



# The Wallflower and the Duke (Revenge of the Wallflowers #34)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** He's haunted by the past. She's ready to reclaim her future. Together, they'll rediscover a love neither could forget...

Marjorie Merryweather has always been the quiet wallflower, content to hide in the shadows of society. But after a scheming viscount steals her novel and threatens her livelihood, Marjorie takes refuge with the one man she thought she'd never see again—the Duke of Abinger.

Once her closest friend, Alfred Lockhart has withdrawn from the world after a tragic accident left him battling his own demons. But Marjorie's return stirs a longing he's harbored for years—feelings he's kept hidden, even from himself.

In the quiet solitude of his estate, old feelings reignite. Alfie has never stopped loving Marjorie, and as their connection deepens, she begins to realize that her feelings for him run deeper than friendship. But as passion flares, so do the ghosts of the past. Marjorie must decide if her heart can risk falling for the man she's always trusted, and Alfie must confront whether he can truly be the man she deserves.

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# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

London, 1814

Marjorie's best ideas came in the thick of the night.

Stealing away from her parents' party with the Viscount Chadwick probably wasn't going to be considered one of them.

Still, she stifled a giggle and dashed down the darkened hallway as all six feet of the handsome man lumbered forward in a crooked mask to match the grin on his face.

"Slow down, Margie."

She frowned. She hated that name. Almost as much as she hated someone telling her what to do.

"Ssh , we'll be caught if you don't hurry up."

With a quick glance down the hallway, she leaned against her bedchamber door, her heart thudding in her chest. She was lovestruck, clearly, to ever permit this. Her bedroom was her sanctuary, even while her parents threw another one of their legendary parties.

Actors and actresses, clowns and monkeys, sheiks and Russian czars—the guest lists were almost as unbelievable as her lack of judgment right now. She was a wallflower, not someone who would consider a reckless dalliance with a charming lord.

But this lord?

Maybe she could make an exception.

“What’s the harm in it when we are to be married?” he asked, backing her up against the door and leaning down as if to kiss her.

Marjorie made a small squeak in the back of her throat and opened the door, spinning to give them space.

“Well?” she asked, standing inside her darkened bedchamber. She was thankful he couldn’t see the blush burning on the apples of her cheeks. “You keep telling me about this wedding of ours, but you’ve failed to ask me—or my father, for that matter.”

He tipped his head up slightly, gazing down at her. Even in the dim firelight, his brown eyes burned her.

“You know I must sort things out with the estate first.”

She balled her fists, fighting back the stab of jealousy blooming in her chest. The damn man loved his family’s crumbling home more than her. That must be it, otherwise she couldn’t think of a good enough reason why he would continue courting her secretly these past two years.

“Percy,” she warned. Marjorie reached out and grasped his hand, hauling him into her bedchamber and peeking out into the hall before closing the door shut.

They might have escaped for now, but she didn’t know for how long.

“Why are you here?” she finally asked as the silence stretched between them.

He shrugged, fussing with his mask.

Please, keep it on. Please.

Too late. With one swift tug, he removed his mask, and she swore all her usual stony defenses crumbled.

“You were tired of the party. Asked to retreat to some place quiet. I am, as always, here to do as you wish, you sweet wallflower.”

She objected to that nickname as well but kept it to herself.

Just because she preferred her room to the chaos of growing up in the famous Merryweather acting family didn’t change the fact it was also necessary to protect her secret.

Miss Marjorie Merryweather, daughter, twin, and yes, wallflower—was also a successful gothic novelist. For three years, she published under a male pseudonym, fearful of the fallout if anyone ever discovered the truth.

But she would need to tell Percy if they were to be married.

She was sick of spending hours locked away in her room until her fingers were stained black and her eyes bleary from lack of sleep, pretending as if she were living her most exciting adventure with no one else to tell.

First her career, then Percy. Too many secrets.

“I must tell you something,” she said, swallowing down her nerves.

He would understand. He wouldn’t reject her for this. Percy was a man of words, his

nose always stuck in a book. It was part of the reason why the family estate was crumbling. He much preferred books and poetry, and she thought their souls might understand one another.

Twin flames.

Percy tilted his head, scrubbing his hand through his golden blond hair and brushing it back. She loved how he smelled of ink and wine and books. It was almost sacred, a call home as it were.

“Can I tell you one?” he asked.

She clasped her hands and backed away, shaking her head. He didn’t need to say a word for her to understand what he wanted to share.

“Please, kiss me, Margie.”

“You haven’t proposed,” she squeaked out. “And I am not?—”

“Do you want me to? You need me to perform a romantic speech, or do I keep it strictly business? Do you want me to tell you how you’ve driven me mad since the moment I spotted you across that crowded salon?—”

“I was writing. I didn’t see you for half the night.”

He nodded, taking a large step forward. “You and your ink-covered hands. You silly woman. Don’t you understand?”

She shook her head, this time remaining still, refusing to retreat even as her pulse drummed in her ears.

“Allow me to kiss you. Tell me you will wait for me.”

Marjorie couldn't think. Couldn't hear past her heart as he stepped closer, and she reached out for his vest, gingerly laying her hands upon him.

He ducked down to kiss her, and she closed her eyes before stepping to the side.

“I write. I'm a writer.”

He groaned, tossing his head up toward the ceiling. “Yes, I know you love to write your little stories.”

“No,” she cleared her throat, holding her hand out to stall his advance. “I am an author. A published author.”

His head snapped to hers. “Published?”

She ignored the way the tiny hairs on her arms stood up as gooseflesh broke out over her skin. Marjorie pushed past the sour taste in her mouth and spun, marching to her desk to grab a copy of her latest published work, then shoved it in his hands.

Percy squinted, holding the book gingerly, first opening the cover, then flipping it over to examine it.

“It's a whole novel, I promise. Nothing untoward.”

“Published,” he repeated. “Like M. E. Gastrell? I love his novels.”

“Percy.” She reached out and grabbed her novel, suddenly wishing to use it as a shield between herself and her maybe someday soon betrothed. “I am M. E. Gastrell. That is what I must tell you.”

He tossed his head back and guffawed before bending in half and placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath. She was of half a mind to whack him over the head then with her novel. There was nothing funny about this secret.

“If you laughing sees me ruined...”

He glanced up and grinned. “You’re worried about some actress finding us? What will happen, Margie, when your parents discover you are a famous Gothic novelist? What then?” He stood and stretched his hand out, still chuckling as if stuck in disbelief. “Better yet, what of the on-dits ? Marjorie Merryweather, the strange little wallflower who parades around the countryside talking to her raven?—”

“Hey now,” she bristled. “You can leave Benny out of this.” Had he called her strange?

Marjorie returned her book to her desk and crossed her arms, frustrated she had only moments before she thought she would kiss Percy. Now, she not only regretted ever telling him her secrets, she also didn’t want to kiss him.

“You should return before anyone notices you are gone,” she said diplomatically, pointing toward the door. “Do not tell a soul about my secret, so help me?—”

“I want you to be my wife, pet.” He reached for her, but she remained still, assessing him. “Are you working on another manuscript right now?” he asked, leaning around her to the stack of paper on her desk.

She shuffled her feet, foolish as it may be to attempt to block his view. “Good evening, Percy.”

“Will you let me read it?”

“Will you ask me to be your wife, or must we continue parading around London with this secret of ours?”

“You seem to be very good at keeping them.”

“I hope you can be as well.”

“One kiss?”

A kiss? A kiss after calling her strange and laughing at her while she revealed the biggest part of herself to him?

“Not tonight, Percy.”

With a large sigh, he shrugged his shoulders and slipped out of her room. She remained behind, ready to have her maid help her undress for the evening, when she spotted his mask on the floor. She picked it up, standing there with its weight in her palm, before folding it up and tucking it into the drawer of her desk.

### CHAPTER 1

#### Two Years Later

Marjorie waited in the carriage as the crowd filed into the auditorium. Like any true wallflower, she didn't love crowds. But it was more than that.

Percy was reading this evening.

The viscount was suddenly a sensation. All of London was abuzz about his gothic novel. Marjorie couldn't bring herself to read it. Thinking of all the time they spent discussing ideas and themes, when ultimately, he vanished on her. She had allowed him into her room one more time. This time, losing her virtue in the process, then her betrothed.

At first, the excuses seemed logical enough. He was busy with the estate. He wanted to focus so they could be married. But then his letters stopped, and her attention toward securing his began to reek of desperation, and she hated it.

Very well. She was now a bitter, ruined woman. And perhaps it was a bit self-serving, but she couldn't fight her curiosity any longer. It had been eight long months since they had last seen one another. And it was awkward at that. She had been forced to go shopping with her mother on Bond Street, and Percy had caught her bonnet, which had accidentally blown off her head. He hadn't even looked her in the eyes when he returned it.

Marjorie clenched her fists, spotting her dear friend Lady Georgiana waiting outside

of the auditorium, nervously searching the crowd for her with dark chestnut eyes.

Gray clouds hung low in the September sky, threatening a shower at any moment. With a deep sigh, she finally slipped out of the carriage and crossed the busy street, happy to see at least one friendly face.

“Georgie, it’s so nice to see you. Thank you for coming.”

“Of course, Marjorie.”

Lady Georgiana, much like Marjorie, enjoyed the written word and hated crowds. Her friend was painfully soft-spoken and just as meek. And where Marjorie often sought refuge from her parents and their ridiculous parties, Georgie sought to escape her father and older brother. Both men had a terrible reputation in London as of late, and it was well-known their estate was in shambles. Georgie quietly mused to Marjorie that she would be pleased to be made a spinster at their hands if it didn’t mean remaining with them until she landed in a workhouse.

Marjorie slipped her hand through her friend’s arm, sensing her unease, and steered her into the crowded building. The space fell into an excited hush, as if filled with busy worker bees, waiting for the queen.

Suddenly, the viscount was the prodigal son of London. Everyone adored him, and the idea that they were ever to be married was nothing more than sweet-whispered nothings.

She was firmly a wallflower with no chance of ever catching the eye of another. And while it hurt to admit it, she longed for love. It was ironic, considering a woman in her circumstance didn’t need a man. She made a living by her pen.

Or had.

Her last novel, released three months prior, was the first to fail to reach any sort of acclaim. She knew she could do better. And now she must if she were ever to compete with the viscount. Unlike him, she wasn't able to do public appearances. She relied on reviews and readers recommending her work to others. She was forced to hide behind a male name.

She swallowed and averted her eyes as she made her way inside, quickly nodding her hellos to anyone who addressed her. The tips of her fingers were strikingly cold as she entered, setting eyes on the viscount laughing with a group of his friends.

"What a turn out," Georgie whispered beside her. "I knew Percy wrote, but I had no idea his talent would warrant this." She waved her hand around, then snapped it to her side to hide the large rip by her thumb. "I've been meaning to mend that."

"I might have a pair for you. To lend you, I mean..." Marjorie was careful never to imply Georgie needed anything. As kind and sweet as she was, she was also prideful and saw it as her position within the household to care for her older brother and her father, the Marquess of Quintrell, after her mother passed away five years earlier.

Her heart fluttered in her chest like it always had when he was near. Annoying as it was now.

Once he had chased her, begging for a kiss. Once, she had given in to temptation and shared her bed with him. It was such an intimate knowing to suddenly find yourself strangers.

He quickly cut her with a sweeping glance before continuing his conversation. Barely even a pause. Nothing.

The man she had foolishly loved for nearly three years. Even when he had disappeared after their night together, she hadn't relinquished hope.

Then she spotted her sitting in the front row. Miss Ellen Somerset, preening and gossiping with the other debutantes.

Hope died the moment Marjorie read the gossip rags to discover the newly celebrated viscount was courting the diamond of the Season. There was no way she could compete with the likes of Ellen.

“Miss Merryweather, are your parents accompanying you this evening?” an elderly gentleman asked. She shook her head, too upset to speak just then. Instead, she waved behind her, motioning to her lady’s maid following close behind. “And Lady Georg?—”

“Very well. Have a seat. The viscount is about to begin.”

In the countryside, she might run wild, but in London she still strived to be perceived as palatable. Wallflower or not, she still had a desire to be married one day.

“Thank you. Lady Georgiana was kind enough to attend with me,” she said, softer than she would have liked. She didn’t care to be talked over or barked at. And she couldn’t in good conscience allow him to dismiss her friend so easily.

“It’s fine,” Georgie whispered, her cheeks now matching the strawberry-blonde locks pulled harshly beneath a short silk bonnet of faded ink blue.

Georgie grabbed a program and sat, tugging on Marjorie’s hand until she was seated. She promptly removed her fan from her reticule to hide behind as Percy made his way to the podium.

“Good evening,” the older gentleman said with a smile. “What an honor. What an honor, indeed. Please have a seat.”

Another man, shorter and nearly bald, stood next and introduced the viscount. Marjorie only rolled her eyes three times before he returned and opened his novel.

He cleared his throat, flashing a quick glance in her direction. She felt a blush burn her cheeks and pulled her attention away.

“I’ll be reading tonight from my novel, *The Cursed Bride of Hollow Hill* . In this chapter, the dastardly villain has kidnapped the heroine, but they are set upon by some highwaymen, and... Well, I don’t wish to ruin it for anyone. I will only say... nothing is as it seems.”

Percy stood before everyone, calm and confident, and his voice was perfectly steady, as though he had practiced for months.

But that didn’t account for the way Marjorie’s stomach twisted, or the sour taste in her mouth, or the way she could finish his sentences before he finished.

No, she wasn’t a mind reader, though that might be more believable.

Marjorie had set the manuscript aside two years prior, frustrated with a needling plot point, and fell in love with her current novel.

Set aside, on her desk.

She dropped her fan, certain she might either scream or faint. But her body remained frozen, sitting as she should as she listened to the viscount read her book to a large, hungry crowd.

Her words claimed as his in front of all of London.

Percy had stolen her manuscript. All her work, now his.

And while she sat there, struck, and the world whirled around her, he couldn't find it within himself to even acknowledge her.

No, no, no.

“Marjorie?”

Georgie's concern rang in her ears, but she couldn't speak. Couldn't...

“Marjorie, dear, are you quite sure you are well?”

No, she was certain she was struck mad because as she glared at him from her seat, she vowed she would have her revenge, but first she needed help.

There was no time to waste. She left the next morning for the country.

\* \* \*

Fluent in five languages. Versed well in the classics. And particularly excellent at grasping mathematical concepts. The education befitting of a duke, certainly.

Alfie excelled at each discipline. But that didn't explain why he couldn't turn the handle to his bedchamber to exit to the hallway.

He stood there, shoulders slumped, scratching the dark scruff on his jaw. Puzzled.

It was only the hallway to his childhood home. He knew what lay beyond. There were no surprises lurking. There was no one else in residence beyond his valet and the rest of the house staff. But he couldn't find it within himself to turn that knob.

He dragged in a breath, feeling the icy dread creep up his spine as his heart began

drumming in his ears.

Every. Time.

He released the doorknob and spun, collapsing against the door, then sliding to the floor into a heap. He clutched his head and rocked, waiting for the worst of it to subside. Certain he was going mad.

Imagine that—the new Duke of Abinger deemed unfit to take on the title and all the responsibilities. He couldn't hide away forever.

Over a year since he had returned. A year since he had left to find his younger brother, who had been declared missing after fighting the French. And what had Alfie succeeded at? He discovered his brother's body at Waterloo. Was then himself severely injured in a carriage accident and finally returned to bury his father. All in four short months.

And since then, that doorknob stood between him and the rest of England.

Damn it.

His hand shook as he bent in half, breathing in and out, trying his best to stay present. But even after all this time, it was never easy.

There had been so much blood. And the noise. Christ, the noise.

His heart rattled against his chest, and he wasn't sure now if he was crying or screaming—or if those were memories as well—when suddenly a gust of wind licked the side of his face, and he snapped to attention.

A figure crawled through the window, hooking a leg over the ledge before pulling

themselves through. After the accident, his long limbs weren't as fast. He was all gangly and awkward, like he was back in Eton again, but that didn't stop Alfie from reaching beside him and hurling a book across the room at the figure.

"Ouch, Alfie!"

Of course. He hadn't seen her in three years, but Marjorie Merryweather was still well on her way to seeing him to an early grave. He forced himself up and strode across his room, where he stood above the figure of his neighbor, the girl next door, collapsed on the floor, rubbing her head.

"There are doors for a reason."

Even though he wished to bend down and examine her head, he remained still.

"Yes, but the butler told me you weren't accepting visitors. Seeing as I need?—"

"A letter then."

