, but that is not the reason I wished to see you today. I have a few questions I need you to answer.”

“Is everything alright?” Her brows furrowed, and Alexander quickly shook his head, trying not to worry her.

“Everything is perfect. I need to know if there is someone in the household who can testify and bear witness to the behaviour of the Russels towards you. Anyone who can straightforwardly tell the cruelty your aunt, uncle, and cousins have put you through and will not be afraid of speaking the whole truth.”

“There is Ralph and Lara, of course, but why would anyone believe the word of two old servants over the word of the earl and the countess?”

Alexander knew she was right. Ralph and Lara were witnesses to everything that had happened, but despite that, their word was not going to be believed. A witness was not necessary if he had the entire set of evidence with him, but he simply wished to be prepared for all outcomes.

“You are right.” He nodded. “I will think of some other way.”

“My Lord,” she squeezed his hand, staring into his eyes, “it is really good to see you, and simply meeting you here brings me immense happiness. You mustn’t trouble yourself with this situation, and I will eventually escape when the time is right.”

Alexander sighed deeply, knowing she meant every word. Eliza was one of those people who would never wish to trouble anyone due to their problems, and it made Alexander realize once again how kind she was. Despite all of it, he was not going to listen to her about this and make sure she never had to escape. What belonged to her would be in her rightful possession soon enough. Without thinking, he picked her hand up, placing a soft kiss on her knuckles.

“You must not give up so soon, My Lady,” he replied, “you will not have to escape. I promise.”

“I must head back now,” she snatched her hand back, and Alexander let her go, understanding her troubles.

“I will see you again soon.”

Eliza nodded, quickly turning around to head back to the house. As Alexander waited in the forest to watch her completely disappear before returning, he felt odd.

It was as if someone in the distance was staring at him, but he had heard or seen nothing. Not wanting to take any risks, he took the longer route back to the house and only removed his mask once on the estate. He needed to be careful.

“Are you absolutely certain that Amelia is not lying, Victoria?”

Victoria shook her head quickly, assuring her mother that Amelia had not been lying.

When Amelia had told her just a few minutes ago that Beth had once again gone to see the masked stranger, Victoria had been sure something was going on.

However, the later revelation was even more shocking since Amelia had followed the masked stranger and had found him entering the earl's estate. To Amelia's surprise, the masked stranger had been no one else but George and by the respect the servants were giving him, it was evident he was not an ordinary stable hand.

Victoria had known something about George was not right. He appeared too noble just to be a commoner.

Hence, Victoria had rushed to tell her mother, because now she was certain how George could very well be the earl's son or even the earl himself. Something about the whole thing made her sceptical.

"I am certain, Mother. Amelia is not bright enough to get so inventive."

"If George is the earl or the earl's son, and he was the one asking questions about the duke and his daughter, it only means he has an agenda. He probably knows Beth is not Beth but Eliza instead, and he could cause serious trouble for us."

Victoria was horrified.

"What are we to do, Mother?"

"We have to stop Beth from seeing the man. Immediately."

Victoria nodded, knowing her mother was right. "All we need to do is accuse her of stealing from the family and carrying on with George behind our backs like a loose woman since Amelia saw the two of them almost kiss. That way, we will stop her from setting foot outside the house again unless escorted."

“That sounds excellent,” her mother sighed. “But if that George or whoever he is, is doing something. He will just continue with it.”

“Mother, I think it is time to say yes to Count Fife for giving Eliza to him in marriage. She will be out and away from here, and the matter will go no further. If anyone asks us about Eliza, we can simply say she is happily married and living with her husband. Moreover, she left everything she once owned for us since her husband has more than enough to provide for her.”

Victoria could see her mother was hesitant about letting Eliza go, but it was important to send her away now. Or else it might end up harming the family.

“You are right,” her mother finally nodded. “I will grant Count Fife’s wish under the sole condition of him signing over Eliza’s inheritance to Edgar since, as her husband, everything she owns will belong to him after marriage. Once that is done, he can take Eliza away. But we will have to wait a little.”

“Why?” Victoria was annoyed.

“We need Eliza to plan the summer masquerade now that the Season has officially begun. This masquerade needs to be bigger and better than the spring masquerade, and only Eliza can do that for us. But once this is done, we will send her away, and in the meantime, we will confront her about what she has been doing in this house.”

“Let’s not delay one bit.”

Victoria had never been happier.

Count Fife.

Margaret was horrified that her very own mother and sister could be so cruel as to give someone as lovely and kind as Eliza to a man like Count Fife in marriage.

Moreover, they were making sure that everything she owned was signed over to them as well. As if treating her terribly for so many years was not enough, now they were planning to ruin the rest of her life as well.

It was too much. Margaret knew she could not stand silently and watch this absurdity unfold. She needed to do something.

But what can I do?

“I must talk to George, or whatever his name is,” she whispered to herself, immediately rushing away. Doing so would bring immense trouble to her and her family, but Margaret was not left with much of a choice. Eliza had suffered at the hands of her family already, and she did not need to suffer anymore. It was about time Margaret did something.

Chapter 17

“Beth?” Amelia’s voice made Eliza stopped dusting the library books, especially because the two of them hadn’t talked in days. Even after Eliza had made multiple attempts at reconciliation, Amelia had given her the cold shoulder, which made Eliza eventually stop.

“Yes?” Eliza noticed how Amelia did not meet her gaze, a guilty expression on her face.

That worried Eliza. It was clear that something was wrong.

“The countess is calling you into the parlour.”

Eliza could sense that her aunt would not be calling her for nothing, and Amelia’s guilty expression was enough to tell her that something was surely amiss.

Without asking Amelia anything further, Eliza quickly made her way to the parlour, wanting to know what was wrong.

She walked inside after knocking, her gaze immediately falling on the heap of things placed in the middle of the room. She tried to conceal the shock on her face as she realized those were all gifts her fairy godmother had sent her.

This is not good.

“Why have you been stealing from us, Beth?” Victoria’s sudden question shocked

her, and she stared at her cousin dumbly, unable to believe her ears.

Stealing?!

Victoria opened her fist to show Eliza a ring, but Eliza had never even seen the ring before. Everyone in the house, including the Russels, knew perfectly well that Eliza was certainly not one to steal. Everything was falling to pieces.

“I have done no such thing.”

“All of these things and this ring was found in your room, Beth,” Aunt Beatrice finally spoke. “They belong to Victoria. What were they doing in your room?”

“I have never seen that ring before.” Eliza quickly shook her head. “As for everything else, they are gifts that an anonymous person gave me. I even have the notes that came attached to these gifts. I can show them to you if you do not believe me.”

“No notes were found in your room when these gifts were brought out,” Victoria said, “and you can lie all you want, but we know everything else you have been up to as well. We just never expected you to steal!”

Eliza groaned inwardly, immediately understanding how Amelia must have told them about the gifts.

She must have removed the notes as well so Eliza wouldn't be able to prove anything, which only made things even more difficult for Eliza. How was she supposed to escape this labyrinth? She had no idea.

Only if she knew who her fairy godmother was could she have proved her innocence, but as of now, Eliza had nothing to prove her innocence, and her cousin and aunt would certainly refuse to believe a single word she said.

“I have not been stealing!” Eliza was frustrated. “And what other things? I have done nothing.”

“You have been carrying on like a loose woman with two men and have been seen in indecent situations with both of them by various people. Do not try to lie to us, Beth. You are never to set foot out of this house ever again, or else people might just believe that we are running a whorehouse here!” Her aunt’s words felt like a slap on her face, making Eliza realize that she had been watched.

Although, even if she had been watched, she had never once been involved in any indecent activity with either of the two men.

“I have never done anything that might make me seem like a loose woman! George is simply a friend, and every servant in the house is aware of our friendship!”

“And what about the masked man from the masquerade?” Victoria asked. “Count Fife saw the two of you together as well, as did Amelia. You cannot continue lying and betraying us in this manner.”