She sat up and frowned. "You haven't replied to that stack." Marjorie pointed to the enormous stack of letters gathered in a bin on his desk. "Too much to do?"

Well, it wasn't as though he needed to explain himself to her. So, he wouldn't.

"Did I hurt you?" He clenched his fists at his side to stop himself from touching her as he slowly inhaled. Alfie wasn't sure he was quite himself yet. He didn't trust himself to be around her. He couldn't live with himself if he hurt her. "I apologize."

Marjorie was tall and slender, with large dark brown eyes and Brunette hair. She had always considered herself plain. Alfie had long considered her to be the most beautiful woman in the world. But alas, she had kept the desires of her heart a close

secret. And his parents made it clear he was never to pursue a relationship with any Merryweather, having a strong distaste for the acting family.

She reached out for his hand, and he hesitated before turning his palm over for her to grab. He pretended as if he didn't notice it trembling. And he could tell she did as well. He hated her a little for it.

Three years .

He pressed his lips together, careful to mask his surprise.

She grimaced as he helped to haul her to her feet. She sprang forward, nearly colliding with him, and without thinking, he reached behind her and steadied her with his free hand at her waist.

“Hello, Alfie,” she said, blinking up at him.

Deep brown eyes, dark and full of mysteries. They were hard to miss when she wore her favorite color—peacock teal.

He might have been in hell since they last saw each other but hearing her voice? Smelling her perfume? After she left, he would be a man punished all over again. He was holding the one woman in England his parents had forbidden him to court.

The only woman he had ever loved.

“Hello, Marjorie.” He was careful not to smile, or maybe he was too distracted. He couldn't help but fall into her kind eyes then, wishing to kiss her.

Christ, how he had dreamt of it all these years.

Instead, she broke out of her reverie and laughed, shaking her head from side to side before stepping out of his touch.

“I forgot I’m mad at you.”

“How? I haven’t seen you.”

“Precisely.” She clasped her hands behind her back and turned to survey his room. “The butler told me you aren’t accepting visitors. When I pressed, he admitted you haven’t left your rooms.”

Well, that would be a discussion for later.

“Did you know my mother was away? Or have you grown brave?”

She scoffed, sitting down on the chaise drenched in morning sunshine. “I’m not afraid of your mother.”

He snickered at her eye roll. They both knew she was terrified of the formidable duchess. The woman had made it her mission in life to keep Alfie away from Marjorie once she discovered their budding friendship.

No Merryweather will ever become duchess , she had coldly declared.

But Alfie was duke now, and if he could find it within himself to leave these damn rooms, he might have a word or two with his mother regarding who he could or could not marry.

Alfie shuffled forward and grabbed the teapot off the silver tray resting on the brocade ottoman. He poured her a cup of tea and added a pinch of sugar, just like she preferred, and handed it to Marjorie.

The light washed over her, and he noticed her eyes were swollen.

“Have you been crying?”

“Are you going to continue ignoring my questions?”

“What questions?”

She looked down at her teacup as if to hide the smile at the corner of her lips. He loved these small moments between them, the ones suggesting there was a private jest between them. A shared intimacy.

He didn't want her here. Not really. Definitely not when he was out of sorts.

“Why are you here?” he asked instead of answering. “In my rooms, alone. That is risky, even for you.”

“Don't send me away. I need your help, Alfie.”

### CHAPTER 2

He made her a cup of tea without asking how she would like it. He just knew .

It made her chest ache all the same as he stepped in front of her, blocking the morning light as he stared down at her.

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“That’s funny, given your...”

“Well, it has to do with that.”

His thick eyebrows rose in confirmation. Alfie was her oldest friend in this world, the duke next door. And for years now, they were forced to keep their friendship a secret.

It wasn’t the only secret.

He turned and made himself a cup of tea. She swallowed, realizing she had been staring at him. His dark hair stood up this way and that, his curls unruly. And his usually sharp jawline was covered in dark stubble. And yet, he was handsome.

There had always been something magical about Alfie.

She turned, draping her arm over the chaise and tilting her head toward the sun. Why hadn’t he answered any of her letters in all these years? He must help her. She had no one else. Her parents certainly wouldn’t.

“A manuscript of mine was stolen.”

Alfie stopped stirring his tea, then gently placed it down.

“And was published under a different name,” she continued.

“Not M. E. Gastrell?”

“No, Lord Chadwick actually.”

For a moment, the room fell silent, but Marjorie could practically feel the air swell around her. She reluctantly opened her eyes to find him standing in front of her. Then he bent down, the light striking his face just so, and she discovered a scar by his temple that was new.

She reached up to touch it, then snatched her hand away.

“France,” he said matter-of-factly before his eyes darkened. He nearly growled. “He stole your manuscript, then published it as his own?”

She nodded, focused on his lips. So close. She hadn’t really ever considered kissing him before. Friends didn’t kiss. So why suddenly was that all she wished to do?

“I attended a salon in London where he was reading. I went...” She blushed, too embarrassed to admit she had missed the viscount. “Everyone in London has been buzzing about the new book. And I sat there and listened as he read my words back to me. I couldn’t say anything. I was too afraid. Too angry...”

Tears burned her eyes, the rest of her words catching in her throat. Rage had coursed through her then, but she was too tired now. She was left only bitter.

And set on revenge.

Alfie leaned forward, closing the space between them, and wiped her tears away with the pad of his thumb. Such a soft touch.

“And you came back for me?”

She nodded, pressing her face into his palm, feeling as if she could breathe for the first time since walking into that salon.

“I’ve no one else, Alfie. And you are the only other person who knows the truth. I’m not sure I can do anything. I don’t...”

Five years ago, Marjorie had happened upon Alfie fishing in the river by her estate. She had been out walking, stuck on her manuscript, and the truth had spilled out when he asked her what she was doing. She hadn’t a reservation then and didn’t now.

She sat up, pulling herself from her trance, and wiped her own tears. “I won’t cry over him. I won’t.”

“He’s a blackguard. Always has been.”

“I suppose you wish to tell me you told me so?”

“No, I’m not interested in being righteous. I want to be your friend. I’ve always been your friend.”

The small hitch in his voice didn’t escape her notice. Nor the way her heart had raced when he had pressed his thumb to her cheek. Such a small, stolen touch born out of nothing else but earnest concern.

“My friend,” she repeated, but even she wasn’t sure at the moment. What a strange feeling that had swept over her upon seeing him after all these years. “Why haven’t you written back?”

He straightened, turning for his tea and strolling to the window.

In the time since she’d shared her secret with Alfie, they’d written one another, conveniently using her pseudonym, so even if she was away in London or he was away at school, they were in communication. And his parents wouldn’t know.

She didn’t take his parents’ dislike toward her personally. She understood being a part of the Merryweather family came with certain... limitations. Yes, she enjoyed a comfortable life because of her parents’ acting careers, but she was never accepted by the ton. Her father had purchased the estate next to Alfie’s ancestral seat, but it by no means made him a member of the peerage. He was the son of an Irish traveler who spent his childhood performing for others. It wasn’t until her father met her mother in a West End production that he first caught the discerning eyes of the London critics.

“We didn’t part on the best of terms, did we?”

She glanced around his room, at the careful stacks of books, the way his favorite armchair was beginning to show wear on the arms, and the potted plants dotted along the way. Then there were the statues and the paintings and the tall ceilings stretching up to her favorite part of all—a beautiful fresco of a summer sunset over the large park of Hollyvale.

All of it familiar and all of it a memory. Crawling into his window was like falling into a dream. And still, that did not explain the way her heart seemed to crack gazing upon him.

“No, but it doesn’t explain why you...” She stopped.

He had left for France.

“You came here for a reason.”

She sighed, feeling them push closer to the precipice. Closer to why they had ended their friendship. The truth always weighed more than the lies, and it pressed heavy against her chest now.

“I will not let him succeed because of my hard work.” She draped herself across the chaise and stared up at the ceiling, losing herself to another possibility. Another summer, long gone now.

“And you shouldn’t. So, what have you decided? Death by a thousand paper cuts?”

“Not an efficient use of my time when I have another manuscript due soon.”

She groaned, slamming her eyes shut and allowing the blood to flow to her head as she shifted, hanging upside down.

A manuscript she was already behind on before her discovery. Now? She felt like a fraud.

“Why don’t you write to him and tell him you know the truth?”

She lifted herself back to sitting upright as the room spun around her.

“You know the viscount well enough to recognize he will deny it.”

A bitter grin pulled at his mouth. The very sight of it turned her stomach sour. And just as quickly, it disappeared. “Yes, I know the viscount. But he wasn’t the one who asked you to be his wife. I did.”

\* \* \*

He shouldn't have said it, but the words poured out of him after being trapped inside for years. And maybe it was because he was stuck in this damn room and was an arse, but his usually fine manners lapsed for a moment.

She had been in love with one of his best mates from Eton, and Alfie had been in love with her since he saw her reading a book in the large oak by the river one summer day when she was ten and he was twelve. Her long brown hair had cascaded down her waist, and she'd been eating a peach.

He had made an upsetting discovery that day—he could be jealous of a piece of fruit.

She had grinned down at him, happy to discuss the merits of Aristotle, and they had spent the afternoon together walking along the wall dividing their respective estates.

“You are in love with him,” he corrected himself as her shock registered.

“Well, not now.” She threw her arms up into the air frustrated. “And certainly not when he left me the way he did.”

Marjorie Merryweather should come with a warning. Or maybe he was just in need of a reminder that no beautiful woman would climb into one's bedchamber window without a catch.

“The two of you are excellent at many things. One is ignoring my letters and pretending I do not exist. Easy, I know. I'm a wallflower with perpetually ink-stained hands who writes what the voices in her head tell her to.”

He placed his teacup down, careful not to toss it to the floor, then strode over to his dearest friend in the world. The very woman he had thought of night and day since

leaving her, even after she broke his heart. Alfie sat beside her, fighting the urge to scoop her up in his arms.

He was still mad at her, wasn't he?

“Let me be clear. Percy loves no one but himself. His actions are no reflection of you and your worth. You are...”

“Frustrating, terrible.” She sniffed back a few tears. “Pig-headed, odd, shy?—”

“Stop.”

She glanced up at him. Her gaze lingered on his lips before finally meeting his eyes. Brown wasn't the right word to describe them. They were nearly obsidian. Dark like the wet earth she loved to trudge over just so she could pluck a handful of wildflowers after a rainstorm.

“Pig-headed maybe, but I object to the rest. For someone who is a skilled wordsmith such as yourself, you are lacking some fitting descriptors.”

“Do you have suggestions?”

He reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Are you flirting with me, Jo?”

“Aren't you?”

Clever girl.

His heart was a traitor, no matter how much he knew logically she didn't love him.

“You’re magnificent, skilled, courageous, kind. But that is only the beginning. You are the damn sunshine, even hidden behind the clouds. You are there shining, unwavering in your passion. And to hell with anyone who doesn’t see it.”

“That’s most of London,” she quipped.

“No, I won’t allow you to do that any longer either.”

She rolled her eyes, attempting to brush off his attention.

“If others can’t speak kindly of you, then at least speak kindly to yourself.”

“Alfie, I need your help,” she whispered. “ Please . Hate me all you wish.”

“I never hated you.”

“I let you down.”

“You followed your heart. I can’t fault you for that.”

“And look at the good it has brought me.”

It brought you to me , he thought to say, but he couldn’t. Instead, he stood once more and forced himself away from her, slowly rebuilding the wall that distanced his heart from hers. Yes, she broke his heart, but they had been young, and it had been foolish to believe they could have run away to be married. He had admired his father too much to have ever gone up against his wishes.

But now?

That temptation tugged at his chest. He could spin around and pull her to him and

kiss her, well and thoroughly, until she was left breathless. He needed her to understand the way he was desperate for her.

The truth was more important.

“I’m not sure how I can help you when I can’t help myself. I can’t leave this room, love.”

Marjorie scoffed as though she believed him to be making a jest. He swallowed the lump in his throat, worried the panic would begin creeping up his spine once more until he was frozen, and terror swept over him.

“I can’t begin to imagine what you’ve been through. I wrote but?—”

“I wasn’t ready to put it into words. Nothing prepares you. Harry was missing, and I couldn’t stand my parents’ misery at the news. I was on my way home with his body when I had my own accident.” He paused, sighing as everything within began to tense. “I woke up in France, not far from Waterloo as men screamed and were dying, and I thought I would too. But life wasn’t kind enough for that.”

“And you admonish me for speaking ill of myself? Don’t say such things, Alfie.”

“It’s been hell.”

“I believe you. But you’re here. You’ve come back, and I am so happy for it.”

Because she needed his help. Because his best friend, the man she admittedly loved, had been a cad and stolen her work. Because she knew he would help because he was still as hopelessly and recklessly in love with her as he had been as a schoolboy.

Alfie folded his arms and turned his attention to the rear park of Hollyvale Manor.

“What is this grand scheme of yours?” he asked at last.

“I want to go to London and make a scene. I want everyone to know he stole my manuscript.”

“Doing that may mean your true identity will be revealed. Are you willing to risk everything for one book?”

By some miracle, he didn't turn as he heard her step closer, didn't reach for her when she stood beside him, didn't dare draw the back of his fist against her soft as silk cheek, or stare overly long at her perfect rose lips.

He remained still, watching over his estate, pretending as if he weren't a prisoner to his own mind, stuck in this room, and feet away from the one woman he would do anything for.

But could he help her now?

### CHAPTER 3

Marjorie awoke the next morning in her bedchamber to the faint sound of tapping against glass. She smiled to herself, sprang out of bed, and threw open the window as her raven flew in and perched beside her desk.

“Hello, Benny. My handsome boy. It’s been some time.”

She had left out presents for him yesterday, hoping he would realize she had returned.

Just then, the door opened, and her twin sister walked in, leaning heavy on her cane.

Emily had nearly died of smallpox until a doctor arrived at their London home and escorted her to their country home. It was a long recovery, and she still had difficulty with her sight and feeling in the left side of her body.

Emily had never returned to London. Their parents thought it best, considering the scarring.

“Oh, you and that bird,” she snapped, then settled into the armchair by a large open trunk.

“Benny is an excellent companion.”

“Birds have no business being kept inside.”

“Good thing he doesn’t live inside, then.” Marjorie turned and cooed at the beautiful

bird. “He only comes to visit because he loves me so.”

“So does the duke, but he hasn’t shown up since you arrived.”

Marjorie stiffened, pulling her wrapper tight, pretending such a casual mention of Alfie didn’t affect her.

But it did.

She swore the ground had just shook beneath her feet. Or maybe her knees wobbled. Or maybe she had just jumped from bed too quickly.

Either way, climbing into his bedchamber yesterday might have done more harm than good. And she wasn’t sure he could help her when he was so thoroughly convinced he couldn’t help himself.

“Where have you been?” she asked her sister instead.

Emily wagged her eyebrows, folding her arms across her chest. “Assisting the good doctor.”

“Mother and Father will not be happy to learn of that.”

“It’s a good thing they’re otherwise occupied in London then, isn’t it?”

Wasn’t that the truth? Their mother loved many things in life, but minding after her daughters wasn’t one of them luckily.

“Besides,” Emily continued, “I could ask you the same. Except I know the answer. You were over with the duke yesterday.”

No bother denying it. Marjorie strode to her desk and shuffled through a few papers before turning. "Have you seen him since he returned from France?"

"He wasn't accepting visitors. When his father passed, I tried to call and pay my respects, but his mother sent me away. I haven't tried since. I know when I'm not wanted."

Funny that anger and sadness could be but a threadbare difference. Alfie needed a friend in this world, even if he believed he wasn't fit for one at the moment. But his mother...

"Yes, well, I saw him."

"Is he still in love with you?"

She didn't care for her sister's nonchalance at such a claim. As if it were common knowledge.

"I don't wish to speak of it."

"I take that as a yes."

"You must be exhausted," Marjorie said, attempting to change the course of the conversation. "Would you like me to help you to your room and ring for something to eat or some tea?"

"I don't need your help," Emily snapped. She stood, then adjusted her gold-rimmed glasses up her round button nose. "I only mean I have been by myself for some time. You have been in London, and I have been here in the country. If you would like my advice, I suggest you attempt to see the duke again today. Be there for him. He is grieving, true. But loneliness is altogether consuming and a different kind of

sadness.”

“You could come to London,” Marjorie said. “I wouldn’t allow Mother and Father to overshadow you.”

“I don’t wish to go to Town. I am happy here. I can study medicine and attend my plants and keep to myself. It’s a quiet life, but it’s comfortable, and I can do as I wish. I don’t have to worry about gowns or balls or marriage.”

“You used to want to be married. You used to make me pretend to be the groom and walk me down the hallway outside the nursery to your doll overseeing the ceremony. Do you remember? Why, that one time you wore one of Mother’s gowns, and I thought she would?—”

“I grew up, and things changed. I changed.” Her sister gestured at her body. “I’ve been left here in the country like a shameful secret, but I refuse to allow their embarrassment to dictate my life. I’m content here. No need for love to muck it up.”

Marjorie leaned forward in her chair, her eyes wide with a teasing smile. “Don’t you wish to be mucked up? Just once even?”

Her sister playfully gasped before standing up and winking. “La, Sister, ladies don’t speak of such things!”

She giggled to herself as she turned toward Benny. “Well?” she called out after her.

“I love you, but you are trouble. Stop being a coward and go see your duke. Maybe he can stop your moping.”

“I was not moping!”

“Stay late and make terrible decisions. I won’t tell. Cross my heart.”

Marjorie pulled her legs up and hugged her knees, gazing out the window across the park toward her neighbor’s estate. She couldn’t see the house from here, but it was much like the moon—always guiding her even when she couldn’t see it. He was a constant.

And it wasn’t as though she didn’t consider herself a friend. He was her best friend in the world. But maybe it was the time away from one another or the kindness lingering in his green eyes, but she wasn’t sure that was all that was between them now.

Some cosmic pull. Or fate. A force much bigger than themselves, surely, because if not, then she was to believe what? She missed years of being loved by a man?

That same echoing tug pulled at her chest at the very thought.

Marjorie had turned down Alfie when he proposed. She was set on his charming friend from school. The very friend who shattered her heart and stole her book now. But she hadn’t been ready to be Alfie’s wife, never mind a duchess. She had been seventeen, and he had been...

Well, yes... she could admit she had been surprised by the way she felt around Alfie sometimes. Even then. Even before.

And now?

She tossed her head back and groaned. It didn’t matter whether her heart was confused. All she knew was his heart was broken, and she could help. She could be a coward later. Now, she had a duke to visit.

\* \* \*

Marjorie had climbed into his window yesterday as if she hadn't walked out of his life three years prior. As if time hadn't lapsed between them, when in truth, it hadn't been years but lifetimes.

And now, he sat in his chair, reading the newsprint as the morning sun dappled across the rug, and he pretended he hadn't positioned it to watch the window for her return today. Because that was ridiculous. Alfie wasn't waiting for her.

He never had been.

Lie.

Last night he hadn't slept well. Nightmares again. Almost always since returning from France. But last evening he had thought she had been there beside him. Could have sworn her hand cupped his cheek and pulled his focus to her dark eyes and whispered until he calmed. Could have sworn the moonlight kissed her bare shoulder from where her nightgown slipped low. Smelled her perfume.

And her smile.

Christ, that smile of hers would forever strike at the center of his heart.

But no matter. That, too, had been a dream. The memory of her. The wish for what could have been.

She deserved someone who could love her.

But it wasn't as if Alfie was a good match for her either. Not now. What sort of future could they share if he couldn't even leave his room? Sure, she was a wallflower, but she lit up when she experienced the world around her. He had watched her often enough from across the ballroom.

A soft rustle sounded outside his window.

For a moment, he nearly sprang to his feet, then decided to wait. He hid behind the paper and stifled a laugh as Marjorie cursed under her breath, before crawling through his window and tumbling down onto the floor in a heap.

She sat up, brushing her long brown hair, the soft dimple in her chin prominent as she shrugged. “No books to the head today? Careful, I might fall under the impression you enjoy my visits.”

I do.

“I have a door,” he said instead. “And a parlor.”

“But you won’t leave your room, so how am I able to pay you a visit?”

“What makes you believe I wish to have you call on me?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, then rolled over to jump onto her feet. It was then he noted the large bag at her boots.

“Had enough of the country? Ready to run back to London?”

“I think it’s high time you see someone other than your own reflection. Your manners are rusty.”

“You were never one to stand on ceremony, Jo.”

Again, she shrugged, then removed a peach from her bag. “If you must know, I brought my manuscript here today so I may work, and you may endure my company because I am an excellent friend in that way.”

He never suffered through her company. She was not a burden. Alfie was afraid, however, of how badly he wanted her. Worried the truth would work its way out between them one way or another.

“I don’t mean... That is, you do not have to suffer because I cannot get out of my own way.”

The way her eyes snapped to his mouth was altogether delicious. He set down the paper on his lap, hiding the unfortunate and sudden cockstand in his trousers.

“Who said anything about suffering? Nonsense. But I would do with a spot of tea.”

Just as quickly, her attention shifted, and she stood, surveying his room before settling over at the desk by the large window overlooking the hedge maze and rose garden in the rear park of Hollyvale.

“You are merely the Minotaur at the moment, my dear friend. I am here to free you. I am your Theseus.”

As if Alfie hadn’t thought of that symbolism before. He did so appreciate her enthusiasm for Greek mythology, but it meant nothing when the monster was inside of him, and he was trapped in this room with plenty of exits but no will to leave.

It was safer here.

If he remained, he wouldn’t fail anyone else. Anyone beside himself. But he had made peace with that sometime around Christmastide last year.

Instead of answering, he rose and rang for tea, then strode across the room and drew back the curtain panel to allow more light to fall across the desk.

“What else might I prepare for you?”

Her cheeks blushed. She sat and ducked her head, grabbing her peach and taking a bite. “You can continue sulking or pacing or whatever you do here. Don’t let me ruin your plans.”

“You’re baiting me.”

“Is it working?” She grinned to herself, pleased, then wiped away some peach juice from her chin. “Don’t be such a bear.”

He ruffled his hand through his hair. His valet had luckily been keeping it trimmed, but given enough time, the brown curls would stand up on end like coils.

“What are you writing this time?”

“The usual. Death, intrigue, romance.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.” His voice dropped to a whisper. She froze in her seat at his desk, gazing up at him. Once again, he was struck that in another life, this was only another morning, and they were a married couple bickering and flirting. Except then, he would have reason to lean down and lick the peach juice off her chin.

Friends didn’t do that. But he hadn’t thought of her as a friend in years.

And really, this was the damn problem. He was in love with his best friend. Had been, had proposed, and when she turned down his foolish plan, his love for her never escaped. Instead, it kindled his heart, bringing him home after almost dying in France, saving him from himself on the longest, loneliest days after burying his younger brother and his father’s death shortly after.

When it came down to it, Marjorie was his reason for living, even after breaking his heart. He treasured her and would help her even if it meant he would hurt himself in the process.

Nothing about it would be easy, but for her, he would do it.

\* \* \*

It wasn't lost on Marjorie that the day slipped by faster than she wanted. It often was the case when she was writing. But that wasn't the only reason why.

She stretched from her spot on the floor beside Alfie in the chaise behind her. She glanced back over her shoulder and smiled. He was reclined back with a stack of her manuscript pages beside him, reading intently.

"I don't know how you do this," he said, looking up from her writing. "This is brilliant. I can't stop reading."

Difficult as it was, Marjorie accepted the compliment, even though she wished to hide under the rug at the praise.

She stood, gathering up her inkwell and the few pages she was revising, and wandered to the desk. It was time to leave, but that didn't explain why she wanted to climb onto the chaise beside Alfie and rest her head against his chest to listen to his heartbeat. Or how she wished to thread her hand into his and pretend nothing else mattered.

Stalling her departure wouldn't help. Certainly not as she watched the day's last burst of golden light wash over Alfie. A glimpse of what she had refused, this lovely, tender familiarity.

Alfie was her friend, wasn't he?

And what she was beginning to feel for him felt far more romantic than that. Or maybe she had always been attracted to him. The way his lips spread into a wide smile, and his warm green eyes filled with joy. She loved the way smile lines creased around his eyes, made him friendly, familiar, and did something funny to her heart she didn't understand.

Marjorie traced her fingertips over the top of her pages, waiting for something to make sense. But none of this made sense.

She had come back to seek his help in revenge against Percy. And it wasn't as if she didn't want Percy to make amends for what he had done, but seeing Alfie made her remember something else entirely.

She had loved her friend when he had proposed. She was seventeen. He was heir to a dukedom. It was ridiculous to even consider agreeing to marry him when his parents had made it clear that they didn't like her family. The ton would never accept her, and she said no. But it would be a lie to say it didn't break her heart to say so. Even then, even when she had thought herself in love with Percy, what she thought she felt for Percy had always been what she shared with Alfie.

"I need to go," she said, first speaking softly to herself, then spinning and resting against the desk. She set down the pages and tried to steady herself. Even so far away, she could swear she felt the back of his hand against her cheek.

To that, she met his gaze. He was always so good at pulling the truth from her. Even now, when he considered himself broken and beyond the capability of love.

She had to leave today, but she wasn't ready to return to London just yet and leave him behind.

“Do you have to?” he asked.

“Yes,” she laughed. “Of course.”

“Let me have a carriage bring you back.”

She walked over slowly to collect the rest of her manuscript. When his hand reached for hers, he pulled her down to the edge of the chaise.

She twisted so she covered his chest with her body. They stared at one another, waiting, the silence filling up between them.

“I could stay a little longer,” she said after a minute.

“I would like that. We can have dinner.”

She chewed on her bottom lip nervously. He was so close. She could kiss him here. Kiss him and see if all the wild spinning thoughts consuming her now made sense. Or if they were only worries.

“That sounds lovely.”

He reached up and placed his thumb on the soft dimple of her chin. She hated it. Always had, always felt self-conscious about it. No one else she knew had the same jawline.

“Stay for dinner,” he urged. “Then we can read again together afterward.”

“I can’t stay here, especially not alone after dinner.” Her fingertips brushed over the buttons of his shirt. “It’s bad enough I’m holed up in your room. If someone were to say something?—”

“You’d be ruined.”

“Yes,” she said after a minute. But even then, she couldn’t take her focus away from his mouth. How close he was. Her fingers itched to touch him.

“I can ruin you,” he said, “and I’d be the perfect gentleman about it.”

She knew he was teasing. At least somewhat. But the way his voice dropped, she realized he had also spoken some truth there as well. That frightened her a little, maybe excited her a bit more.

“Ruin me?” She licked her lips as the space between them grew even smaller.

“I don’t think it would be considered ruining you if I still intend to marry you.”

She drew back a little, laughing. “Marry me? You were talking about ruining me. I was talking about leaving a minute ago.” She jumped to her feet, putting her forehead in her hand. “Alfie, I must go. I think it’s best. I don’t know what...”

She swallowed hard, watching emotions play across his face until he finally sat up, gathered her manuscript, and stood.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t know a lot of things to be true in this life. Hell, I can’t even leave this room. But I know I still care for you, Jo. I do enough that, if it is a crime, I am willing to pay for it. I am already a man condemned.”

He sighed again, and she noted his hands fisting along his waist. “I already can’t get out of my own mind. Being stuck in this room has also made me realize what is in my heart. And I know I wasn’t wrong all those years ago. I knew then I wanted you to be my wife. I still want you to be my wife. Be my Duchess, Jo. Go to London and we will see that Percy acknowledges what he did, and more importantly, you receive the

praise you deserve.”

He stalked closer. Marjorie’s heart hammered in her chest. She remained still, afraid to move, afraid to speak. Marry him? He wanted her to marry him. After all this time?

“Alfie,” she gasped, shaking her head, overwhelmed. Because this time it didn’t seem so ridiculous an idea.

“I love you, Marjorie. And however inconvenient a truth that is to hear, I have to tell you. I don’t know if I told you enough then. I don’t think you were ready to hear it. I know you’ve just come back, and I realize I have been my only company for months now, and I’ve had plenty of time to consider this, but I don’t see any way out. Because you are it for me, Jo. You have always been the only woman for me. I want that. I want you. I want to learn what love is because I’m learning it with you. I know it’s a lot for you to hear. I’ll be patient if you need time. I’ll wait. I’ll wait until my dying day.”

“Alfie, you’re the Duke of Aldridge,” she said.

He straightened, putting a little distance between them. “I need you. I don’t care about the rest. I’ve spent too much of my life worrying about what I should do, what I was born to do, what I needed to do. But duty only saw me locked up in this room. And it took you crawling in through my window for me to recognize this doesn’t have to be the end of my story. I don’t have to say goodbye. All I’m asking is for you to allow me to love you.”

Marjorie waited, stunned.

Only moments earlier, she was preparing to return home. She had come this morning to be a friend because her friend had been hurting. She was quite positive she had just

had a duke propose to her.

Again.

### CHAPTER 4

The air in Marjorie's lungs left in a soft whoosh . To his credit, Alfie stood still, close enough to touch, but allowed her space as surprise washed over her.

“Do you remember when you first asked me to marry you?” Her voice wobbled as heat rushed to her cheeks. “We were swimming after a long summer walk, and you pulled yourself out of the water while I dried myself off in the sun. You stood before me with your hands on your hips and told me?—”

“You were the most beautiful girl I ever met, and I needed you to marry me immediately.”

She swallowed the soft sigh in her throat at the memory of that day. For years, she thought she missed summers here with him. Now she realized it was likely she missed him .

“Yes.” She smiled softly. “And I told you?”

“First, you laughed. Then you told me you wrote fiction, but you couldn't live it. That no one would approve of a duke marrying a Merryweather.” He sighed. “My heart broke because I was willing to risk everything, but I understood I couldn't ask the same of you. Not when you were at the start of publishing your novels. You'd found a small comfort in your life, and I was there asking you to give it all up for a lot of unknowns.”

“I would have been with you.”

He shook his head. "I knew what I wanted, but that was not true for you."

Alfie approached, slowly holding his hand out. Marjorie nestled her cheek against his palm, shutting her eyes for a moment. "And now?"

She opened her eyes. Now, it was her turn for the shattered heart. Though, she was sure she hadn't been in love with Percy for some time now.

"I need more time, Alfie. I've only ever known us as friends."

He dropped his hand but remained close. "I should apologize. I don't?—"

"I've missed you, and even if you never replied, I thought of you often. I'm afraid of... deepening our friendship."

For a moment, she thought he would yell or toss his arms in the air or make a snide comment like Percy had. Instead, with a small nod, Alfie turned and walked away.

She didn't want to hurt him. She didn't mean...

"I'm sorry," she said.

But instead of answering, he rang for dinner and turned, collapsing back against the wall. "We have lived our lives with many secrets, Jo. I can wait until you are ready. If you are ever ready. In the meantime, will you have dinner with a good friend?"

"Dinner?"

She was struck at the sight of him leaning against the brocade wallcovering, his head tipped up enough that his dark-green eyes narrowed in on her.

She wasn't focused on dinner. Suddenly, her thoughts flew to kissing. And that might have been odd to consider yesterday, but today? Marjorie and Alfie were no longer friends.

They were... a scandal waiting to happen.

"Dinner," he confirmed. But his voice was low and husky, and she thought maybe he also was thinking of kissing her.

She nodded, suddenly lifting her hand and laying it at the bottom of her throat, pinning her there under the heat of his stare. Her sister had teased her about being ruined, not knowing the truth. She already was. If she confessed that to him...

"Very well." She finally dropped her hand and gathered her things. "I will stay for dinner, then accept your offer of a carriage. It wouldn't do to have gossip spread. Or worse, staff telling your mother."

"My mother is the last person I wish to think of now."

She smiled at his strained voice. It was a small flirtation and a wicked promise.

Good, at least they could find humor in the situation. However surprising it was for her to discover. She always was a quick learner, and if he continued looking at her the way he was now, she was certain she would leave this evening having kissed him.

She chuckled, walking to the window. Hollyvale was beautiful at sunset. In the distance, a few stags grazed in the field. The past few years, she was used to confining herself to her rooms to write, but she couldn't shake off the feeling of being stuck in his suite.

"You've filled this space with some lovely things." She turned, clasping her hands

behind her back and slowly strolling over to the statue in the corner of the room. “And I see you have plenty of books. You’ve stayed here for nearly a year now, so I’m curious. When you don’t have women climbing in through your window, what do you do?”

That look, the one which made her grow warm and achy, dropped suddenly. Marjorie could have sworn his warm, green eyes turned icy black.

“Every day, more or less, feels the same, and after a while, I’ve grown accustomed to making this my home.”

She tilted her head, studying him. “Hollyvale is your home. There are over one hundred seven rooms, I believe.”

“One hundred twelve.”

“Yes, well you are living in one at the moment.”

“It’s a large estate, and it is only myself at present.”