“I promise,” Eliza was on the verge of tears, but she was not going to cry. “I have definitely not been stealing or doing anything that might harm my reputation! You must believe me.”

“I do not want to hear another word from you,” her aunt said, almost shouting. “You are to dedicate your days to planning the summer masquerade and must feel lucky that I am not calling the constable to send you to serve a sentence for stealing from the family. You are not to leave the house unless escorted, and I do not wish to hear a word from you. Is that understood?”

Eliza was horrified.

Although she knew she could moan and shout and try to prove her innocence however much she wanted, it would result in nothing. Her aunt had taken it upon herself to ruin Eliza's life, and she would go to any lengths to do so.

Without another word, Eliza nodded and stepped out of the parlour, her eyes falling on Amelia, who was still standing there. Amelia began to turn around to leave the moment Eliza appeared, but Eliza quickly called out to her.

"Amelia, stop!"

"What?" She still couldn't meet Eliza's gaze.

"Why did you betray me in this manner?"

"I only did what a good servant must do for their masters."

Eliza scoffed at the explanation, leaving immediately before Amelia could say something even more absurd. It was not just about losing the gifts that belonged to her or about not being able to meet George and the masked stranger anymore.

It did upset her to some extent, but what she was truly worried about was how everyone would keep a closer eye on her, making her life more difficult.

The mending and embroidery work she had been doing on the side to make money for escaping from this house was extremely important to her. Not being able to step out simply meant she would not be able to earn that money, and she could not ask Lara to do all the work herself, especially with Lara's failing eyes. That meant they would be set back, her planned escape falling to pieces.

Eliza felt as if her heart was breaking, but she had no choice except to endure it.

Lately, she had been thinking about her feelings for the two men in her life and knew her feelings for George were much deeper than her feelings for the masked man.

It pained her that she would not be able to see him again and wouldn't even be able to tell him what had been happening. What would he even think of her absence?

Eliza was worried about too many things, and she had no idea how she was ever going to escape.

Chapter 18

Being left with no choice, Alexander made his way towards the stables of the Russel Estate, hoping to find Ralph. Two weeks had gone by already with no word from Eliza, which made him terribly worried.

She had stopped coming out for her morning and afternoon strolls in the woods, and none of the servants in the house were talking to him.

In fact, he was no longer welcomed inside the grounds of the Russel Estate as if everyone had been instructed to keep away from him.

What made matters even worse was how Alexander, or more appropriately, the earl, had not even received an invitation to the summer masquerade thrown by the Russels, which was the very next day.

He had happened to hear about it from other people and was hoping this was a simple mistake. He was still waiting for his invitation, but the wait seemed futile now.

This only meant it would be impossible for him to get inside the house to both find the documents and see Eliza. He was certain she was still inside; he simply needed a way to find her.

Even Lara was afraid to speak to him and simply asked him to stay away. Although, he could simply no longer go on without doing something about it. He needed to speak to Ralph.

Alexander found Ralph standing in the stall of a little pony in the stables, filling up the feeding bowls. Noticing how the other stalls seemed empty, Alexander quickly made his way inside, closing the door behind him. He was dressed as George since he knew Ralph had no idea about his true identity.

“You!” Ralph seemed angry to see him, making Alexander even more confused about what could have gone so wrong.

“Ralph, I must speak with you immediately. Where is Beth?”

“Why do you care? You are the reason she is caught up in so much trouble!”

“I am the reason?” His eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean? What have I done?”

“What have you done!?” Ralph shouted in a whisper, growing angrier with every passing minute. “The countess is convinced that Beth is seeing you and some masked man and even accused the poor girl of theft.

She is keeping her locked indoors so she cannot meet you or that other man. Everyone knows Beth would never steal, but there is no way for her to prove her innocence, and she has to suffer. You and that other man are the troublemakers behind this whole thing!”

Alexander was stunned.

He could have never imagined that Lady Leicester would be able to find out about Eliza meeting with him and the masked man.

The gifts he had sent her must have been what she had been accused of stealing, but he knew no one went into her room. This only meant someone had betrayed Eliza, and someone had been following her on her visits to the woods.

“How did they find out about these things?”

“That horrible girl Amelia betrayed poor Beth. She told the countess everything.”

He had known it. Amelia had been causing trouble for them since the beginning, and there she was again. Now, he understood not receiving an invitation had been intentional, but it was still unclear to him since the Russels were angry with him, not with the earl.

His head was spinning.

All he knew was that he needed to save Eliza one way or another.

“Thank you for telling me the truth, Ralph. I appreciate it. I will leave before anyone finds out I was here, and you get in trouble too. Beth won’t be happy about that.”

“I do not care about these things, George. But you must remember the Russels will not let you come near Beth again, so it is best you stay away and not cause any more problems for her.”

“I won’t cause any other problems for her, Ralph. I promise.”

He quickly left the stall after glancing left and right and exited through the way he had come. His mind was still on Eliza, making him wonder if she could be mad at him for putting her into this mess.

He was not sure about her feelings for him already, and now, with all of this, he wouldn’t blame her for being a little more upset with him. He deserved it.

Alexander quickly made his way back to his house, continuing to think about ways to somehow get inside the Russel Estate tomorrow to extract the documents. This little

glitch in the plan did not deter him one bit; in fact, it only made him more determined. Alexander had to do something or another.

But what?

He walked inside the hall, his eyes falling on Lady Margaret, who stood up from the sofa when he entered. She was the last person he had expected to see in his house, and she definitely did not look shocked to see him. What was happening?

“I need your help, My Lord.”

Alexander was shocked. It was evident she knew who he was. Perhaps she would be able to help him after all.

Even though Margaret was on the verge of a panic attack when she had escaped from her house to see George, being in front of him was strangely peaceful. Despite her terror, she had known she could not allow her family to ruin Eliza's life any longer.

Even after everything Eliza had been put through, she had never once been unkind towards Margaret. It was about time she took things into her own hands, especially with the masquerade happening the next day.

“Lady Margaret.” He bowed, walking inside the hall.

“My Lord ...” She curtsied back, noticing the shock on his face. “My family is well aware that you are not who you say you are. They know you are the masked stranger, and Eliza has been seen with you. That is one of the reasons they have locked her away.”

“Amelia betrayed her, I gather?”

“Yes,” Margaret nodded in agreement. “My family is suspicious of your intentions, especially since you asked questions about Eliza and the Gordons from both me and Victoria. Then you were seen with Eliza both as George and as the masked stranger, which is why my mother seems to think you might know the truth and could cause trouble for our family. Hence, it is best if Eliza stays away from you.”

A weight lifted from Margaret’s chest as she laid out the entire situation in front of George, his shock only increasing with everything she revealed. He sat down on the sofa, his worry evident on his face.

“How is she?” he finally asked, looking at Margaret.

“I have never seen her look so terrible. She has been diligently working to arrange the summer masquerade, which is tomorrow. I believe you did not receive an invite, and this happens to be the reason.”

“Yes.” Alexander nodded. “I was wondering why I had not been invited. Why are you here, Lady Margaret? Be honest.”

Margaret completely understood his suspicions towards her intentions since she, too, was only a Russel, but she was ready to prove him wrong. She had already decided to help Eliza in any way she could, and this was the time to stand up.

“I am here to tell you that my family is planning to get Eliza married off to Count Fife, who is a terrible, lecherous man, and Eliza does not deserve that fate. He is going to sign off on her inheritance to the family, and everything will legally belong to the Russels after he does so. I came here because I am aware only you can save Eliza.”

“And you are ready to stand up against your family to help your cousin? Why now? You have seen her be treated terribly all your life. Why this sudden change of heart?”

“I can’t allow my family to fall this low, My Lord. They have mistreated me all their lives as well, but not as much as they have mistreated Eliza. Despite all this, Eliza has never been unkind to me; in fact, she has been kinder to me than my own sister. I know she does not deserve such a life, and it is about time I help her, even if it means going against my own family. It is about time they pay for the sins they have committed.”