“Your mother does not need the other one hundred and eleven rooms to herself.”

He crossed the room, raking his hand through his hair. “I can’t leave, Jo.”

“Can’t or won’t?” she challenged.

She was sorry the moment the accusation left her lips. His face drained of color.

“I apologize. I—” She reached for his hands, clasping them tight in hers. “Can you tell me what happens? How may I help?”

He shook off her touch and scoffed. It was an ugly sound that wedged itself into her chest.

“I try.” He lifted his hand and pointed to the door, even as it shook. “I try every damn day to leave. I recognize it is foolish. My brother was the one who died in Waterloo. But I had to identify his body. What was left of it. And then, I found myself half numb in a carriage on the journey home, and there was an accident. I survived. I’m alive, yet I can’t force myself out of this room. I didn’t even attend my own father’s funeral.

“I lost my brother and my father, and my mother is so frustrated she left me to visit her sister in Bath. She told me if I am not out of this room when she returns, she will have no choice but to have a doctor visit. I might have hit my head, but I’m not daft enough to realize she means keep me here at Hollyvale, hidden away. She thinks me otherworldly now.”

Oh, how foolish she was.

“Contrary to appearances, I don’t want to stay in this room. I miss living. Miss swimming and riding. Never thought I’d admit it, but London as well and going to my club.”

Marjorie raced to erase the distance between them and cupped his face in her hands. She pulled until his attention was drawn on her. His pulse raced at his jaw beneath her fingers. For two days, she had carried on about her manuscript and Percy, and Alfie had been hurting.

“What if we try to leave together?”

He shook his head, his breath coming quicker. “Christ, you’ll never marry me now.”

She shook her head, forcing out a heartless laugh even when tears brimmed in her eyes. “Nonsense.”

“I will fail everyone if I step outside this room. It should never have been my brother going to France. I am the eldest, and he’s dead because I couldn’t protect him.”

“You were heir. You had a duty to remain here, and he was eager to enlist.”

“I couldn’t stand the sight of my parents while he was away fighting. When we received word he was missing, my mother sobbed for three days, and my father barely left his favorite chair in the library.”

“The green one with the stitched cushion?”

“Yes.”

The chair cushion they had stolen away one day as children to picnic, only to have Alfie’s dog take to it instead. Marjorie cut a piece from her gown and patched it herself, too afraid her friend would land in trouble.

“My father refused to part with it, even after what happened.”

Her chest ached. She still remembered returning to Hollyvale that evening with Alfie with a hole in her dress and a badly patched cushion to make her apologies. His father had met them in the front hall, furious they had stayed out all day without taking lunch or dinner. He had bent down and embraced them both, tutting over their concern about what had happened. Until his mother swept in, sending her home in the carriage, demanding for the chair to be replaced.

Unbothered, Marjorie’s mother had later sent two new chairs over to Hollyvale to prove a point.

How guilty she had felt, how ashamed. Alfie had remained close, stepping in front of her as his mother lectured her over her lack of decorum.

She might have fallen a little in love with him that day.

As for today? She feared being honest with herself meant admitting she had been in love with him for longer than she even knew.

“You are only failing yourself by remaining in this room.”

He pulled away and tossed his head up at the ceiling. “And I’ll fail you too. If I stay, or if by some miracle I can leave this room, you know I can’t go up against Percy. And that’s why you came, isn’t it? You want me to rescue you?”

She ignored the stinging comment, recognizing his frustration. On any other day, she would have pushed back. Instead, she kept her voice calm. “You are no longer boys at Eton. You are capable?—”

Alfie quirked his eyebrow at her, annoyance heavy on his face. “I’ve lost out to him when it counts the most. I don’t ever want to give him such power again.”

Power? She scoffed. “You only fail if you never try.”

“Is that what your mother told you when you stood against the wall of every ball in Town?”

She threw her hands to her hips, her patience slipping. “Well, that was uncalled for. I am only trying to help.”

“And I am making a damn mess of everything!”

“Only because you are choosing to.”

“I was born an heir to a dukedom, Jo. I haven’t chosen a damn thing in my life.”

But you .

She swore she heard the words tumble out of his mouth, but she couldn’t tell for sure because she strode up to him, cupped her hands over his cheeks, and kissed him.

\* \* \*

Could a kiss hold one’s salvation?

Alfie would consider the merits of that argument later.

Right now? He was certain he had died in that carriage accident because Marjorie had just pressed her lips against his, soft and searching. A kiss full of questions.

He felt the air squeeze from his lungs as the panic melted away within him, and suddenly the world switched into focus.

Alfie wrapped his arm around her, pressing his fingers into her hips as his lips met hers tentatively.

Years, and this was nothing like he imagined it would be.

Her hands fell from his cheeks, and she pulled away enough to gaze up at him, her big brown eyes asking for an answer he didn’t have.

All except one. Alfred Renwick, the Duke of Abinger loved Marjorie Merryweather.

“I don’t need your pity.” His voice scraped against his throat.

She shook her head, leaning her forehead against his. Her fingertips danced at his temple, and he slammed his eyes shut, afraid if he opened them, this would only be a dream.

“Not pity,” she whispered back. “I care...”

He opened his eyes again, hopeful. Then reached down and tipped her chin up.

“Can I kiss you?”

Her eyes fluttered briefly to his mouth, then darted back up to his eyes. He never would understand how such rich brown eyes were threaded with the most beautiful gold and green.

Marjorie held so many secrets, like the soft freckles gracing the tops of her cheeks in the summer, the soft bow of her lips when she was about to laugh, and the way she smelled of spring—a scent that lingered behind her as if Alfie could never quite catch up. And her writing, of course.

Marjorie sighed, the tension in her arms melting as she leaned against him and nodded, her eyes full of an eagerness that tore at his chest. Hope —something much more powerful than love or desire.

He reached up and brushed back some dark brown hair from the sides of her face, his thumbs rubbing against her temples as he carefully studied her features, wishing to catalog every detail in case she left this evening and never returned. He knew that was a possibility, and he could never offer her a happy life as long as he remained in this room where he felt safe.

A growl ripped from his throat, and the delicate thread of his patience snapped. He bent down and pressed his lips against hers, a kiss that was not soft, not searching, but demanding. Alfie needed Marjorie. He needed to taste her, to feel everything she was willing to offer him. He needed something to hold him here when he felt as if he was standing on the precipice, fading away.

She was his hope.

A soft moan escaped her as she leaned against him. He deepened the kiss, sucking on her bottom lip, biting down softly before soothing the pain away with his tongue. She opened to him, allowing him inside as her hands wound around his neck and clung to him.

He could never convince himself that this was not how it always should have been between them—kissing.

“Sweet thing.” He pulled away a moment, whispering against her ear, “Jo.”

She didn’t look up, her lips grazing the corner of his jaw and throat. Her tongue darted against his skin, and he thought perhaps she was going to take him apart right then and there. Whatever control he had left vanished, along with his patience, and he was about to become a greedy man.

His fingers tightened in her hair, tugging against her scalp, bringing her face back to his for another deep kiss, searching. His heart hammered in his chest. For this to feel so wonderful, why did it feel as if his chest was about to break open? He wanted everything, but he knew he couldn’t ask her. He knew she already risked so much just by being here, alone.

But a little more, that was all. Temptation coursed through his veins.

Alfie's mouth moved to the base of her throat and nipped at her skin, like an utter cad wishing to mark her as his. She sighed, her hips pushing against his, her middle pressing against his bulging cock in his buckskins, and he feared he would spend right there like a schoolboy at the mere touch of a woman.

Then, a knock on the door.

He didn't break apart. He couldn't. He leaned his hand against the door, caging her in as she collapsed her forehead against his chest, and he rested his head against the top of hers. For a moment, the two of them struggled to catch their breath.

"A moment, please," Alfie finally called out.

Marjorie allowed a soft giggle to escape her, and as her laugh grew louder, she wiped at her eyes.

"Was that funny?" he asked, his voice rough.

She clasped her hands to her cheeks as if trying to wipe away the lingering grin. "No, nothing was funny about our kiss, Alfie. It's only... I've never been kissed like that. Kissed by someone who wanted to kiss me."

Alfie growled and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her close just as a second knock sounded against the door. "Damn it," he muttered under his breath. "Stay for dinner," he urged.

Her hand crawled up his shirt, slipping beneath the buttons. The pressure of her fingertips against his chest was oddly reassuring.

"Go on," she said.

He couldn't take his eyes off her, afraid that once he turned, it would only be the memory he had to hold of Marjorie for the rest of his life. Kissing her there against his bedroom wall, desperate, heated.

His heart thundered against his chest. The small sliver of possibility that shone back at him in her eyes kept him anchored.

### CHAPTER 5

Marjorie stifled a yawn as she shuffled to the sideboard in the morning room and poured herself a cup of tea.

“You were out late,” said her sister, Emily, walking into the room.

Marjorie didn’t bother turning around. Her response mulled around on her tongue at the mere memory of her kiss with Alfie against his bedroom wall.

Instead of telling the truth, she remained quiet.

“I wasn’t home,” her sister continued, “but your silence is confirmation enough.”

Marjorie spun around, pointing at her. “That was a nasty trick!”

Emily crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows, her dark beady eyes shining brightly behind her gold-rimmed glasses. She leaned against the dining room chair, her cane resting nearby at the foot of the large table. “Well?” she said smugly.

Marjorie only swatted her hands as if to shoo her sister away. She loved having a twin sister most of the time.

“I need tea,” she barked instead, her mind fumbling for words as memories played over and over again.

When she had returned home last evening after dinner, in the carriage, she couldn’t

sleep. Instead, she spent the night writing, pacing back and forth across her room with her quill in hand, acting out the story. Satisfied at last that she had worked through a troublesome plot point, she thought to let Percy have her old manuscript without protest. Her current story was much better anyhow.

No.

The pit in her stomach deepened. Could she allow Percy to claim her work as his, never challenging him? All because it was easier?

That manuscript had been hers, tucked away with the intention it would only remain for her eyes. He was not entitled to it—then or now.

“Well,” Emily said at last, “if you wanted to know, I was out because Mrs. Turner had her baby. Another lovely, healthy boy.”

This time Marjorie did yawn. She wiped her eyes and collapsed onto the armchair by the fireplace with a cup of tea in her hand. She nodded. “I didn’t believe you were sneaking out for any other reason.”

Emily glared at her for a moment. “Is there something you want to say?”

Marjorie stiffened. “I meant no offense. Sister, you believe I wouldn’t support you? You have a brilliant mind for medicine, and I wish for you to pursue it whichever way you can find. It is not easy for us women to make our way in a world where men’s voices are as loud as their brash actions.”

It was Emily’s turn to be surprised. “I was under the impression you preferred ballroom walls, not conquering the spaces men inhabit. Why didn’t you say that first?”

She was so sure she would brush it away as she had for years now, even with the truth impatient on her lips.

Maybe it was because she was still remembering last evening. Or maybe because she was fed up with hiding all her life. Marjorie wished to take up space, to be a part of this world, and no longer be a wallflower.

“I know because I am an author,” she said at last.

Emily scoffed. “You are a writer,” she insisted. “I know you love to write your stories.” She pointed toward Marjorie’s ink-stained fingers now clutching a near-empty cup of tea. “You spend hours writing them. But you haven’t pursued that, have you?”

Marjorie rubbed her eyes, exhaustion pulling at her eyelids, and her body buzzed with some strange frustration. She blamed Alfie for that. She was restless at the mere thought of him. Her heart began to race in her chest, and she thought she would forgo some sleep to see him again. Later, she told herself.

“I am an author, Emily. I have written four novels published under my pen name, M.E. Gastrell.”

Emily sank down in the chair opposite her, her mouth agape. “You’ve kept a secret from me. You’re the author?”

Marjorie nodded. “It was too dangerous to write under my own name. Mother and Father would never allow it.”

“But you kept it from me,” Emily said. “Me? I’m your twin. I will support you no matter what.”

Marjorie shrugged, shame creeping up on her cheeks. “You are my twin, yes. But at the time...” She stopped, not wishing to remember her sister nearly dying and the void that had threatened to consume her.

“At the time,” Emily continued, “I was ill.”

“Yes,” Marjorie said, “and it felt silly to share my news, no matter how important to me, when I was desperate not to see you leave us.”

Emily scowled, briefly reaching under her glasses and wiping her eyes before putting her hands back in her lap. “Even on my sick bed, I would have been happy for you, and I’m happy for you now. But I think I might need a day or two because it hurts to know while you have been in London, living this secret life, I have been kept in the country and written off by our parents, wasting my days playing with plants and learning about the human body, and desperately wanting...” She swallowed hard. Now the tears began streaming down her face. “I promised myself I wouldn’t cry.”

Marjorie set her cup down and swung her legs off the arm of the chair, quickly walking to her sister and embracing her. “There’s nothing wrong with crying.” She dropped a kiss on top of her sister’s head.

Emily only grunted in response, but finally, after a moment, she gazed up at Marjorie. “I want so desperately to have a bigger life than I have been allowed. And it feels foolish to think so. Now I have just learned my dear sister has been doing just that. And I couldn’t even enjoy the journey with her because it’s been a secret.”

Marjorie nodded, wiping away the tears on her sister’s scarred face. “My dear, you are living a large life, even if it is quiet. You are helping those around here. You are learning medicine, and you are fearless when you do so. Our parents are preoccupied with their own large lives. We can’t let their shadows darken our paths. If you want to come to London, I will be there right beside you. And until then, I will remain here in

the country with you.”

“Because you’re busy writing,” Emily said. It wasn’t so much a question as it was an accusation.

Marjorie sighed. “No, not because I am writing, though I am. Because I’m hiding, because my heart has been broken, and my work has been stolen. I am too afraid to do anything about it.”

Emily glanced up at her, her brows furrowed. “I think you have more secrets to tell me.”

Marjorie helped Emily over to the sofa. The two sisters faced one another, and Marjorie proceeded to tell her how she foolishly fell in love with Percy those summers ago and how she dreamed up a life with him. How they talked about books for hours and how one evening at a party, she made the mistake of telling him her secret and believing he had felt the same for her. And in doing so, she laid her heart and trust at his feet, and he smashed everything and stole an old manuscript, publishing it as his own.

“Anyway,” she continued, “that is why I have returned. I asked Alfie for help. I figured if anyone could help me, it would be a duke.”

“But he won’t help because why?”

Marjorie didn’t feel it was her story to tell how Alfie was battling his own demons.

“Alfie can’t help,” she said instead. “I must do it for myself. But hiding isn’t the answer. I only wish for others to acknowledge the fact that he did not write that book. Those are my words. My time, my effort, and I can’t, in good conscience, let him take the credit, even if he’s counting on me to remain quiet.”

“You have the reputation of a wallflower around London,” Emily said. “I suppose he believes you’ll remain quiet.”

Marjorie nodded, pressing her knuckles against her mouth for a moment before she blew out a deep breath. “I need to confront him, and then I think I need to reach out to his publishers. But the problem is,” she said, hesitating, “I’m afraid by doing that, I will lose everything I have worked so hard for when I speak up.”

“Because speaking up for yourself will out you as the author?” Emily readjusted her spectacles. “M.E. Gastrell is very well respected. People will surely be pleased and thrilled to learn the truth.”

“It’ll be a scandal, and our parents will hate it.”

“Let them.” Emily reached for her sister’s hand and squeezed. “Let them throw a fit. I will be here with you. Bring me to London if you must, but I can’t promise you I will be well-behaved. I never liked Percy.”

Marjorie hugged her sister and sighed because, the truth was, she realized she had never liked Percy either.

\* \* \*

Alfie had bathed, read the newspaper, and attempted to finish reading the novel he began the day before.

Attempted because he couldn’t stop moving. Suddenly, his room was too small. The space that had been his sole comfort since his return. And his only prison. And now he paced his suite like a caged animal, waiting.

Would Marjorie return or had he scared her off last evening?

He reached for his cold cup of tea from the stack of books beside him and groaned, resting his head back against the chair.

But to feel her against him once more? To feel her lips against his, just as equally demanding. If she never returned, it would be a kiss that would forever haunt him, the very kiss to lead off all his private fantasies.

He shot to his feet and marched to the small balcony overlooking the gardens and the fishpond. His hand hovered about the doorknob. If he couldn't leave from the hall, maybe he could bring himself to stand on the balcony for a few moments.

He glanced over his shoulder, blowing out a steadying breath before glancing back toward the doorknob. His stomach soured, and the all too familiar cold metal tang filled his mouth. He braced his shoulders as panic exploded in his chest.

"No," he said out loud. "No!"

If he were to have any chance with Marjorie, it would need to be outside of this room. Whether Hollyvale or London, he needed to show up in the world and stop hiding.

Then why was it so bloody hard to leave?

His hand hovered, shaking when the door to his room swung open, and he froze.

Marjorie stood in the doorway, her cheeks pink from the walk over, her dark hair wild from the breeze, and her eyes silently challenging him.

But he could barely breathe. She stood on the other side of the door. It might as well have been another country. He wished to haul her inside and slam the door shut and keep her to himself, safe from the rest of London.

From the rest of the madness tearing apart the world.

“I didn’t feel much like climbing today,” she said with a small shrug.

Alfie meant to nod, but his heart was hammering in his throat. He could hardly blink, never mind move a limb.

And there she stood, the gentle morning light falling behind her in the hallway in a beautiful violet dress.

“You came back,” he finally choked out.

She clasped her hands in front of her, still remaining in the threshold. For a moment, she glanced down at her feet and swished her skirts before glancing back up. Marjorie nodded, her large brown eyes studying him.

“Were you...”

“In the middle of losing my mind? Yes?”

She smirked. “Only in the middle? Now really, Alfie.”

He didn’t understand the warring pressure in his chest. He wanted to gather her up in his arms and kiss her senseless, and at the same time, he feared stepping closer would mean leaving what he had known behind.

“Come away from the door,” he said, his voice cracking.

Marjorie remained still. She didn’t shake her head or speak. She just filled the doorway, tempting him by standing there with steady reassurance while he remained by the French doors. He couldn’t open that doorknob if he wanted to right now. He

couldn't take his eyes off Marjorie.

Swallowing hard, he tried to ignore the throbbing pulse in his ears and the icy shiver racing down his arms. He swore he felt a sweat break out on his forehead.

He was coming apart in front of her. He didn't wish for her to see him this way. And yet she remained quiet and steady.

"What would you like me to do?" she said.

Alfie slammed his eyes shut and shook his head. He couldn't logically make sense of what he wanted from her right now. What did he want her to do?

He wanted her to race to him from the hallway and close the door behind her. He wanted her arms to be laced around his neck and her lips against his. He wanted all of it, as grand as it was, because he still had hope that one day he would cure whatever was wrong with him. One day, they could have a future. But as long as he was trapped in this room, it was selfish to ask her for anything more.

He had proposed to her last night like some lovesick schoolboy struck by the local beauty, professing his undying love. Alfie, at thirty-one years old, hadn't seen her for years. Instead of trying to keep something for himself, he just threw himself at her feet, knowing he could never be a good husband.

Damn the title. He hated that title. He hated who he'd had to lose to have that title.

"Alfie," her voice called softly across the room, gentle and reassuring.

He opened his eyes slowly to look back at her, certain he appeared like some wild, crazed thing, but she hadn't run away.

“Come here,” she said at last.

When he shook his head, he knew the refusal would cost him everything. He turned his back and, leaning against the wall, thought it would be better if she left. It would be better if she returned to London. He would reach out to Percy, he would do something, but she should return to London, not hide away.

He was the perfect example as to why. But then again, Marjorie knew that as well. Keeping a secret was not a privilege. It was a burden.

In and out. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to root himself in the room, trying desperately to make sense of the fact that his feet were firmly on the floor. That he was not falling apart. That the world was not ending. That he was safe. He could feel the cool breeze from the open window across the room. He could smell her perfume, chasing him, haunting him in the doorway.

He licked his lips, waiting for his heart to slow down, waiting for his lungs to finally have enough air so it didn't feel as if he were drowning in the river in the park.

“Darling,” she whispered beside him. She slipped her hand into his and rested her head against his shoulder. “I'm here.”

With a ragged breath, he tilted his head so he could meet her eyes, not ashamed there were tears of his own as his mind struggled to stay present.

“I will only let you down,” he said.

She pressed her lips together and tilted her head. “There's no way that's possible.”

He moved his head back again, hiding away like a coward, even as her palm was warm against his, and it was the one thing keeping him tethered. He hated being lost

to this overwhelming tide. Sometimes it felt as if he would lose himself for hours or days to it. He didn't want to.

"You're safe," she said. "You don't have to leave if you're not ready. I will go to London myself. I had no idea." She paused, inserting herself between him and the wall, her lips now nearly ghosting over his. With her free hand, she skirted her fingertips up his shoulder, back into the nape of his neck, playing with the ends of his hair.

"He stole your damn book," he growled. "I'll burn down London until he pays."

"No," she said, slipping her hand out of his and placing it on his cheek, wiping away a tear with the pad of her thumb. "Alfie, I need you to listen to me. Because this is important."

He nodded, struck by the sight of her lips. The feel of her fingertips brushing against his skin was both calming and enticing all at once. This panic began to be chased away by anticipation.

"I cannot kiss you and make this go away, as much as I want that to be the case. I wish it were so simple. And I know you want to hide away. I know you are hurting." She placed her hand over his heart. He couldn't stop crying, and he hated himself for it.

"Alfie, darling," she said again. "I have to return to London, and I realize now I must do so alone. But I need you to understand it's not because I don't love you. And it's not because I don't wish to be your wife. It's because I want to keep what is mine. I don't think he deserves to keep that book just because he thinks I'll be quiet."

Questions began swirling in his mind, questions about plans and what she meant to do. But all he could focus on was what she said—it wasn't because she didn't want to

be his wife. What did that mean? How could she possibly feel anything for him when he was holding himself up now against his bedroom wall, crying because he couldn't open a door? He was weak and a failure, and he would only let her down.

She clasped both hands on his cheeks, squeezing slowly, pulling his attention back to her.

"Look at me," she said. "Look at me, Alfie."

He swallowed hard. Why was it so difficult to stay present? Why did it feel like his mind went one way and his body the other?

"When I walked in, you were going to open that door," she said. "Do you want my help?"

The door. Right.

He glanced quickly behind him. The door was still open, the light from the hallway pouring into his room, making the room look so much larger than it was.

That was Marjorie. She was his light, pouring into his life, and he didn't deserve her. It was selfish to ask her to remain here with him.

Her lips pressed against his throat, and he returned his attention back to Marjorie. Searching, trying to find some truth there in her eyes, something that would make this better.

He hadn't expected her to return. He hadn't expected her to climb through his bedroom window. He certainly hadn't planned on confessing how he felt for her and proposing.

“You don’t have to open that door. And you don’t have to go into the hallway,” she said. “Not until you are ready. And I know one day you will be ready. Until then, I’ll be with you when I can. I won’t leave you. So, I’ll ask one more time. Would you like to try?”

And even though everything in him screamed “no,” there was a small push from his brain to say “yes.” Because he had already fallen apart, and she was there. He had nothing else to lose.

He nodded.

“Very well. Hold my hand,” she said, “and we’ll do it together. Look at me.”

She placed his hand on the doorknob, lacing her fingers tightly with his, and he remained staring at her, studying her face and those beautiful brown eyes of hers, the freckles on her cheeks, and the little bow in her lips, perfectly plump and pink they were. And then he felt the door turn and slowly crack open. A burst of air slipped in between him and Marjorie. She remained holding the door with him.

“How’s that?” she said.

Fresh air swept across his face, and he was holding Marjorie’s hand.

He whispered, “Perfect,” and then met her lips with his.

### CHAPTER 6

Marjorie was surprised to feel his lips against hers.

She stumbled backward, losing her footing and colliding against the door jamb. She felt his pain as his lips moved over hers, searching, softly demanding, and she gave herself over to the power of him.

Alfie's hands tangled into her hair as she slowly moved her body, slipping through the cracked door, pushing it a little wider, never allowing their kiss to break.

She wasn't afraid. She wanted him to know he didn't have to be either. She was there, and the late September morning was warm, the soft breeze rustling the trees outside his balcony.

His body tensed as she turned them, about to fully step outside. But he didn't give voice to his fears if he had any. Instead, Alfie clutched her closer when she gave herself over.

She wasn't about to let Alfie spend the rest of his life cloistered in this room, not when she remembered what he had been like before.

Yes, he had always been the dutiful older brother, the presumptive heir, and he had taken that seriously. Though bookish, they had that in common. But he enjoyed being out in the world. He had always commanded some sort of power when he stepped into a room. She missed that, and if she did, then she feared he either forgot or didn't think he deserved to be out with the rest of London now after the deaths of his brother

and father.

She whimpered against his mouth as they spun and stepped out onto the balcony. His back slid against the hard stone facade of the house, and she looked up, breaking their kiss, holding his face in her hands.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “I am here, and you are well.”

Alfie sighed and slid down the wall.

He was so handsome.

When he was younger, she had thought so as well. But he was no longer fresh-faced. Now, his eyes shone back at her, wild. Her chest hurt. She wished to tell him where they were but feared bringing light to it would only make it worse. So instead, she dropped a kiss to his forehead and the tip of his nose and cheeks.

Alfie gathered her up and placed her on his lap and clung to her as he tried to steady his breathing.

She slipped her hand through the buttons of his linen shirt, resting her palm over his racing heart. She tucked her head low and kissed the side of his jaw, down the line of his throat, and dropped one last kiss to the hollow there, feeling his pulse beat against her lips. When she sat back up, her heart hurt in reverence all the same.

“You must think...”

Marjorie shook her head, placing a finger gently against his mouth. “I don’t want to hear one disparaging thought,” she warned. “I think you’re brave. I think you’re kind. And I think I love you.”

His eyes flared open at her last words, and he pushed her hand away to kiss her once again. This time, not out of desperation but hunger. Not frenzied but slow, calculating, as if he had dreamed of nothing more since she'd left for London years earlier.

He kissed her as if he only wanted to kiss her and her alone , and it meant everything.

His hands ran through her hair, pulling out the pins, and it tumbled down her shoulders as the birds sang. The golden sun filtered through the dark-green leaves in the last whisper of summer warmth, carried off in the wind. She knew autumn was coming. Soon the leaves would fall, and it would grow colder and darker, but for now, kissing him was like finding an eternal summer.

She felt the hard length of him pressed against her core. She grew achy and frustrated and issued a soft moan as his lips trailed down the column of her neck. His teeth dragged against her skin, bringing about the softest kind of pain. And to her surprise, it faded to a new kind of pleasure as well.

She stared down at him, slowly unbuttoned his waistcoat, and untied his shirt as he tugged at her dress.

There was too much between them. His eyes darkened, and she felt it too—the sudden madness driving them forward. This was a man kissing a woman he loved. A woman realizing she had loved this man for years, and this had always been what was going to happen, even if she'd lost her way for a while.

His hands pulled down her dress, revealing the tops of her shoulders. Then a little more, to the tops of her rounded breasts. The brush of his fingertips against the soft, delicate skin sent a shock down her spine.

“Alfie...” It was a soft, desperate plea.

His thumb tentatively brushed over her nipple, and she bucked her hips against him.

“Let me taste you,” he groaned against her mouth.

Marjorie felt as if she were being spun apart with each touch. She kissed his cheek, tasting the salt of his tears, smelling the leather notes of his cologne, feeling the heat of his skin under her fingertips. She was consumed with him, throwing herself over to the moment.

“Lay back, sweet.”

Alfie bent forward, guiding her gently down to the ground before running his hands up her calves, then higher over her ribbon garters, before pushing her dress above her knees.

She propped herself up onto her elbows, attempting to catch her breath as he crawled forward, ducking down to push her dress higher still.

Her pulse thrummed as he skirted his fingers up her inner thigh, his eyes pinned to her reaction. Marjorie bit down gently on her bottom lip, waiting, the last of her patience about to snap before his fingers found her core and slipped between her folds.

She gasped, tossing her head back up at the sky.

“No, keep your eyes on me.”

She snapped her attention back to Alfie as stroked his thumb against the sensitive pearl at her apex. Everything within tightened.

He bent his head down, pulling apart her legs with his hands, then kissed the inside of

her thigh.

Marjorie couldn't look away, couldn't...

She had never experienced such pleasure before. Certainly not with Percy who hadn't dared...

Alfie's mouth licked up her seam, parting her folds, before his tongue slowly circled that magical spot again, and she swore she saw stars as soon as he sucked.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders, too afraid to say anything, too afraid to look away. And all the while, her body tightened, chasing some end she wasn't sure of, only that she felt herself climbing toward a secret destination.

"You taste like heaven," he whispered against her. "Do you like it?"

Marjorie nodded, her pulse quickening.

"Good." He slipped two fingers inside of her, and instead of shock, a rush of pleasure flooded her body, and she clamped her eyes shut and fell back against the cold stone floor. His mouth tasted her, and his fingers worked in and out, and just when she thought she couldn't handle it any longer, something snapped inside of her.

Marjorie's back bowed as a pulsing rush washed over her and her body, and for a moment, as she glanced up at the sky, she thought she might be flying. But everything soon settled, and she came back to her own, realizing what she had just done with Alfie, and she closed her eyes, embarrassment bright on her cheeks.

"Don't close your eyes, Jo." He pulled down her skirts, before crawling over her. He braced his body over hers. "Don't leave me now."

She shook her head, finally gathering the courage to open her eyes. He pressed his mouth to hers, and she could taste herself there on his lips. Another spike of excitement rushed through her, a genuine surprise at how much she enjoyed such a private act.

“Heavens,” she said, suddenly falling into giggles. “The door was open the entire time. Anyone could have seen, Alfie. What were we thinking?”

“I was thinking how perfect you are.” He brushed his hands into her hair, suddenly sitting up and pulling her into his lap.

Such utter reverence. She was sure she had gone mad. This could only be a dream.

“I was thinking how we’re outside.”

His shoulders tensed under her touch. “London doesn’t know what’s coming. No one steals from my duchess.”

“Your duchess?” she squeaked.

He grabbed her hand, kissing the back of her knuckles. “If you will have me, Jo. I know I am not?—”

Marjorie shook her head, rocking her hips against his, satisfied to feel his hard length between her thighs. She cupped his face and brushed her thumbs over his sharp cheekbones, remembering once the boy who had stumbled upon her reading, eating a plump peach.

\* \* \*

Alfie tipped his face up toward the sky.

He choked back a surprised laugh, suddenly feeling the tension melt from his body as a soft breeze caressed his skin and birdsong filled his ears.

Outside .

Maybe it was the woman tracing her thumbs over his cheekbones, sitting in his lap. Having her there made the moment all the easier, and now he was outside.

The heavens still remained, and the world wasn't coming to an end.

He turned his eyes back to her, loving how the golden September light flickered on her dark-brown hair, painting it with gold. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes nearly sparkled, and her lips were plump and inviting. Her dress lay off her shoulders, making her look wilder and more desirable than he had ever seen her before.

He was used to seeing Marjorie Merriweather walking in the park, her boots covered in mud, her raven nearby. He loved to watch her march across the fields in the early morning mist. That had been some kind of magic. But this, now, was a different magic: kinder, softer, and overwhelming all the same. He wasn't certain if he'd ever loved anyone more than he loved her.

"Sweet," he said.

She giggled, dropping her head to his shoulder. "Someone could have found us."

"We're not doing anything," he said, the corner of his mouth pulling up in a smirk. She only grinned.

He kissed her more, bringing her pleasure, and now all he could think of was bringing her to his bed, exploring her, savoring her. The rest of London could hang; he would deal with that damn cad another day.

He hadn't shared with Marjorie yet, but he had already written to his solicitor to see about buying the publisher and stopping the presses on Percy's book. That was his first step. His next would be marrying her and bringing her to London as his duchess, confronting Percy together.

"Door," she reminded him again.

He lifted her hand and kissed her fingers, sucking on the tip of her index finger. "Right, the door."

"Are you listening?"

She slowly rose from his lap, and he couldn't hide the cockstand in his trousers. He pushed up to his knees and then to his feet, gesturing for her to spin around to fix her dress and pull up her sleeves.

"I don't suppose you know how to fix hair."

"No one is here to mind," he replied. "And I love your hair."

She blushed, as if he hadn't had his mouth on the most intimate part of her only moments ago. Too bashful over a compliment about her hair. He laughed.

When she was sorted, he fixed his shirt. He braced his hand on the stone of the building and peeked over his shoulder once more at the park beyond. The morning light danced, casting shadows over him and Marjorie.

He stepped inside his room, grabbing her hand, before marching over to the door, fully expecting to either slam it shut or freeze. He was surprised when he stepped through.

“Alfie?” she asked as they found themselves in the hallway. She clamped a hand over her mouth, stifling a surprised giggle.

“It’s my house, isn’t it?” he said.