He stayed quiet for several minutes, closely assessing her.

“Lady Margaret, I do trust your intentions, and I thank you for coming forward in this matter. My name is not George, as you must have already guessed. I am Alexander Blackwood, Earl of Eastwood, along with being the Marquess of Lennox and a few other titles. I have known Eliza since we were just children because we used to be neighbours.”

Margaret was shocked at the introduction, realizing how important and powerful the man before her was. Even if she had not come forward, he would have found a way to help Eliza, but she was ready to help him in any capacity.

“What can I do to help, My Lord?”

“I just want you to find the documents in your father’s study detailing the inheritance and property deeds. They are all placed together in his bottom drawer. I have seen them there and you will be able to find them easily. You must bring those documents to me.”

Margaret was slightly scared, knowing it was not going to be an easy task.

“The ball is tomorrow, My Lord, and I am afraid they will send her away with Count Fife right after, which is why you must reveal the truth tomorrow. I will bring you the documents at the ball, but you will need to be present there right on time.”

Alexander stood up, followed by Margaret. A strange feeling filled her stomach, but she knew she was doing the right thing.

“I will do it at the ball,” he replied, his mind elsewhere. “I want you to do another thing for me.”

“Anything.”

“I got a dress made for Eliza. It is an ice blue colour along with accessories and all other necessary items. You must give it to her for her to wear tomorrow so she can be present at the masquerade, but I do not have a mask with it.”

“Do not worry.” Margaret shook her head. “I have a pearly, white mask, which will look beautiful with any blue dress. You must make your entrance at the ball and reveal the truth, while I will be present with the documents and will bear as an eyewitness to everything Eliza has endured in the past years.”

“Are you sure you will have the courage to step forward against your family? I cannot afford your faltering at the last moment.”

“I promise,” Margaret sighed. “I will lose my family, but even though I love them, they do deserve to be punished. It might mend my relationship with Eliza, but I am certainly not counting too much on it. I won’t hold it against her if she does not forgive me.”

“Knowing Eliza, she will forgive you in a heartbeat. Thank you for doing this, Lady Margaret. It takes great courage to stand up against your family, and you are doing

just that. Saving Eliza right now might not have been possible without you. I will arrive at the ball exactly at the right moment.”

“I will see you there, My Lord. It is about time I grow a backbone.”

Margaret felt as if she finally had a purpose, and she was ready to fulfill it. As long as she remained strong and staunch, she would be able to get through everything, even if she had to defeat her own family to get there.

She was finally ready.

Chapter 19

“All of this is for me?” Eliza had never been more confused and stunned at the same time, the beautiful dress staring at her in all its glory.

It was the night of the masquerade, and after working all day, Eliza was simply making sure that everything was settled in place before the ball officially began when, to her surprise, Margaret had forced her to the attic, claiming she had a surprise for her.

Eliza was almost scared of the surprise, fearing the worst, but Margaret had not been lying. A beautiful ice blue dress made entirely of sheer lace was waiting for her, along with white shoes made out of silver thread, elbow-high transparent white gloves with sequins on them, and a tiara of diamonds. Margaret carried a pearly, white mask with her as well, which matched the dress beautifully.

“Yes, this is for you,” Margaret replied, a huge smile on her face.

“Why?” It was unfathomable for Eliza.

“You have been a very good cousin to me, Eliza, and I have only ever been horrible to you. I know this won’t make up for any of it, but I do hope this will bring you a little happiness. Would you return to my room with me so we can get ready there and attend the masquerade together?”

Margaret’s question stunned Eliza even more, but in her heart, she wished to do just that. She had always wanted to attend a ball, and now the chance was right there

waiting for her.

“I would love to,” she sighed, still in shock, “but why can’t we get ready here?”

“My dress is in my room. Besides, it might be suspicious if a guest emerges out of the attic. If you come out of my bedchamber, I can simply introduce you as a friend, and we will not reveal your name to anyone because you wish to remain mysterious.”

Eliza nodded, picking everything up as they made their way to Margaret’s room, using the secret passageways in the house not to get caught. Once inside the room, both Margaret and Eliza went to work, and before Eliza realized it, it was already nine in the evening, and she was dressed like a lady.

She stood staring at her reflection in the mirror, the mask in place. Margaret had tied Eliza’s hair into a neat chignon, leaving tendrils on her face, which framed it perfectly.

The gloves made her hands appear beautiful and elegant, filling Eliza with happiness. She could never have imagined something like this happening to her, and she was still unsure about why Margaret was doing all this, but Eliza simply wanted to play along.

She felt as if this was her only chance of attending a ball and looking beautiful, and it would be absurd to throw the chance away simply because she was scared. If she were discovered, the consequences could be huge, but she had stopped caring.

How much worse could things get after all? Besides, this might be a chance to see her masked stranger. Even if she still would not be able to meet George, she could still hope to find the masked stranger. She missed him as well.

“Shall we head downstairs now?” Margaret’s question startled her, nervousness

settling into her stomach.

“Are you certain we should be doing this?” She was terrified.

“Absolutely.” Margaret took hold of her hands, trying to calm Eliza down. “You need to simply be confident and enjoy yourself.”

Eliza nodded, and the two of them made their way downstairs, where the masquerade had already begun, the guests beginning to arrive. Eliza was certain her absence would have been noted by now, but she simply did not care. Being inside the ball as a guest beside Margaret, she wanted to have the time of her life, even if it was just for a little while. Whatever consequences awaited her could be dealt with later.

“Are you feeling alright?” Margaret asked Eliza as they set foot inside, several eyes turning towards them.

“No,” she replied honestly, unused to the attention.

“You will be fine.”

Margaret introduced Eliza to a few of her other friends, not giving her name to maintain her anonymity while diligently keeping her away from both Uncle Edgar and Aunty Beatrice.

She did not even let Victoria or Henry come close to Eliza, making Eliza feel as if she could truly trust Margaret. It felt as if she was on her side. Eliza continued to converse with several people, her eyes constantly on the outlook for the masked stranger, but he was nowhere in sight. That worried Eliza, but she was certain he would appear.

“Eliza?” Margaret whispered her name, taking her hand and dragging her towards the

refreshments table.

“Yes?”

“Why do you look so concerned? Is something bothering you?”

“No, no. I was just trying to find someone.” She shrugged, her spirits dimming as she realized the masked stranger might not attend the masquerade at all.

“You are wearing a beautiful dress and accessories, and you must focus on enjoying yourself. Everything and everyone else can wait.”

“You are righ-”

Before Eliza could finish her sentence, Victoria barged in from behind them, anger evident on her face.

“I should have known,” she whispered angrily, not wanting to create a scene, “The moment I saw you here, I had the feeling something was wrong. I wonder why I didn’t recognize you earlier. Come with me at once.”

“Victoria!” Margaret tried to barge into the conversation, but Victoria held up her hand.

“Shut up,” she whispered once again. “Mother and Father will deal with you.”

Eliza was aware that if she resisted anything, Victoria would not hesitate to create a scene in front of everyone and quietly followed Victoria out of the ballroom, with Margaret beside her. Within moments, Uncle Edgar and Auntie Beatrice had followed them to the attic as well, their shock written on their faces when they realized what had been happening.

“How could you, Margaret?” Aunty Beatrice asked Margaret, who still stood strong.

Eliza was surprised to see her cousin’s courage, especially since Margaret had always been weak. As for Eliza, a part of her had already prepared for this to happen, but she still could not stop the tears from falling out of her eyes, thoroughly humiliated at the debacle.

“She deserves to have a good time too, Mother,” Margaret replied defiantly, making everyone roll their eyes.

“I want you out of that dress and accessories immediately, and you will stay locked up here until the masquerade is over. Count Fife will take you with him first thing tomorrow, and then you can be out of all our lives for good.” Uncle Edgar’s threat made her heart lurch with fear, but Eliza felt completely helpless.