She nodded as he took her a few more steps away. The soft carpet beneath his boots cushioned their footfalls. It was a dark house, the walls of wood and stone, covered in tapestries, dark drapes, and paintings. His father had been an avid art collector. Alfie had shared the same passion and, along with portraits and landscapes, also liked to collect maps.

He clutched Marjorie’s hand, never letting go, as they approached the grand staircase Percy used to chase him around on Christmas holiday. Once, they had taken their mattresses off their beds and raced down the staircase until their mother had discovered what they were doing and scolded them both.

With each step, he expected the panic to come, the sour stomach, and the metallic taste in his mouth. While the rest of him felt on edge, the panic mostly subsided. He was determined to go on a walk.

“Where are we going?” Marjorie asked. “Alfie,” she said, tugging on his hand.

He stopped on the landing, spinning back to see her standing there a step above him, gazing down on him as if she were a queen. By God, she was beautiful. Simply stunning. Her smile was his favorite.

“It’s a nice day,” he said. “We’re going on a walk.”

“We’re going on a walk?” she asked, clearly confused.

“Agreed,” he said, then held her hand once again, continuing down the stairs before

his mind could catch up to what his body was doing. Before the excuses could start or the fear could take hold. He was done with it all.

For Marjorie, he would leave his room, leave this house, go to London, and protect her. He would help her reclaim what was rightfully hers because he loved her and was proud of her. Above all else, she had done the hard work, not Percy. Percy had capitalized on Alfie's hard work throughout school, always relying on his charm. But Alfie wouldn't let him win, not now, not again. He'd already taken Marjorie away from him the first time.

He would claim what was his, speak up for himself, and fight, no matter his fear. He had lost too much already, and time was unforgiving.

He opened the door and waved her outside, struck by her genuine smile.

"Very well, Your Grace," she said.

"Very well, my lady. No need to stand on formalities now, is there?"

She shook her head. "I only wanted to try it the once. I like you best as my Alfie."

He offered her his arm. She slipped her hand through, and the two of them walked down the front steps of the house, out onto the stone drive, and farther still out toward the pond.

"I like that best as well."

### CHAPTER 7

Marjorie gazed over at Alfie, her eyes tracing his face for any sign of panic or fear. She felt the tension rippling down his shoulder and forearm, yet he didn't pause.

With another glance behind her shoulder, she was surprised to see Hollyvale slowly grow smaller behind them as they weaved through the gardens, heading deeper into the park. A lot of the flowers were spent, yet another sign of autumn well on its way. But the sun was warm on her skin, the air heavy with the scent of earth and leaves and a slight hint of burned sugar.

Her body still buzzed, and she was certain she had a heavy blush on her cheeks from the mere memory of that balcony and how Alfie had moved over her, desperate and hungry.

Alfie cleared his throat as if returning from a daze and pulling them both to a stop. "I should apologize."

She tilted her head, studying his face. She loved the way his short curls piled on top of his head, the sun streaking gold and weaving through.

"We can return," she started. "If it's too much. I am already so proud."

He shook his head. "No, it's not that." He held his hand out and ran it through her hair, capturing a small lock between his thumb and forefinger. "You're here," he whispered, reverence heavy in his voice.

She nodded.

“And we are walking the park as if?—”

“Like we always did.”

“Would you like to go on the rowboat on the pond? Like we used to.”

Marjorie couldn't shake the memory of his fingers on her, the feel of his tongue against her until she fell apart beneath him. Capable and handsome.

She spun out of his touch and backed up a step, before throwing her arms wide and tilting her face up toward the sun.

“I want to remember you like that, forever.”

She opened one eye, smiling at him, certain she was more than a little in love with him. The excitement of it coursed through her. She had a confession of her own—she wanted to remember the look in his eyes watching her now. Marjorie felt the tension simmer between them, before spinning on her heels and taking off through the field, her hands brushing against the last color flush of wildflowers before the cold settled in.

“You don't think I'll chase after you?” he called out.

The pond came into view, sitting at the bottom of a large hill and surrounded by a group of old oak and elm trees. And to the left, a small stone folly that his father had turned into a glass house. Marjorie darted over, attempting to open the doors, but they wouldn't budge.

“Jo.”

She startled, surprised at how quickly he caught up to her. “It’s locked. I haven’t been inside in... years.”

He bent around her to an old terracotta pot by the peeling celadon door, the tangled snarls of rosemary brown and silver from years of neglect. The brittle leaves rattled and fell as the pot tipped over with a soft thud on the landing, and Alfie stood with a key clutched in his hand.

Marjorie plucked the key out of his hand and slipped it into the lock, frustrated when it didn’t budge. She pushed against it, but the door stubbornly refused to open. She felt the heat rolling off his body before Alfie’s arms reached around her, so close.

“Allow me,” he whispered, his lips ghosting by her ear as his chest brushed against her back.

A soft rush of air left her lips as he caged himself around her, opening the door with a push, and suddenly she was hit with a wall of memories of when they were younger.

The folly still smelled the same, of earth and geraniums and apples. The wild flush of roses that climbed along the wide bank of windows overlooking the pond were long past now. She stepped inside, her slippers scuffing against the stone floor. The cushions and blanket were still where she had stacked them for the last time they rowed on the pond, folded in the corner by an old trunk. And beside that, a pile of books and an old top hat and scarf.

She walked to the small desk in the corner, tracing her fingertips through the thick layer of dust. The taper candle was still half burned, unmoved, perched beside an old journal of hers. This had always been her favorite hideaway. She remembered afternoons spent here in the summer with Alfie, Percy, Harry, and Emily. Before Emily fell ill with smallpox.

“You haven’t changed a thing.” She glanced over her shoulder to find Alfie standing behind her, his hands stuffed into his pockets, studying her intently.

He cleared his throat, and whatever dreamy look had washed over his face, it disappeared. All these years and it was as though he had stopped time at Hollyvale, waiting.

Her heart ached all over.

One can’t wait on ghosts, and Harry and his father were never returning. Emily would never again be the young girl who climbed trees and fought bravely against Harry, the pirate king.

Those were memories now. The ones she weaved into her manuscripts when it was early in the morning, and the world was quiet, and her heart was sad.

“I kept everything as you liked.”

She nodded, stepping away from the small desk to the bed tucked into the back corner. Marjorie flopped onto the dusty mattress, grinning foolishly to herself as she gazed up at the ceiling and discovered the mural that she and Alfie had painted remained.

“It is no wonder you are a duke and I am an authoress because our painting leaves something much to be desired.”

“Dukes can be a great many things.”

She pushed up onto her elbows, meeting his stare once again. Something about being in this folly made her feel... Well, it was as if she were walking back into time all the while knowing she was no longer that young girl. She was trapped in another body

entirely and governed by a mind that had lived lifetimes.

Marjorie was no longer the quiet country girl, nor was she the quiet wallflower of London. She very well was an author with a pet raven who trudged around the countryside in the early morning to catch a glimpse of the sunrise. There were so many pieces of who she was, and it felt as though none of them fit with him watching her.

“Then what are you, Alfie? A brilliant mind with a kind heart? A scholar of Greek mythology and purveyor of antique maps? A formidable duke who carefully builds his empire?”

He glanced down toward the floor, fighting back a grin.

“I don’t know at the moment who I am. But I do know I am glad to see you here again.”

“I can’t stay,” she said quietly, half warning him.

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Then what are you asking me, Alfie? These past few days have been a whirlwind, and I am sure it has been as overwhelming for you as it has been for me.”

“Overwhelming?” he chuckled. “Am I so much...”

She shook her head, pushing up to her hands to sit on the bed. “No, that is the strangest of all. Not too much. I saw you this morning, and I thought it was how it always should have been. You are... perfect.”

He scratched his jaw, wriggling his eyebrows. “Let’s take the boat out on the pond.”

From the moment she climbed through his window, Alfie had admonished any negative thoughts she had about herself, yet he couldn't accept her compliment.

Marjorie grabbed the cushions and blankets and followed him outside to the small rowboat stored beneath a large oak. He readied the boat, then helped her climb in as he pushed off from shore.

She reclined and gazed up at the clouds, smiling to herself as she spotted one that looked like a dragon. It had been their favorite game when they were younger.

"Should I recite some poetry or..."

"Oh, heavens, no," she laughed. "I was beginning to like you."

He knocked his hand against the bottom of her slipper before pulling her feet into his lap. A deep, warm chuckle radiated from his chest. Marjorie rolled her head to meet his unwavering stare.

"Only beginning to like me?"

She didn't miss the roughness in his voice, echoing the stubble shadowing his jaw.

Her heart went up like dry kindling at his smile, and in between the rush of excitement and giddy pleasure of knowing she had his attention, she withdrew her foot from his hands and sat up. "You have your merits."

"You go away to London and return a flirt."

"Is that an accusation, Your Grace?"

"Call me that one more time..."

She leaned forward in her seat, her fingers gripping so hard her knuckles were white, waiting. “What?”

A slow, wicked grin tipped the corner of his mouth, and he reached for her, snatching her up and into his arms. Marjorie squeaked and squirmed, playfully wriggling away as he bent down and whispered into her ear, “I’ll find something else for that mouth of yours to do.”

Her pulse thrummed against her chest as she drew back, attempting to mask the anticipation coursing through her body. But instead of pulling away, she reached out with two fingers and placed them under his chin, tipping his face up to hers.

“You accuse me of flirting, Alfie. But that sounded like a promise.”

He growled.

Alfred Renwick, the Duke of Abinger, growled at her. Goodness.

Pleased with herself, she attempted to slip away only for his hand to reach for her waist, but her foot caught on the hem of her dress, and she fell toward the side of the rowboat.

It happened in a blink. He reached for her as the boat tipped to the side, but it was too late. Alfie and Marjorie splashed into the pond as cushions and blankets rained down around them, and a cool wind shifted through the trees.

“Alfie!” she cried, slapping her hand against the water.

He popped up a moment later through the surface, his curls now plastered flat over his head, giving him a rather rakish appearance. “Good day for a swim.”

“We wouldn’t be in the pond if it weren’t for you.” She couldn’t even pretend to be mad. Laughter slowly unfurled itself from her chest.

He hauled her against him, the two of them kicking to stay afloat. She leaned her head against his shoulder, unable to stop laughing.

“I wouldn’t be out here in the pond if it weren’t for you,” he whispered, cupping her cheek gently.

“In time, yes. I believe that. It has nothing to do with?—”

Alfie kissed her cheek, swimming them a little closer to shore. “It has everything to do with you, Jo. It always has. And my life has been all the better for it.”

“You can’t say something like that...”

“I can.” He stood on the soft, mucky bottom of the pond now, and like he always had, he scooped his hand under her legs to pick her up, so she didn’t need to touch the bottom of the pond. She never cared for the feeling. “And I’m going to remind you every damn day of my life if you’ll allow it.”

\* \* \*

Marjorie jumped from the chair to the mattress, wearing her shift as candlelight flickered across the small glass house. She popped another grape into her mouth and crunched down before swinging her arms out wide,

“Do not test me,” she declared, peeking a glance down at Alfie, then continuing the villain’s speech.

He flashed her another grin as she squinted down at an old journal of hers—the

scribbles of a girl with big dreams always tumbling around in her head.

“I can’t read this next part...”

Alfie sat reclined back against the headboard with his legs crossed, his shirt still off from swimming hours ago. And since then, they had shared a picnic here, and Marjorie was in the middle of a dramatic reading of an old short story if only she could concentrate.

She couldn’t.

Scientifically impossible, she determined. Struck and lovesick of the handsome man grinning up at her. She tossed her long hair back over her shoulder and cleared her throat before she continued. Alfie tugged at her ankle until she fell back onto the bed opposite him.

“Couldn’t take it anymore, I understand.” Marjorie wiggled her eyebrows, then tossed the journal to the floor.

“I haven’t been in here for years.” He traced soft, slow circles over her shin. “I’ve missed you, too.”

She nodded, swallowing hard. Something about this was suddenly no longer playful. The air buzzed with tension between them, the only thing filling up the silence now was her heartbeat, thrumming in her ears and the soft rain falling against the glass.

The smile slipped from his face, and when he glanced up at her again, she swore her future burned bright there in his eyes. More moments like this, stolen and quiet. Comfortable and full of an unspoken understanding.

His hand slid down over the top of her foot, and he moved his other hand to her heel.

His fingers began working over her flesh, and she moaned, slipping down onto her elbows.

“Does that feel good?”

Words escaped her, so she nodded.

“Do you realize I could listen to you read for hours? But that soft moan of yours... I would crawl over broken glass for it to be the last sound I hear before I die.”

Marjorie collapsed back onto the mattress, closing her eyes to the pleasure of his touch. Firm, warm fingers.

“Make it again for me, hmm?”

His hands released her left foot and reached for her right. But instead of listening, she protested, forcing out a small grunt until his hands were back on her.

“Greedy, aren’t you, Jo?”

“Friends share, Alfie.” She pressed her bottom into the mattress, rolling her head to meet his heated stare.

“What I’m about to do to you isn’t what friends do.”

“No?” Anticipation raced up her spine.

He dropped her foot and crawled over her, covering her body with his. “I’m going to make you mine, and I don’t intend to share. Fair warning.”

“Now you sound like a duke.”

He bent his head and raked his teeth over her exposed shoulder. Another breathy moan escaped her.

“Comes with the territory. And based on your pulse at the bottom of your throat, I’m guessing you enjoy it when I tell you what’s going to happen.”

“Are you teasing me?” The words skipped out of her mouth as his tongue traced up the line of her throat.

“Never about you. We can stop whenever you’d like, sweet. But let me taste you again, let me?—”

She nodded before he could finish, raking her fingertips through his hair to draw him in for a kiss. Her lips searched his, desperate suddenly to feel more. She wanted everything with Alfie.

He broke their kiss at last, the two of them struggling to catch their breath. He whispered against her ear, “Do you want that, too, sweet?”

For a writer, she suddenly was at a loss for words. Instead, she rolled to her side and pulled at his buckskins, frustrated suddenly there was so much between them.

He gripped her hand, stalling her progress. “I don’t intend to rush this. Let me make this feel pleasurable for you. I...” He drew her hand up to his mouth and dropped a chaste kiss on the back of it, nearly making her dizzy. “I crave to bring you pleasure, Jo. Always.”

She rolled to her knees and stood on them, towering over Alfie as he lay back on the bed. She noted the panic flashing in his eyes before she grabbed the hem of her shift and pulled it slowly over her body. Marjorie didn’t break eye contact, even when she heard his soft gasp and tossed the shift to the floor of the glass house.

He could have her. Her heart. Her future.

She was his.

### CHAPTER 8

“Look at you,” he said in a reverent whisper. Alfie reached out and traced his finger slowly up her thigh to the swell of her hip.

It was a slow, tortuous touch. She sucked in a breath, wishing suddenly to cover herself. Afraid of what he might think of her body or her boldness at baring it.

He pressed the pad of his thumb into the indentation of her hipbone and shook his head.

“No more hiding, right, sweet?” His tongue darted out to wet his lips as he gazed up at her and hooked his other arm around her thighs. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Alfie.” She wasn’t sure if she was pleading or begging.

“Open your eyes.”

Slowly, she did, in time to feel him draw her close. The warmth of his fingers was a sharp contrast to the goosebumps scattering across her skin. Alfie kissed her inner thigh before his eyes connected with hers.

“We can stop whenever you want. Do you understand?”

Very well. She was begging. Marjorie nodded, finally reaching out to brace herself upright by placing a hand on his shoulder. She felt the corded muscles of his arm

tense beneath her fingers.

“I am going to taste you again, give you pleasure until you scream out my name, and then, and only then will I lay you down and make you mine.”

No words. Her throat was dry, but she felt the dull ache of desire between her legs, listening to him talk to her as though he wanted her and only her. Dear heaven, she craved every word of it.

“Good girl,” he whispered against her skin. His lips moved closer to her core, softly circling her inner thigh and her hip but never where she wished for his lips the most. Never how he had touched her like that morning on the balcony.

Marjorie rocked her hips forward, desperate for his touch. He grazed his teeth on her delicate skin, then slowly moved his hands from his hips, up her stomach, and higher still to the swell of her full breasts.

“Ah, I think you’re teasing me, Alfie.” She pressed her nails into his shoulder, the desire to feel him inside her again almost unbearable. A wicked, sinful craving.

Alfie touched her as though she was precious. The soft grunts he made in the back of his throat as he touched her, cataloging every inch of her body, made her feel like a gift. Made her feel wanted and special.

Made her feel loved.