She knew she had to escape now, or else she would be stuck here forever. But how?

“Mother, you do not understand. The situation is utterly complicated, and I need to reach the Russels’ summer masquerade right now before it is too late!” Alexander explained, staring at the clock. He would have been at the ball two hours ago if he had not been delayed by the sudden arrival of his mother and sister. Although his mother demanded to know the truth, Alexander did not think he would be able to explain it.

“Alexander, I will not let you go until you tell me the complete truth.”

“They have been keeping Eliza in the house as a servant! She has been stripped of her identity while the Russels are living on her inheritance. I need to get there so I can reveal their true faces in front of the entire ton today. It is about time.”

“My goodness!” His mother was shocked, but she stood up almost immediately. “I am coming with you right now.”

“But, Mother-” She cut him off.

“I wish to see the daughter of my best friend at once, Alexander. She has already been through so much, and I cannot wait to hold her in my arms.”

Alexander nodded, immediately making his way to the Russel Estate, his white mask slipped in place. He had already been dressed for the ball when his mother had arrived, but in not wanting to reveal the entire situation to her, a lot of time had been wasted.

Despite that, he was glad he had finally told her everything because she deserved to know about it all. They made their way to the entrance, where the footman immediately stopped Alexander, shocking him.

“I apologize, My Lord, but only people with invitations are allowed to enter.”

“Is that so?” his mother chimed in, “I am the Marchioness of Lennox and have merely forgotten my invitation. If you do not let me in at once, I will consider it a slight against me. I am sure you do not wish to cross me.”

Alexander knew the effect his family name had on people since it was one of the oldest and most powerful names in England. The guards must have recognized it, too, since after a few moments, they nodded, letting the two of them enter. Alexander made sure only his mother was announced since he wished to remain anonymous. All he needed to do was find Eliza.

“Where is she?” his mother asked once they were inside. Alexander could feel eyes on him, but the only person he wished to see was nowhere in sight.

“I can’t find her. You must remain here, Mother, while I look.”

He left his mother behind, his eyes suddenly falling on Margaret, who immediately rushed towards him. Without uttering a single word, she handed him a note that read, “My family discovered Eliza in the dress.

They have locked her in the attic. Bring her out to the ball while I bring the documents. Hurry.” Alexander was shocked, but without wasting a single minute, he took the servants’ staircase and rushed to the attic, finding the door locked just as Margaret had claimed.

“Eliza?” he called out to her softly, hearing footsteps from inside the room.

“Who is that?”

“It’s me, Eliza. Your masked stranger. Stand back; I will try to push the door open.”

He started to push the door, the hinges beginning to stir at the impact. In just a few minutes, the door came apart, the lock breaking with a snap. Eliza stood at a distance, dressed in her servants’ attire, tear streaks on her face.

Alexander felt his heart breaking at the sight of her, but now that he was here, everything was going to be alright. She immediately rushed into his arms, spilling all that had happened from the dress to Victoria finding out about it.

“But, how did you know I was here?” she asked him, finally looking up into his eyes. She was beautiful, his heart throbbing at the sight of her.

“Lady Margaret told me, and I came to get you,” he sighed, slipping the mask away.

“George?” she backed away from him, shock written all over her face, “You are

George? What is happening?"

"Eliza, you must listen to me," he replied, taking her into his arms, "I am Alexander Blackwood."

Alexander watched as Eliza's eyes widened at the confession, realization dawning in them. In just a matter of a few seconds, he noticed how her expression changed entirely from confusion to shock to sweet relief, which flooded through the tear-streaked smile on her face.

He was delighted to have caused this reaction in her, his heart melting. This was exactly what he had hoped for, for him to reveal his identity at the right time, and there was no better time than now.

"My goodness. I should have known. You always seemed so familiar." She began to sob while Alexander held her in his arms, never wishing to let go. She slowly trailed her fingers over his face as if trying to tell herself how all of this was real. "Did you truly just come all the way back here to find me?"

"I did. I came to find you and instead found out how messed up the situation was. That was the reason I had to pretend to be George and meet you as the masked stranger. I was simply trying to rescue you and find information about the Russels to reveal their crimes. I wanted to reveal my identity so many times but saving you from these cruel people was more important."

"My goodness was it you who was sending me the gifts?" she asked, her eyes widening in surprise.

"How did you guess?" Alexander laughed, rather happy knowing how she had suddenly figured that out on her own.

“I have come to realize that I simply have one well-wisher, and that happens to be you. It has to be you because how else am I ever going to justify having a secret fairy godmother?”

“I asked my housekeeper to keep sending you gifts as your fairy godmother so you could have all the finest things in the world. I apologize for how those very gifts became the reason for getting you into trouble towards the end.” Eliza began to shake her head even before Alexander had stopped speaking.

“I just cannot believe that you went to such lengths for me, Alexander,” she sighed, still sobbing softly, “I must have truly done something right to have someone in my life who cared for me in such a way. I must thank you for all you have done.”

“It isn’t done yet, Eliza.” He tenderly rubbed his thumb over her smooth cheek, staring earnestly into her eyes. “You must come to the ballroom with me at once. We have to be there.”

“Alexander,” she whispered, running her hand over his cheek. “Why must we go there? I want to sit here with you and talk about everything that has happened and everything I do not know about you. I wish to relive all those past memories.”

“We have all our lives for that, my Eliza, but right now, the truth is more important. It is about time the Russels pay for everything they have done.”

“Can you really do it? How?” She looked afraid.

“Do you trust me, Eliza?”

“Completely.”

He extended his hand towards her, “Then simply come along with me. I promise you

everything is going to be alright.”

She quickly wiped her tears and gave her hand in his, the pair taking the normal staircase to return to the ball. Alexander slipped his mask back in place, wanting to keep his identity a secret for a little longer. As Eliza entered the ballroom, dressed in her servants’ dress, the music suddenly stopped as all eyes turned towards them. Despite the attention, Alexander was immensely proud to see how she stood tall beside him, bright and confident. He could see the shock on Lord and Lady Leicester’s faces as they saw Eliza enter, her hand clasped tightly in his.

“Beth!” Lady Leicester rushed forward, whispering angrily, “What on earth are you doing here? Leave immediately!”

“She is not going anywhere,” his mother chimed in from behind Lady Leicester, pushing her aside to come and stand in front of Eliza. “My darling Eliza.”

Before Alexander realized what was happening, his mother gathered Eliza in a hug in front of everyone at the ball, eerie silence surrounding them.

He knew how much the ton enjoyed gossip, and right now, almost everyone was confused about what was happening. He could sense the curiosity of the people, along with the horror on Lord and Lady Leicester’s faces.

“Why are you crying?” Eliza asked his mother, hugging her back.

“I am so sorry for everything, my dear. I should have come to save you earlier. I am so sorry,” his mother kept blubbing on, sobbing continuously.

“Mother, you must calm down,” he said, the two women finally parting.

Victoria and Margaret appeared on the scene as well, and Alexander could see the set

of papers in Margaret's hands. He knew it was the right time.

He slipped off his mask, Lord and Lady Leicester growing even angrier. However, he was well aware that they were powerless in front of the ton and would not be able to do anything about it.

"Hello, everyone," he directly addressed the ton, "I am Alexander Blackwood, the Earl of Eastwood. I have been hesitant to reveal my identity earlier for various reasons, but now I am aware it is the right time to do so because I have several other secrets to reveal about the Russel family."

"He does not know what he is saying, ladies and gentlemen," Lord Leicester tried to interrupt, but his voice faltered, showing his fear.

"Oh, but I do." Alexander smiled. "Lord and Lady Leicester came about this fortune after the death of Lord Leicester's cousin, the Duke of Grafton. However, he gained nothing but the country seat out of this, which is why he decided to take the duke's heir, Lady Eliza Gordon, and turn her into a servant so he could have complete control over her inheritance and her properties. They stripped her of her identity so no one would be able to find her and treated her cruelly, and that Lady Eliza Gordon is none other than the beautiful woman beside me."