“Never teasing, sweet. I’ve dreamt of this... Christ, I’m afraid you’ll still leave in the morning and never come back. This is all I’ve wanted and all I’ll ever want.”

The protest on her lips died as soon as he dropped his hand and brushed the soft curls between her legs, pressing his thumb against the small pearl there at her apex. She

clenched her thighs together in a deep sigh.

Majorie still knelt before him, stuck between wanting more or falling back against the mattress. He gripped her hips and tugged her closer until she straddled him.

He drew one finger through her curls, dipping it inside of her, moving through her wetness in a slow exploration. Then added another.

“That feels... Yes.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say. Her head tilted up toward the glass ceiling as the candlelight danced over them, and she rolled her hips, greedy to feel him.

“Lie back, let me taste you.”

Marjorie removed her legs from his waist and lay back, collapsing against the pillows, doing as she was told. Her heart thrummed in her chest, and she felt as though she were on fire, and yet something was still missing.

“Open your legs for me.” He lifted her leg, kissed the inside of her knee, and pressed them wider. The cool air licked her skin. “Perfect.”

He brushed his fingers over her curls again, before sliding his fingers against that small pearl. Her hips bucked at his touch. Alfie grinned, ducking down to finally taste her. She slammed her eyes shut.

“Open, sweet. Let me see you.” His mouth hovered over her, his breath washing over her skin like a caress. “Don’t look away now or I won’t kiss you there.” He slipped two fingers inside slowly, curling them against her channel until she moaned. “I can feel you, so close. So tight around my fingers.” His tongue slid up her seam before he sucked on that one spot, and the fire which had been a low simmer suddenly flamed.

“Be greedy, Jo. Take it. I’ll be here to catch you.”

She shook her head, afraid, even as her body climbed higher still, and he slipped a third finger inside of her, and she screamed out his name into the rainy night.

A private moment, tucked away by the pond where he first asked her to be his wife.

The pleasure washed over her in waves, and she struggled to catch her breath, recognizing finally that she had fallen apart with his fingers still inside her, his mouth kissing her in the most intimate way.

“Beautiful, so damn beautiful,” he whispered.

Slowly, he removed his fingers and pressed one last featherlight kiss to her mound before he climbed upward, kissing her in slow, equal measure as she gathered herself.

He sat up over her and raked his hands through his hair with a grin on his face. His curls bounced, and she thought for a moment she would say something. Did you say thank you to someone after an experience like that? Then she spotted the small markings below the waistband of his buckskins.

She reached closer and pulled it down, tracing her fingertip over the small M.M. at his hip.

The air crushed from her lungs.

“Harry and I were in London. Before he deployed with his regiment, we paid for an artist to tattoo us.”

“Yes, but M. M ., Alfie?”

“It was always going to be us, Jo. Whether you were with me or not. I was always going to love you. I still love you. Let me show you.”

She swallowed back the tears trying to fill her eyes. It wasn't a time to cry. And yet he always said the most beautiful things to her, as if he was just going about his day asking about the book she was reading, or what she wanted for dinner, or if she would like to take a ride through the park.

He told her he loved her so easily she was beginning to believe she was someone who could be loved.

And that would forever be the most precious gift she could have from the duke next door.

\* \* \*

“You've had this for years, and you never said anything.”

“I'm always thinking of you.” He placed his hand over hers, stilling her touch. Something about revealing this secret was the crumbling of his defenses against this woman. Marjorie had crawled back into his room, crashed onto the floor, and then broke his heart all over again that morning when he saw her face for the first time in years.

Someday, he would tell her how after they shared dinner together and she rode home alone, he had stayed up and finally read every letter she had written him over the years. Each word a sharp blade to his heart. But here she was before him.

So damn perfect.

For him, and him alone.

“Don’t leave me.” He swallowed, waiting to feel her push him away, but she remained. Instead, shaking her head and sitting up to help remove his buckskins.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Not after... Did I really make all those sounds?”

He tucked his chin toward his chest to hide his grin. “This time louder, sweet.”

“You’ve been alone too long. You can’t just say things like that.”

This time, they both laughed, but his cock ached, and he was desperate to feel her. To drive inside of her. To hear his name on those sweet lips of hers.

“I love it. A secret tattoo for me.” Marjorie sat up and kissed the small reminder he had carried with him all these years, then tugged at his waistband once again. “Please, Alfie. Please don’t stop.”

The plea set off a whole new fire within, and he quickly stood and undressed, crawling back onto the bed. For all his bravado, he gathered she was nervous. Saw the way her eyes bulged at the sight of him.

Alfie pumped his hand over his cock, biting back a groan. “Are you ready for me?”

She bit her lip and spread her legs. The damn sight of her before him made him somehow harder.

“Good.”

He crawled over her, teasing the head of his cock over her entrance. Her soft pants urged him on.

“There’s no way you are going to fit.” Her hands bracketed his face, the faint hint of

worry in her declaration.

“I will, promise.”

He kissed her, needing to feel all of her as he slowly pushed inside of her. Christ, she was so tight around him. “Breathe,” he whispered against her mouth.

Marjorie nodded.

“Can you feel me? Do you want me to fill you up, sweet?”

“Please,” she whimpered.

Damn, her breathy sighs were intoxicating.

“Tilt your hips up, and I’m going to move real slow.” He slowly pushed forward, hanging on to all his control. He didn’t want to be gentle, but for her, he would. For now, for as long as he could. “You’re so damn perfect, Jo. Do you feel me?”

“So much talking,” she groaned, arching her back off the mattress to press her hips against his.

Pleasure shot straight to his core as she raised her hips to meet him, and the chuckle that had been bubbling up in his chest turned primitive. Years, he had loved her. Years, and now she was here with him, sharing all of herself, urging him on. Giving him a reason when he had spent far too long searching for one outside of the dukedom.

He thrust once more, sinking in the rest of the way. Fire ignited down his spine, and he groaned. Then slowly, he drew back and feathered kisses down her neck before pulling back and driving back inside. Madness, this was pure madness, and he knew

he wasn't dreaming, but he had certainly dreamt of this moment more than once. Had pleased himself to the thought of her wrapped around him, and this... this was so much better.

"Do you like it when I move in and out like this? When I tease you with my cock?"

Red bloomed across her pale skin. "Alfie, your mouth..."

"What about it?"

"You keep speaking... you keep saying such vulgar things, but I don't want you to stop. I like that, too."

He felt her pulse race against the base of her throat. He nipped her skin with his teeth as his control slipped. Greedy, yes. He wanted to mark her as his, claim her completely.

Mine.

"You're taking me so well, sweet. Let me fill you up." He adjusted his hips and drove deeper. "Christ, I need you."

Alfie worked the head of his cock over her, teasing before he slipped back inside. He slid inside of her again, groaning and driving his hips against her, harder. Her body began to tense beneath him.

"You are so tight. Like that sweet, yes. Watch me. Eyes on me, then say my name." He pressed his hand above her mound, slowly driving himself deeper. Feeling her tighten against him. "I want you to shatter around me again. I won't stop until then. And then when you do, it'll be my turn."

He circled the pad of his thumb against that bud above her quim, feeling her tighten before her back arched off the bed, and she shattered around him, pulsing around his cock.

“You took me so well, Jo. Good girl. Let me...” He bent his head and kissed her, licking the seam of her mouth until she opened up to him. On her soft sigh, he thrust his hips harder, swallowing her gasp, and drove into her again.

“You like it when I say vulgar things? Your quim is perfect, so needy for me. I’m close now, Jo.” He braced his arms on either side of her next to the pillow and chased his need, pushing until he felt himself about to burst.

“Next time, I’m going to spend inside you. Tonight, I’ll keep true to my word.” Alfie pulled out and gripped his cock, pumping his hand up and down his hard length until at last, he spent over her stomach.

Marjorie panted, her eyes wide before she glanced down at her stomach, then grinned up at him, suddenly smug.

“You’ll be the death of me, Jo.” He laughed, his voice rough before kissing her for a moment. Lost in the feel of her, riding the wave of his own pleasure. Of how completely...

“I can’t think of anything more perfect than right now.” He kissed her forehead, then rolled off the bed, grabbing a napkin from the picnic basket and wiping her clean. He braced his arms over her, staring down at her smile and the way her eyes sparkled back at him, as though he was finally home.

The moment was suddenly overwhelming. He ducked his head and kissed her throat before her hands circled his cheeks and drew him upward. “Eyes on me, Alfie.”

He grinned.

“I love you. Thank you. You kept your word and ruined me like a perfect gentleman.”

“Only fair. You’ve ruined me for everyone else, sweet. You are it for me, Marjorie Merryweather.”

Marjorie giggled, then fell onto the bed, where they dozed off for a time before finding their way to one another again.

Like it always should have been.

Perfect.

Just like his Marjorie.

### CHAPTER 9

Early morning light filtered through the windows as Marjorie stirred, surprised to roll over and discover Alfie awake and watching her. She stretched and smiled as he dropped a kiss on her forehead.

“Good morning,” he whispered.

She tilted her head down as if to hide, but he peeled back the sheet, refusing to let her slip away.

Stubborn man.

“I’m so hungry,” she said. “I can’t believe we stayed out here all night.”

His voice was low and rough when he replied, “I can.”

“There’ll be no living with you now, Your Grace.”

He reached over and pinched her nose. She wiggled her bum against the mattress, then he dove in and kissed her. First a fun, teasing kiss that slowly melted into desire, simmering and stirring. The kiss made it clear in her mind that, above all, they would no longer be just friends.

“Let’s return to the house,” she said. “Find something to eat.”

“Then?” He brushed the hair back from her shoulder with his finger, drawing small

circles there against her skin.

“I suppose I should return home.”

“Do you have to?”

“Yes. All good things must come to an end,” she said dramatically, though she had a long way to go before she treaded the boards of Drury Lane.

He snickered softly.

“I should see Emily. And I don’t wish for any gossip.”

She rolled away even as he tried to snatch her back into bed, and she glanced over her shoulder and laughed, quickly running her eyes from his head to his feet, soaking up every small detail of him. Admiring how handsome he was, her heart felt happy for once.

“If I don’t find something to eat—” Her stomach cut her off with a grumble.

Alfie nodded, reaching for his buckskins. She laughed. She loved how easy things had become between them. Things hadn’t changed between them—not really. It felt right, as if it should always have been this way.

He tidied the bed linens while she finished dressing, and then he came over and helped her with the fastenings of her dress. She brushed back her hair and held out her hand for his, glancing toward the door of the small glass folly, wondering if he would have a problem leaving. He surprised her and walked out, hand in hand with her.

On the first morning of October, they walked back slowly, talking about this and that,

nothing important. He never let go of her hand. She wasn't sure she had ever had a more perfect morning in her life until she spotted the carriage in the drive at the front of the house.

Alfie stilled beside her, then pushed her behind him, squeezing her hand tight. She peeked around his body, trying her best to see who it was, only coming to the devastating realization that it was his mother, the duchess.

"Go ahead," she whispered. "I will continue home. This doesn't have to be a problem."

He shook his head as his mother spun on the drive, and her eyes met them both, her face settling into stone. She might as well have been Medusa.

Dash it, Marjorie cursed under her breath.

It was still so early. The sun had barely risen, and here she was, found walking hand in hand with the duke.

He glanced toward Hollyvale, staring a beat too long at his room. A sharp, sour taste overtook her mouth.

"Alfie," she said, hating the plea in her voice, or the way she suddenly felt ill to her stomach. Her heart raced in her chest, her palms sweaty. "Alfie, stay with me if it's?—"

"This would have had to happen at some point," he said, and his voice sounded distant. He tore his focus away from the house and back to his mother. "S-stay here. Give me a moment with my mother."

He cast one more look up at his bedchamber window before he set off toward his

mother, too far away for her to hear their conversation. But the duchess shot a hard stare in her direction, nodding abruptly. She'd always hated Marjorie.

It was obvious what had happened.

Marjorie hadn't bothered to fix her hair. She wore yesterday's wrinkled dress now wet from walking through the fields so early. Her slippers were stained. She looked a mess, certainly not fitting for a morning visit in a parlor with the Duchess of Abinger.

She blew out a breath and closed her eyes as a high-pitched ringing pierced her ears, and the sounds of Hollyvale faded away. The same thing had happened when she had heard Percy read her novel out loud to her, claiming it as his. Shock and knowledge that her life was forever changed.

Alfie suddenly turned and waved her forward, and she knew she had little choice but to obey. As much as she wished to turn around and retreat, she couldn't. She clenched her hands as she walked over to Alfie and his mother.

She bowed her head. "Morning, Your Grace."

"Miss Merryweather," his mother sneered. "It is early for a visit, and Alfie here has said he found you walking this morning and invited you for tea."

Marjorie didn't miss the way the duchess swept her gaze over her, picking her apart piece by piece. She was no better than a vulture, eager to tear apart her prey until nothing remained.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Very well," his mother said, and she turned abruptly, setting off into the house.

Marjorie drew back, a little stunned, as Alfie came to stand beside her.

“What did you say to her?” she whispered.

There was a gleam in his eye. “Pretend as if we haven’t seen one another.”

“You told me she was in Bath,” Marjorie countered.

He shook his head. “She was. I don’t know why she is back so soon, but I think her finding me outside of my room has shocked her into being somewhat pleasant for the moment. So, let’s take advantage of that, shall we?”

Marjorie agreed and quickly hurried inside, glancing around the once-familiar halls of Hollyvale. She hadn’t been here in years. It was still as magnificent as ever, though dark due to the intricately carved paneling and collection of tapestries.

She certainly felt the loss of Alfie’s father and Harry. It was much too quiet.

Harry was always singing or humming or laughing, following Alfie around as if he were responsible for hanging the moon in the sky. Their father preferred to play the pianoforte. The house had been alive with noise and laughter and joy, even if it had been made clear to Marjorie that she wasn’t allowed to take part. She had caught glimpses, and it had felt different from her own home, which was a different sort of chaos growing up.

Her parents had visitors from all over the world who shared grand adventures, and they hosted wild parties. Marjorie was always lost in the shuffle, finding a way to keep herself busy and not so lonely. Especially after Emily was sick, and she was in London by herself.

Alfie peeked over his shoulder at her and winked. If she hadn’t been marching after

the stodgy figure of the duchess, she might have allowed herself to smile back. Instead, she quickly glanced at a mirror in the hallway, brushed back her hair, and followed, walking into the parlor and sitting down in the chair offered to her. She sat straight, quiet, and swallowed hard.

“Alfie, I’m so pleased to see you,” his mother said as she sat opposite Marjorie and poured everyone a cup of tea.

The woman was grace and polish—everything, she supposed, a duchess should be.

Shame filled Marjorie’s chest because of how foolish she had been to think, even for a few days now, that she could be Alfie’s duchess. Most days, she never left her room. She preferred it that way, lost in her stories.

She glanced around once more, overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of it all. The duchess had made it a point for years to make sure Marjorie knew her place, and it was not at Hollyvale.

“Why are you back, Mother?” Alfie set his tea down on the table, not touching it, and then refused a scone. Marjorie grabbed one but was afraid to eat it, certain she would be ill. Her stomach was far too unsettled by the unpleasant surprise.

“Well, I received an invitation from Lord Chadwick,” she said. “Surely you remember Percy. He visited here often while you were at school together.”

Marjorie dropped her scone. It fell against the spoon resting on the saucer and clinked against the fine porcelain, before flipping off and falling into her lap. She felt the heat of embarrassment burn her cheeks as she quickly picked it up and pretended to stare into her teacup. Even as that strange whooshing sound washed over her, Alfie’s voice seemed miles away.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well, he has a literary event and has invited me. Such a kind gesture, and you know I always wish to support the arts. He wrote that he hasn’t heard from you, and he wishes for you to attend as well.”

“Have you considered I don’t want to speak to him?” Alfie shot back.

She never let her displeasure slip, instead turning her disgust toward Marjorie.

“Why are you here, Miss Merryweather?”

Marjorie’s eyes widened. “I was taking a walk this morning, and I happened upon Alfie in the park. It has been years since I’ve seen him.”

His mother glanced between them. There was no hiding the fact that she knew. Marjorie wished she could fall through the floor at that moment. She had never felt so small in her life, so insignificant. She glanced once more over to Alfie, waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, she knew she must leave.

“Thank you kindly for inviting me in for tea. But I shall return home. It was lovely seeing you both, truly.” She stood up, trying not to fall when her skirt got stuck in the chair. She pulled the fabric free, jumping as Alfie reached to help her, wishing to give his mother no need for further gossip.