The crowd erupted into loud whispers.

"You have no proof!" Lady Leicester shouted, coming to stand in front of Alexander.

"I do." Alexander looked at Margaret, who immediately stepped forward.

"I am Lady Margaret Russel, the daughter of Lord and Lady Russel, and I can testify that everything the earl is saying is fully honest. My father has been dipping into Eliza's inheritance, and here in my hands is the proof of it. It is the duke's will,

giving everything to Eliza and proof of bank accounts about how my father has been using money that does not belong to him. Moreover, living in this house, I have seen all of it myself, and it is about time my parents receive the punishment they deserve for their crimes.”

“In order to hide these very crimes, they planned to get Eliza married to Count Fife so he could write her inheritance to their name. Their story about Eliza being in France was fake since she has never set foot in France, and I happen to have proof about everything,” Alexander added, looking at the interested crowd.

The shock on everyone’s faces was enough to tell him they believed him.

“This is false. All of this is false,” Lady Leicester continued shouting, but no one paid her any heed.

Alexander watched patiently as the crowd only grew louder, people beginning to disperse one after the other. The guards he had called appeared on the scene, ready to take away Lord and Lady Leicester, but all Alexander was now worried about was Eliza.

The shock on her face was undeniable, and he knew he needed to talk to her. Without wasting another second, he quickly informed the guards about everything and took Eliza away to the gardens, knowing she needed some fresh air.

“Are you alright?” he asked her once they were outside.

“Just overwhelmed,” she finally looked at him, “did that truly just happen?”

“It did. It is only a matter of a few legal proceedings, and everything that is yours will once again belong to you. I promise.”

“Thank you, Alexander.” She began to sob, and he wiped her tears away. “I do not know how I will ever repay your debt.”

“You don’t have to, Eliza.” He smiled. “I would do anything for the woman I love.”

She looked up at him sharply, his declaration making her eyes go wide.

“You love me?”

“I am sorry for keeping the truth from you about my identity, and not telling you that I love you, but I simply needed everything to settle down before I could do such a thing. I loved you since the moment I first met you, Eliza, and I need your permission to court you once everything is settled properly.”

She laughed, placing a kiss on his knuckles. “I have always loved you too, Alexander. Both as George and as the masked man and now as Alexander. My Alexander. I would love to be courted and wooed by you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” She smiled at him, and Alexander knew everything in life was eventually going to be alright.

He had Eliza.

Chapter 20

Two months later ...

“Oh, Sarah, let it be,” Eliza quickly interjected, stopping the maid from pouring out the tea for her and Alexander. “I can do it myself.”

“But, My Lady?”

“I will do it. It’s alright.”

Eliza noticed how she looked at Alexander for permission, who also nodded. She finally left, leaving the two of them alone in the parlour. It had been two months since Eliza had been living this new life of hers, but it was still difficult for her to fully settle into it.

She often ended up doing things she was no longer expected to do, such as cleaning up after herself or pouring out her own tea. Despite that, she had nothing to complain about. Everything was great.

“I shall be the one to pour you tea, today,” Alexander said, immediately standing up.

“Oh, you must not. I can do it.”

He waved her away, and Eliza sat back down, staring at the man who was completely in love with her, and she with him. Now that things were better, the two of them had been courting properly, and Alexander took her out to parks and danced with her at

every ball.

He had arranged for her official debut in society, and since then, the invitations had not stopped. Eliza was finally living the dream, and Alexander was right there beside her.

“There you go.” He handed her a cup, resuming his seat beside her. “I actually came here today to give you news.”

“I hope everything is alright?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Lord and Lady Leicester, along with Lady Victoria and Henry, have finally left London. The allegations against them were proven right, and they are never to set foot in London again. Count Fife has also left London, and I have sent him a private warning to stay away for the rest of his life. Moreover, the earl is forced to pay back all the money he has taken from you.”

Eliza was surprised, still unsure if any of this was real.

“Margaret will be devastated,” she said, thinking about her cousin.

Aunt Beatrice had completely refused to own Margaret or take her with him, and Eliza had offered her to stay at the estate only.

Their relationship had finally improved, and the two of them were completely inseparable. Amelia, on the other hand, had apologized and resigned.

Ralph and Lara were no longer servants and lived with her as family; everything Eliza had wanted for them was finally coming true.

And it was all because of Alexander.

“She is going to be fine. She is a strong young lady,” Alexander said, placing his cup down.

“Are you alright?” he asked her, and Eliza nodded.

“Should we head out for our walk?” she asked him, still cherishing the walks they took in the woods every single day.

Alexander chuckled, standing up to give Eliza his hand as they made their way outside. Eliza knew life could not be any better than this. She had everything she could have ever asked for and more.

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Epilogue

A few months later ...

Using the light of the lantern, Eliza stepped out into the early winter morning, realizing how dark and cold it was. Despite that, she was looking forward to the stroll she was about to take.

She had only taken a few steps forward when her eyes fell on Alexander, who was waiting for her on the grounds.

“You are here.” He smiled, taking the lantern from her as he took her hand in his.

“Well, it is bad luck to see the bride on your wedding day, but nothing can bring bad luck to us.” Eliza laughed, making Alexander shake his head.

The two walked quietly in the early morning, climbing the hill where they had once before watched the sunrise together in summers past. Once they were settled comfortably, Eliza laid her head on Alexander’s shoulders, perfectly comfortable.

“Eliza,” he whispered her name, and she turned to look at him, “I love you.”

She breathed in deeply, “I love you too.”

Sensing his warm breath on her face, Eliza closed her eyes as Alexander’s lips touched hers, warm and inviting. The sun began to appear in the sky, brightening everything around them, the light and warmth making its way into Eliza’s body.

She looked into Alexander's russet eyes, unable to believe that in just a few short moments, the two of them would finally be married. It was everything she had ever wanted.

She couldn't wait to marry the man of her dreams.

Alexander stared at the woman before him, the white lace wedding gown making her look ethereal. He was glad they had decided to rush things and get married in winter rather than wait for an entire season to marry.

As he stared at her, faintly listening to the vicar making them repeat their vows, Alexander knew he needed to say something.

"Eliza," he whispered her name once the vicar stopped speaking.

"Yes?" she asked, appearing confused. Her eyes were glistening with both happiness and tears, as were his own.

"I am aware we have already said our vows, but I only wish to tell you that I love you more than words can explain. You are the sun, moon, stars, and skies for me. You are everything beautiful, wholly and completely mine, and I cannot wait to build a life with you. I cannot wait to share all my happiness and sadness with you. I can't wait to spend a lifetime with you and have a future together. I simply cannot wait to call you my wife every single day and make sure I make you the happiest woman in the world. I love you, Eliza. Thank you for being mine."

The tears running down her face, coupled with her smile, made Alexander tear up as well, but he did not care. He could see how the guests and the vicar were emotional, too.

“I love you too, Alexander. Thank you for rescuing me and coming into my life. I cannot wait to share this life with you, too.”

“With the power invested in me by God and the Church, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Alexander immediately scooped her into his arms, kissing her passionately. The crowd erupted into cheers around them, and the vicar presented them with the legal documents, which were to be signed. Both he and Eliza quickly signed, laughing together. They were married. He simply couldn't believe it.

“Now you can never escape me,” Alexander said, holding Eliza close.

“I wouldn't dream of it.”

They truly were made for each other.

THE END

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:34 pm

Viscount James Augustus Northwell stepped off the ship, shivering at the cold spray of the mist off the Thames against his back.

Even with his coat to shield him from the wind and rain, the nip of the dreary English weather in fall was a vastly different from what he'd become accustomed to in the Southern Colonies, the cities of India, and most recently, Africa.

His travels had shown him a much sunnier, more inviting climate, and returning to the drab grayness of London's fall was the last thing he would've chosen on his own.

He took a moment to gain his bearings. His legs wobbled on the solid ground after so many weeks at sea, and he wished he could get back on the ship and sail away, back to where he'd come from. Forcing his mind off the thought of running away, he looked up at the city of London, or, at least, the dingy dock area of it. This wasn't the worst dock on the Thames. Far from it. But no dock on the Thames was his preferred place to be.

Others traveling to London on the ship from Africa began to unload behind him. The sailors handed down luggage from the ship, and he spotted a porter collecting his to be loaded into whatever carriage came for him.

He'd sent word ahead that he would be coming, and he'd also had the ship's captain send a bird to inform those on land to send word to the Northwell home for a carriage. One would be waiting on the street, no doubt.

The porter spotted him and waved him over. "Viscount Northwell," the man said in the thick accent distinctive of the East End. "I have your luggage 'ere, Lord

Northwell. Top of the mornin' to you, by the by. 'Ow was the voyage?"

He smiled faintly, though he wanted to grimace at the shock of hearing the man refer to him as Viscount Northwell and the stark reminder the salutation carried that his parents were now dead and gone. "It was uneventful, thank you."

Despite the smile and polite words, something of his bleak mood must have slipped through. Either that or the press had spread the news of his parents' deaths in a distillery fire three months ago for all of London to read. Whatever the case, the porter was quieter after that.

"Just bring the luggage to the edge of the street," he told the porter. "I should have a carriage waiting with the Northwell crest on it. I trust you can manage?"

"Aye, Viscount Northwell. Been doin' this many years now, milord. Just you leave it to me." The porter picked up James's luggage and headed for the street.

James plucked a bag of his personal effects out of the luggage before the man could make it too far. "I'll carry this myself."

The little bag was too precious to lose. It had all of his botany journals and a packet of letters from his father. Neither were things he could easily replace. The thought of the letters was a fresh reminder of the open wound in his soul following his parents' deaths.

The bag contained the final letter he'd received regarding his parents three months ago. It had been a notice that they had died in the distillery fire and a request from his sister that he return home.

His family's attorney had sworn he would take over the family fortune and estate since there were no other heirs to do it.

The weight of that responsibility pressed on him. While he was not unhappy that his exile over something he hadn't done was now over, he was returning to a family whose name was in shambles thanks to the lies and rumors spread about him, and he had a great deal of work to do if he wanted to restore their honor.

He would bear not only his grief but also the curiosity and judgment of the ton regarding his return.

He moved along behind the porter to the street, examining the bustle of people and carriages as they went. It was so different, yet in other ways, so similar to the other major cities he'd visited in the last eight years.

It was cleaner than the cities in India and the little villages in Africa, but it was dingier and dirtier than some of the cities he had visited in the Colonies. It lacked the bright fall colors of New England, but it had the same bustle and hubbub of people.

As he stepped to the side of the street, scanning for his own carriage, a closed carriage rattled past, and an embroidered handkerchief escaped a crack in the window, flying free to tumble into the street. James hurried to snatch it up when it came to a stop at his feet and looked for where the carriage had gone.

The carriage was rumbling to a slow stop on the cobblestones just ahead of the porter, and James strode toward the carriage to return the woman's handkerchief. The window of the carriage opened just as he came to a standstill in front of it and lifted a gloved hand to knock.

He looked up into the angelic face of a woman whose striking appearance left him momentarily without words.

Her blonde curls were done up neatly, swept back into a soft chignon with ringlets that gently framed her face, and her soft blue eyes met his for a moment before her

full lips curled into a delicate smile.

“Is that my handkerchief, sir?” she asked, her voice sweet but strong enough to be heard over the chaos around them.

He held it up to her with an apologetic smile. “My apologies, my lady. Yes, I fetched it from the road when it fell and wished to return it to its rightful owner.”

She reached out and took it with delicate, lace-gloved fingers. His own fingers brushed her warm ones as he did so, and then the carriage jolted into motion again as the driver up front pulled the horse back out into the flow of carriages along the street.

James stared after it, trying to find his bearings. Such a gentle, sweet woman didn’t belong in such a dingy, dark place. Who had allowed her to come down here alone with that unmarked carriage? Certainly, no one who could afford a proper governess or chaperone for the young woman!

“Lord Northwell!” A man’s loud voice cut through his reverie and the noise of the crowded street.

He spun and found a valet waving to him from a carriage down the street just a little way. The porter was setting down his bags, and the valet, seeing that his call had been heard and his presence noted, turned to put them up in the carriage.

James made his way to the carriage and paid the porter for his help before climbing into his carriage. The carriage jerked and then rumbled into motion as soon as the valet had closed the door, and he was off, heading for the Northwell house and wondering what might await him there.

The family home sprawled across the front lawn of the Northwell estate just outside the inner boroughs of London.

His parents had owned a sizable house and a good bit of land for a city dwelling, but though the house was sprawling and had once been considered beautiful for its time, James couldn't help thinking it looked old and a bit ordinary.

It had no beautiful eaves or bright, crisp white siding. Instead, it was blocky and gray, like everything else in this city.

It was home now, though, and there was something to be said for the way the glittering frost from the morning chill gave it a sort of worn-out charm. Whatever the case, the place could certainly use some updates, and he would make them if there were funds to do so.

For now, his focus had to be on reintegrating into a household that had forgotten about him when his father sent him across the seas to get rid of the source of the family's scandal.

He helped his valet take the luggage inside while the carriage driver went to put the horses and carriage up, and he walked through the front door to silence.

Inside, servants stopped what they were doing to greet him with subdued murmurs and curtsies. None of them seemed happy to see him.

Looking up at the grand staircase in the entry hall, he wondered which bedroom would be his now. The master bedroom that had once been his parents' quarters? It felt wrong.

A woman appeared in the hall at the railing and began to descend the stairs, but she stopped to stare at him when she spotted him. With a start, James realized it was his

younger sister, Lily.

He hadn't seen her in so long, and she'd grown a great deal. Instead of the little girl he'd left behind, Lily had grown into a striking young woman who surely turned heads at any social event she might attend.

Did she recognize or even remember him? He'd kept in contact with his father and mother, though the contact had been sporadic. They hadn't wanted to send him away, though they'd been forced to it by the situation. He hadn't wanted to go, either.

But the whole scandal he'd been embroiled in when the young woman he'd been engaged to claimed he'd fathered a child with her had been too great to quiet no matter how his father tried. Leaving had been the only choice.

The moment between them hung awkwardly in the air. Lily didn't rush to him. After a moment, though, she greeted him with a curtsy. "Lord Northwell," she said, her voice carrying down the staircase.

Another woman, her hair graying and wrinkles around her pinched mouth, stepped into the upper hall and onto the staircase beside Lily. When she saw James, her mouth pinched even further. "You," she spat.

"Lily, I will be departing this moment now that this disreputable man has arrived. I am sorry that I cannot stay longer for your period of mourning and assist you in your dear mother's absence, but I simply cannot stay under the same roof as a man like your brother. I will return to my husband and the parsonage and pray for the Northwell household."

She came down the stairs, scowling at James as she approached. "I do hope you will repent before it is too late for your eternal soul, young man! And for your poor sister's sake, I hope you are ready to fulfill your duties as the man of the house."

Lily winced and turned away, her cheeks blooming with color.

James gritted his teeth and took a deep breath to calm himself. His Aunt Maria had always been a bit of a harridan, judging everyone who didn't live by her overly pious standards. Even her own sister, who had married up when she'd married James's father, had never been good enough.

"Aunt Maria," he said stiffly. "Thank you for caring for Lily. I am quite certain I can manage now in taking over as the man of the house."

Maria shook her head and looked up at Lily, who was slipping quietly away from the scene. "That poor, poor child! Think of the ruin of her future thanks to your foolish, wicked behavior. At least the woman you foisted a child off on has left the city!"

Upstairs, Lily froze in the hall. Her gaze darted to James as he felt heat creeping up into his cheeks. He held her gaze. Did she believe the same of him? Did she think he had fathered a child with his former fiancée and then abandoned her to deal with his bastard child alone? He couldn't blame her if she did.

Lily's cheeks flushed, and she looked away. "Please excuse me," she said before fleeing from the hall's landing.

His aunt harrumphed and shoved past him to the door. "God have mercy on this household with you in charge!"

The door slammed with an ominous boom behind her. The servants, who had been peering around doorways and corners, quickly disappeared, leaving him all alone in the house's large, empty entryway.

James closed his eyes and fought back the wave of despair and fury threatening to overwhelm him. Then he opened his eyes and headed upstairs. He wandered down

the empty halls with his luggage until he found the master wing where his parents had lived.

Staying in the main room didn't feel right, so he put his luggage in the large guest room that they'd kept for important family who deserved a place of honor in the home.

He would transform the old master bedroom into the new guest room later when he could bring himself to look it over and decide how to go about that.

He dropped onto the cold bed and stared forlornly out the window at the city beyond their grounds and the rain falling over the lawn now. The whole house felt barren and void without his parents here.

His stomach clenched in a mixture of anger over the past and fear for the future. Why had he come home at all? Traveling an unknown world to places that might be hospitable or hostile had never felt so dreadful or uncertain as coming home to a place he had known for most of his life.

Had he been better off before he'd known of their deaths, thinking that he was still disowned and exiled? Or would he be better off here when he'd settled and managed to escape the specters of the past that haunted these halls and his soul?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:34 pm

Lady Genevieve Stoneham folded her hands in her lap as she and her family sat in the silent, dim powder room of her mother's bedroom.

She fought the urge to race from the room as she, her mother, and her older sister, Katherine, waited to meet her betrothed, who was to arrive soon for dinner along with his sister and two nieces.

She'd seen Viscount Walter Goulding, heir to the Goulding estate, when his father, Walter Goulding Senior, the Earl of Aston, passed.

Timberdale had come many times at dinner at her family's home, much like tonight. But tonight, he was coming to discuss the date for the wedding. Gen had avoided thinking about the possibility of a date on their engagement's ending at the altar, but the time was here, and there was no more arguing over it.

Kate adjusted Gen's necklace where it rested against the cream-colored dress Gen wore, and Gen fought a shiver of disgust.

She was like a prize piece of meat, all dressed up to attract the highest bidder, and this dinner was her final hour before the slaughter would commence. A bit melodramatic? Yes, perhaps, but the way that Timberdale always looked at her, it felt like an apt description.

She began to chew on her lower lip as she stared at her pale complexion and freckles in the mirror.

"Genevieve," her mother chided. "Stop chewing on your lip. Lord Timberdale will

not want you if you appear to be damaged goods.”

She quit chewing on the lip, her heart pounding. It was always Timberdale would want this and Timberdale would want that. No one cared what she wanted. She had to do this because the family was in ruin, thanks to her father’s poor investments. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t her fault. She was the only unmarried child, so it was her duty to fix this. And so, she had agreed to marry Lord Timberdale when asked.

Instead of chewing on her lip, she began picking at the kerchief tucked away in her pocket.

It was the same one she’d almost lost earlier that day, the one her father had given her when she’d first been introduced to society a year ago before the financial ruin had hit and left them hanging on by a thread. She’d nearly lost it returning from her walk with Kate in the park.

Her mind wandered to the handsome man who had returned it to her. The man with wild black hair and piercing green eyes that she’d never seen on anyone before.

He’d looked like some god from the old myths she loved to read, emerging from the sea with the storm in his hair and the salt wind on his skin. The scent of salt from seawater had stung her nose as he’d handed back the kerchief, betraying the fact that he’d been at sea for some time.

If she could marry him instead of Lord Timberdale, what sort of life might she have? He was certainly far more fetching than Lord Timberdale, who was much older than her and was going bald early.

He’d been far more polite than Timberdale was, too, and he’d looked at her like he was star-struck instead of like he couldn’t wait to take what he wanted of her.

There was a knock at the door that startled her from her fantasies.

“Madam?” the head maid called through the door. “Lord Timberdale and his sister, Lady Chesterton, have arrived.”

Gen’s mother looked at her with a smile and squeezed her arm. “You will do perfectly tonight. Simply remember not to be too shy but to be quiet and polite. Timberdale wants a woman who can run his estate, not a frightened girl, but you must remember how he feels about women. They are to be seen, not heard.”

Kate cast her a sympathetic glance before she disappeared out the door. The family’s financial ruin wouldn’t touch her sisters. Her brother, Viscount Stephan Lakeshire, would suffer the most for this once her father was gone.

If she failed to secure this match, Stephan would be stuck trying to right his father’s investments and find a woman who would marry him even though there was nothing much left to inherit.

The thought of Stephan reminded Gen why she had to do this. She loved her older brother, who was both well-respected in society and a quiet, bookish sort like herself. The two of them had always gotten on well, and she didn’t want to see him ruined because her father had been tricked into bad business investments overseas in the newly formed United States.

Gen followed her mother downstairs to greet their guests. Her father was already there, fawning over Lord Timberdale with a simpering smile. They all knew their fortunes depended on him and the bank he and his father ran.

Behind Timberdale, his sister, Lady Chesterton, and her twin daughters, Sienna and Agnes Kent, stood looking at the room around them in disdain. Agnes actually stuck her nose up at a painting she spotted, sneering at it as if it had offended her sensibilities.

Forcing herself not to bite her lip, Gen stepped forward and plastered a smile onto her

lips. She curtsied to Lord Timberdale and Lady Chesterton and then smiled at the two girls.

The twins snickered behind their fans.

“She is terribly plain, is she not?” Agnes murmured just loudly enough that Gen could hear.

Gen’s cheeks flushed, and she glanced at Lady Chesterton. Wasn’t she going to correct her daughter’s behavior?

“She all but announces she is a pauper by the way she dresses, too,” Sienna added.

The blush grew warmer, and Gen took a step back, trying to hide the flinch that the words inspired.

Lady Chesterton smiled thinly at Gen. “Yes, rather true, Sienna. Agnes, we mustn’t blame the poor girl for her looks. She cannot help how she was born, now can she? How she dresses, however, is another matter altogether.”

Gen gritted her teeth and glanced at Timberdale. Surely he would step up and say something about their behavior? He might not care very much for her, but propriety ought to be upheld, and he couldn’t just stand by while his sister and nieces mocked his potential bride.

He didn’t say anything. His gaze trailed over her gown and frame, lingering far too long on the bodice of her dress and the low neckline her mother had insisted on. He looked at her like she was the piece of meat she’d felt like earlier, and her shoulders slumped a little.

Her title and status were all he wanted besides her body, and he didn’t make any secret of it. If she were to lose her title or the ton were to become aware of how bad

her father's financial situation was before the wedding, Timberdale would drop the engagement without hesitation.

Timberdale would never defend her because he didn't care. To him, she was only there to look pretty on his arm, like any woman he could have chosen for a bride. Seen but not heard.

The others could mock her as much as they wished, and he would never listen. He would never hear her because, to him, women were objects, not people.

Then a warm hand fell at the small of her back, and she looked behind her to find her brother, Stephan, standing behind her to offer his quiet support. She hadn't heard him ghost into the room. That was her brother, though. Quiet and unassuming unless the situation forced him to be otherwise.

He didn't tell Lady Chesterton or her daughters off for their behavior. It wasn't his way. He just stood beside her and offered the comfort of a friend's presence in this awful hour, and while it wasn't enough to fix the hurt, it did help to make it bearable.

At dinner, Gen sat quietly beside Kate, who took the place of the eldest married daughter beside their father near the head of the table. Stephan sat across from Kate since Kate's husband was not in attendance, and Timberdale sat beside him, leering at Gen from across the table.

On the other side of the table, Gen's mother presided at the opposite end of Gen's father and was doing her best to entertain Lady Chesterton in conversation. Agnes and Sienna were seated beside each other on Gen's right, and both were studiously ignoring her.

As they ate their first course, her father straightened in his chair and directed his

attention to Timberdale. “Lord Timberdale, how is Earl Aston? I had heard he was in rather poor health.”

Timberdale waved off the question. “Yes, rather poor. We expect him to recover eventually. The bank is doing very well, though. In fact, we are opening another branch near Norwich!”

Gen’s father, the Earl of Grendall, leaned forward with a smile. “Is that so?”

“Quite!”

Gen glanced over at Lady Chesterton, who sat beside her brother.

The older woman met her gaze with a sneer and leaned forward slightly to speak to Gen. “Do you think you will learn to better manage fortunes before you become responsible for my brother’s household?”

Gen flinched back, her cheeks burning. They had not hidden the dwindling of the Stoneham fortune from Timberdale or his family.

Even if they’d wished to, they couldn’t have because her father’s fortunes were invested in Earl Aston’s bank, and the Goulding family knew the state of their finances all too well. In fact, Earl Aston and Timberdale had only agreed to help mitigate her father’s debts to them on the condition that she marry Lord Timberdale.

Of course, Timberdale hadn’t seemed terribly thrilled about it. She suspected Earl Aston had been the one to state the condition since her family’s name had been in very high standing until recently.

The ton didn’t know the extent of their ruin yet, though they were speculating about the shift in social habits from the Stoneham family.

Rumor was not proven fact until it became a rumor that had backing, so for now, their reputation was still worth something. That was all that was holding Timberdale to her.

That and her father's promise that once he paid off his debts and got returns from his latest investments next year, they would be able to offer a dowry of a good sum in retrospect.

Timberdale was likely after the prestige and banking on her father's better fortunes in the new investment. If those things were lost, the engagement would be, too. Timberdale certainly wasn't marrying her because he liked her!

She glanced to her mother, Lady Francesca Grendall. Would she not say something to make Lady Chesterton step back into the expectations of good social graces? Her mother didn't look at her or Lady Chesterton, though.

Determined to move on and not let Lady Chesterton know how deeply the remark had hurt, she turned to the girls. If she married Timberdale as planned, they would be her nieces someday soon. "How are you two liking your studies?"

Sienna looked her up and down with a smirk before saying, "We like them well enough. Our tutors are the best money can afford, and I am certain they have left nothing lacking in our education."

"Yes, we expect to be presented to society in a few short years as very eligible matches." Agnes twirled one of her curls around a finger with a smirk that matched her sister's. "Were you a very eligible match when you were introduced to society, Gen?"

Gen clenched her hands in her lap, fury warring with anxiety.

She couldn't answer that. It was clearly intended to gain an impolite response from

her, so she kept her mouth shut and did her best to shove down the hurt at their unjust behavior. Just because she had less money than their mother and family didn't mean she was any less educated or eligible.

Her father stood and tapped his spoon gently to his glass to get everyone's attention.

"Now then, everyone! I know that tonight was a night to set a date for the wedding, but Lord Timberdale has requested that we give a little more time for that. He has also asked we continue to hold off on announcing the engagement to allow time for both parties to be certain of it, a request that Gen has also made. He and I have worked out the details for how it will be announced, Genevieve."

"But it will not be announced until Christmas?" Gen asked in a wavering voice.

Everyone around the table eyed her with disapproval. Too much was riding on this for such a request, but she wanted this time.

She didn't want a public engagement announcement out if there was any way to avoid this marriage after all. She couldn't bear to add more scandal to her family's name by breaking off the engagement if it were public already when their salvation came through other means.

Her father looked sad for a moment before he squared his shoulders and glanced at Timberdale. "That is acceptable to you still, is it not? Just so that you can get to know one another and adjust."

Timberdale straightened his jacket with his free hand, a smirk slipping onto his thin face. "Of course. If it will make my bride-to-be more comfortable, I can delay a formal announcement until Christmas, perhaps later if there is a need. But we will be married soon."

Timberdale paused and then grimaced. "My father has demanded that we set a date

for it before the New Year and that the marriage happen before next summer. If no date is set or the debt paid prior to his passing, he has sworn I will not inherit his title.”

There was a hesitation in everyone at the table as her father and mother tried to decide how to respond to the very rude mention of the family’s debts to the Goulding family bank and the pressure of potentially being the cause of another being harmed if the marriage didn’t happen.

Gen squirmed in her seat under Timberdale’s cold, dispassionate gaze and looked away. She didn’t want the pressure of knowing that not only her family’s fortunes, but also Timberdale’s, seemed to rest on this wedding happening soon.

Finally, her father plastered a smile onto his face and raised his glass a little higher. “To the engagement, then.”

Gen offered a weak smile as the family toasted their official engagement.

“And the date for the wedding?” her mother asked softly. “Has that been decided even tentatively, at least, given the circumstances, or has Lord Timberdale requested that be held off indefinitely?”

“Madam, I am most eager to marry your daughter,” Lord Timberdale said smoothly. “Most eager. If it were up to me, we would announce the engagement in a month or two, when she has had ample time to come to know me. The wedding would be by Christmas to secure your fortunes and mine.

However, Lady Genevieve has requested a long engagement to provide us time to come to know one another, and I am a patient man when I know that what is mine is secure. Once it has been publicly announced, we will wait only long enough for banns to be read. I expect the wedding should be possible only a month or two after Christmas.”

Gen shrank down in her seat, the promise of a speedy wedding after the formal announcement ringing in her ears like a death knell.

It wasn't that Timberdale was a monster to look at. It was that, even in their short time interacting tonight and the few other times he'd spoken to her before their engagement had been arranged, he'd proven himself a monster on the inside. She was being thrown to a wolf to save her family.

As much as she loved her family, she couldn't help the wave of helpless anger and frustration she felt that one of them couldn't do this duty instead so that she might be spared.

Dinner seemed to drag by, but at last, the Goulding family rose to depart. Timberdale rounded the table when it was time to bid her farewell and took her ungloved hand in his, lifting her knuckles to his lips. He pressed a dry kiss to her hand and then pulled back with an oily smile. "Until next time, my dear."

Gen took her hand back as quickly as she could without being impolite and watched them head to the front hall with her mother and father. She shivered, not bothering to suppress the urge to squirm now that Timberdale was gone. He might not be bad-looking, but he was repulsive all the same.

Kate stepped up beside her to watch them leave, too. "Are you all right?" she asked gently. "You look a little ill."

She shook her head, tears welling. "I hate him," she whispered. "Him and his dreadful sister and nieces. They treat me like I am chaff underfoot, and he does nothing. She is not even our social equal, and yet she looks down on me.

As for Timberdale, he looks at me like I am only his means to satisfying his lusts and his desire to inherit, not a woman he means to treasure, and I do not know how I am going to do this. I know I must, but with Timberdale? Is there truly no other way?"

Kate pulled her into a hug with a sigh. “Oh, Gen...I hate that this is the man you are to marry. I should have made you a better match, but I could not find anyone else who would come up to scratch for what we could offer him. I am so very sorry...”

Gen hugged her sister back. It wasn't Kate's fault. She'd played matchmaker to the best of her ability considering the situation, and Timberdale would save them, even if it wasn't ideal.

“I forgive you the inability to do better.” She laughed a little. “Not all of us can marry for love, after all, though I begin to wonder if any such thing exists these days. But I know you did your best, Kate, and I do not blame you for him. It is Timberdale I blame for his despicable manners and allowing his sister and her dreadful nieces to behave thus.”

Kate hugged her a little more tightly. “Perhaps you will win him over, and he will fall in love with more than your angelic appearance, little sister.”

“Miracles do happen at Christmas,” she murmured.

But deep down, she doubted those words. Did she really think a miracle could happen for her and with Timberdale, of all people? Did love really exist at all in a world of marriages arranged to save a family fortune?