“Have a lovely time in London, Your Grace,” she said as she turned around, leaving the room, only hearing the duchess’s soft, chattering laugh.

“Her rude manners—it’s no wonder why London won’t embrace her,” the older woman remarked. “What a strange creature. I’m surprised she’s not married, though I’m not sure who would want to marry?—”

“Mother,” Alfie warned.

Running out into the drive, placing her hands on her knees, and bending in half, she felt as if she would cast up her accounts at any moment. She glanced up at the sky, then back at Hollyvale. She had no business being there. No business sitting across from the duchess taking tea. She could pretend all she wished, but what had happened between her and Alfie could be nothing more than a fever dream. Now she was certain she needed to head to London.

“Jo,” he said, and she winced at the nickname, furious he would even say so with his mother within earshot. She whirled upon him, balling her hands in front of her.

“Do not tell me what to do,” she hissed. She wished to yell and scream and make a fuss. Her voice was all cold ice. “I was just humiliated in there. And I don’t wish to pretend.”

“Pretend what?” he insisted, reaching out for her. When she shook off his touch, he cursed under his breath and looked up at the sky before storming over to the carriage.

“At least take the carriage home,” he said. “It would be faster. Let me ride with you.” She noticed his white knuckles as he held the door for her. All hope sank in her stomach.

“No, Alfie.”

Still, he insisted. She climbed into the carriage, settling over the bench, watching as his face paled. He stalled in the doorway.

“Damn it,” he said finally after a few minutes, looking over at her. “Damn it all, I can’t get in this carriage.”

She reached her hand out for him, but it was his turn to withdraw.

“No, no pity,” he snapped.

“Then let me go to London,” she said.

“And what? What next?”

“I will return.”

“Will you?” It was clear from his voice that he didn’t believe her. She didn’t believe herself. If she left, she wasn’t certain she could return.

“Please,” he said, his voice snapping. “Please, don’t leave me here.”

“I’m going,” she whispered, her voice breaking. She wiped away the tears on her cheeks. “Be sure to answer my letters this time.”

He pushed himself away from the carriage door and slammed it shut, stuffing his hands into his pockets as she took off. She glanced behind her through the small rear window as Alfie grew smaller in the drive, never moving.

She had been the biggest coward for running away, when she hoped leaving would be the right answer.

And reclaiming what was stolen from her.

### CHAPTER 10

Marjorie spun, her arms akimbo on her waist, and glanced over her room, which now looked like a ravaged wasteland—papers strewn about, closet doors open, dresses scattered here and there.

She couldn't find anything. Nothing helpful, anyhow. She had found a mask from that first evening when Percy had attempted to kiss her, and she revealed her secret. But what would it prove? She needed something irrefutable.

"Where is it? Where is it?" she muttered to herself. Hearing something in the hallway, she poked her head out.

Her mother, all tall elegance and easy charm, spun around as her cherished spaniel danced around her feet. "Oh, I didn't know you had returned. I'm glad I caught you." She adjusted her bonnet, revealing beautifully lush chestnut hair and large, amber eyes. "Your father and I are leaving. We'll be spending a few months in Scotland. We will return for Christmastide and see you and your sister then."

Marjorie forced a smile, closing the door tighter behind her so her mother couldn't see the mess inside. "Lovely."

"And your plans?" her mother asked after a moment of silence. Regina Merryweather, charismatic, flighty, and clueless about her daughters.

"I've returned for a literary event," Marjorie said, which wasn't a complete lie. "But I promised Emily I'd return to the country soon."

“Very well.” Her mother clucked at the dog tripping over her skirts, before bending down and scooping the poor beast into her arms. “Keep out of trouble. Don’t forget to bring your lady’s maid with you wherever you go. Your father and I have agreed to a new production in the spring. It wouldn’t do to have a scandal.”

“Right, of course,” Marjorie said. “We understand the rules, Re—Mother.”

Marjorie winced, nearly slipping. Emily preferred to call her by her Christian name instead of something familiar like Mother.

“Goodbye, darling.”

She waited as the older woman slowly strolled down the hallway. Once her mother was out of sight, Marjorie dove back into her room, slammed the door shut, and fell to her knees to try to stuff herself under her bed to see if something had fallen underneath.

In all her years of writing, there had always been proof of her drafts, notes, and scribbled pages. She had saved everything, which was why she had had that manuscript to begin with. It needed at least another pass of revisions, and she had put it aside, not ready to work on it yet. Her current project had held her interest far more. But the basket where she had stored the draft was empty.

She worried he had also obtained her notes somehow.

She crawled out from under the bed, sat on the floor, crossing her knees, and blew out a deep breath. For the one hundredth time that day, Alfie crossed her mind, but she couldn’t afford to think of him now.

Her hands fell against her lips as she remembered him kissing her—soft and searching. Their time together had been so brief. She hated driving away, watching

him remain there, stuck, but she had been furious with him too. He hadn't said a word to his mother, keeping her instead as a secret just as Percy had done. She hated feeling as though she didn't belong.

She stood up and slowly righted her room, searching through the stacks of papers for one book and another, furious she couldn't find any notes. She had searched everywhere. Within an hour, her room was somewhat more presentable, but she was no closer to proving Percy had stolen her work.

What was she to do? Break into his home and try to find the original manuscript herself? No, that was ridiculous, and she didn't have time. She had to think.

She drummed her fingers on her lips and studied her room before a rush of excitement coursed through her. There was one other place. She stormed toward her bed and lifted the mattress, but it was too heavy. It collapsed before she could get a peek of what was underneath. Determined, she shoved against it, pushing it off the base to reveal a collection of notebooks—journals she had kept growing up, filled with scribbles and poetry.

She collected the notebooks and sat on the floor, slowly going through each until finally, at last, she stumbled upon notes for that manuscript. This would bring her justice, would bring about the end of Percy claiming her work as his. He couldn't deny it. She had proof.

The mattress was too heavy, so she left it as it was, stored the notebooks in a basket in the back of her wardrobe, and carried the one with the notes with her to a carriage outside.

Almost an hour later, the carriage arrived in front of his publisher's office.

Notebook in hand, she approached the small building, its windows wavy and dark.

Marjorie attempted to open the door but realized it was locked. She knocked on the door next, but there was no answer. She leaned closer, cupping her hand over her eyes and leaning in until she could see the dark interior of the shop.

Strange, no one was there.

“Damn,” she said. If she could prove the novel was hers, she had hoped the publisher would stop running the presses. She stayed in front of the building for the remainder of the afternoon, first walking back and forth in front of the shop, and then waiting in the carriage, lying down, and sitting up, always moving to keep her mind busy.

But after several hours, she knew there was only one more option.

Marjorie needed to find Percy and confront him.

\* \* \*

It had been nearly six days, and Alfie couldn't remain in the country any longer.

“What are you doing?”

His mother burst through the open door to his bedchamber as he helped his valet pack.

“Leaving.”

“You only just left your room. How can you go to London? Stay here a little longer with me where you will feel safe.”

“No,” he said simply.

Since her return, his mother had driven him mad, going on about this and that—improvements to the house, trips she wanted to take, gowns she wanted to order. All of which he had zero interest in. His mind was only ever on Marjorie. He had remained behind, watching her leave, and felt like the biggest failure. He wouldn't do it any longer.

“Alfred, you can't leave.”

He spun to face his mother. “You threatened me with a doctor if I didn't leave my room, and now you wish for me to stay? Which is it, Mother?”

“Why the rush to London?”

He debated whether he should tell her the truth. And in his hesitation, he realized he no longer cared about her opinion. Let her say what she wished; at the end of the day, he was duke. His father had passed, his brother was now buried. He couldn't remain living in the ghost of one life because he was too afraid to step into the new one.

“Aren't you leaving?” he said. “You returned and told me that you were going to Percy's event.”

“Yes, I was planning on leaving tomorrow. Why don't you wait, and we'll go together?”

“I don't have time.”

His mother collapsed dramatically at the edge of the chaise, clearly exasperated. “You have all the time in the world. You are duke, darling. The world works for you .”

He shook his head, putting his hands on his hips and staring down at the floor. He

hated how he felt—how panic coursed through him... and rage. He was furious with himself.

“I love Marjorie, Mother.” He held up his hand before she could counter. “You can have your opinion, but she will be my wife, and she needs me. Remaining here is failing her. I cannot let her go to London and face what she must face alone.”

“Face what?” his mother asked.

“Percy stole from Marjorie.”

“Stole?” she asked. “Stole what?”

It felt wrong to tell the truth. It felt like it was Marjorie’s story to share.

“Percy stole a manuscript.”

“Marjorie has a manuscript?” His mother scoffed. “That makes sense. Even the on-dits know she’s always writing or has her nose in a book.”

“Yes, well, she’s published, Mother. She uses a pen name but is very successful.”

“A published author! Of course. She’s always been a scandal. First her parents, now her. The entire family wishes for all the attention of London.”

“You could help sway that opinion,” he said.

She lifted her nose in the air. It was answer enough.

“You can, or you don’t have to. It doesn’t change the fact that when I return we will be engaged, and you will be moving into Leebrook Cottage.”

“There’s no need to talk to me that way, Alfred.”

“I almost remained in this room, locked away, while you were in Bath. Leaving my heart here, ignoring everything I wanted because I wished to make you and Father happy. But I realized something,” he said, and he held his hands out, his voice shaking. “Father is no longer here. And I will never make you happy.”

“That’s not true,” she interjected.

He shook his head, continuing, “I don’t know what you want. You made up your mind about Marjorie Merryweather a long time ago. And if that is what you want to believe, then so be it. But she is the only woman I’ve ever loved. And I’m leaving for London today. Not tomorrow, right now, because I have to. I don’t care about the challenges of getting to her, I’ll damn well crawl the whole way if it means I can hold her once more. She doesn’t deserve to be taken advantage of just because the rest of the ton thinks she is a strange and quiet wallflower. The praise Percy is receiving belongs to Marjorie.”

“Well,” his mother said, “if that is how you feel...”

Alfie marched out of the room. “Goodbye, Mother.”

He wouldn’t waste his time any longer. He stood at the front of the carriage in the drive, collapsing his hands onto his knees and steadying his breath even when he felt as though he might be sick.

His valet handed him a small vial. “Try this, Your Grace. It will help.”

Alfie stood up, glancing at his valet. “Help with what?”

“Your nerves, Your Grace.”

He grabbed it from his valet, not caring about what others would say, only that he knew he must reach Marjorie. And soon.

Alfie would stand beside her to ensure she received the recognition she deserved because, above all else, he was proud of her. She didn't deserve to be silenced, or pushed aside, or disregarded as a scandal because of her parents and their occupation. She was not something to be lumped into a group. She had worth all her own.

He grabbed the vial and tossed it back before jumping into the carriage and slamming his eyes shut, fighting back the waves of nausea as that day returned—the memory of his own carriage accident and the painful months of recovery which followed.

He would reach Marjorie. No matter what.

### CHAPTER 11

October blew into London in a cold, dark rush.

Marjorie glanced up at the sky before darting out of her carriage, fearful the storm clouds would unleash a driving rain down upon her.

She couldn't meet Percy looking utterly bedraggled.

Her lady's maid followed quickly behind as she knocked on the door of Percy's London home and waited. If his mother or sister answered, she was sure to be sucked into staying for tea, and she wanted to make this as brief as possible.

Finally, the door cracked open to reveal the stodgy butler, Herbert. "Yes, Miss Merryweather?"

"Yes, good afternoon." The first fat raindrop struck the side of her face. She sputtered, surprised, then wiped it away. "I'm here to see Lord Chadwick. I will make it brief."

"He is not interested in seeing you."

Oh? She had feared that as well. "Is he home?" she pressed.

Unfettered, the butler blinked slowly. "He will not see you. He has a previous engagement."

“Miss,” her lady’s maid leaned in to whisper. “The viscount is there in the window.”

Marjorie whipped around to see the curtains fluttering.

The blackguard!

“Now listen, Herbert. I understand you have a job to do, but if you do not let me in, heaven?—”

“For Christ’s sake, Marjorie,” the viscount whined from behind the door. “A touch dramatic, don’t you think?”

She folded her arms, ignoring the rain slashing against the stone facade of the building and splashing back upon her. “I only need a moment, my lord.”

There was more mumbling behind the doorway before Herbert stepped aside and she was allowed into the front hall.

Percy was immaculate. His suit bespoke, not a hair out of place on his head, and the grin on his face didn’t falter.

Marjorie sucked in a deep breath, unsure of where to start or what to say. “I need to speak with you,” she said, her voice wavering. She hated herself for it.

He nodded tersely, turned on his heel, and strode toward the first room off the front hall—a small sitting room. She walked in, dismissing her lady’s maid to stand outside the door before he shut it with a loud click .

“I’m very busy,” he said curtly.

Marjorie clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m aware. I understand you have another

event tonight.”

“So, you’ve read my book?”

She studied his face. Nothing, not even his posture, changed to give away a hint that he suspected she knew.

“I heard the book.” That caught his attention because ever so slightly he tipped his chin forward in anticipation. “Percy?”

“I don’t have all evening,” he snapped.

Marjorie smiled and stepped forward, balling her hands next to her hips. “Yes, you’re very busy, I understand. But that book you read was mine.”

“Your book?” He laughed, and it was such an ugly sound.

“It was an old draft of mine. And it’s gone missing. I can’t find anything. And when word spread about your new novel, I thought I would attend your salon and listen to you read from it. Imagine my surprise when you read my novel back to me.”

He scoffed. “What are you accusing me of?”

Marjorie wished she was taller, bigger, and louder at that moment. She hated feeling stuck as the quiet, strange wallflower. “That was my manuscript,” she said. “And it’s gone missing.”

“Why does that concern me?”

She felt the embarrassment rush to her cheeks. There were only two nights it could have gone missing, and guessing at how he cut her off after the second, she knew

very well when he stole her manuscript.

“Do you honestly forget?”

“Marjorie,” he said in warning. “I don’t want this to become ugly. I know you have aspired to become an author for years now.”

“And I am one. That is my manuscript. You stole it.”

“You can’t prove it,” he sneered.

And even though she had the journal, she wasn’t ready to confront him with that yet, still hoping he would come clean. And this could be solved quietly, out of public and away from the rest of London. She was already embarrassed enough as it was. Because for him to have stolen the manuscript meant he had been in her bedchamber, something he now swore to forget entirely.

“Marjorie,” he said, “I don’t want to embarrass you. I understand you may be jealous. But I don’t know what you’re speaking of. And I do have a very large event tonight that I must attend. I’m reading again. If you have an issue, please write in the future. We have no further business with one another.”

“We were engaged.” Those words were louder. Still, they weren’t enough.

“We were never engaged,” he corrected. “They were promises—promises that never resulted in a marriage. We haven’t been with one another for years now. And I don’t wish to see you again. I don’t know what delusions you have in your head. We all know how you spin webs of lies and wicked tales to help spend the time as a lonely spinster in London.”

“That’s going to be your answer?” she asked. “Are you sure?”

“Am I sure?” he scoffed once more. “Marjorie, I don’t know what you’re speaking about. The book is my own, published under my name. And whether you want to accuse me of stealing it or not, you have no proof that I did so. And now I must leave.” He walked to the door and tore it open, pointing for her to follow out. His dismissal felt like he struck her cheek.

She had followed him around, so sickly in love. She was younger then, and to think what she missed because of it, who she missed because of it. It left her feeling hollow.

“Very well, Percy,” she said. “I gave you a chance. But if you’ve chosen?—”

“Goodbye.”

She nodded, gesturing for her lady’s maid. As they ran outside in the pouring rain and into the carriage, Marjorie folded forward, crying and laughing all the same. She felt as if she were going mad.

“What is it, miss?” The maid’s concern was clear.

Marjorie sat up, shaking her head and wiping her tears. “I don’t think I can be a wallflower any longer. Can you help me ready for this evening?”

“Tonight, miss?”

“I have an important event. It’s time all of London knows who I really am.”

\* \* \*

Hours later, the rain hadn’t let up.

Despite her best efforts, Marjorie arrived at the event soaked through. She brushed back her hair and sniffed, the cold October night chilling her to the bone as she stepped inside the grand hall. Busy and buzzing, it was full of London society.

She had given Percy a chance to do this quietly. But he had chosen to lie, deny it, and make her feel as if she had gone mad when it was her truth and her work. Did he expect her to be quiet and let him take credit?

Probably.

There weren't many friendly faces in the audience. In fact, many people gave her strange looks. The carriage hadn't been able to pull close, and pressed for time, she had jumped out and walked a few blocks. Instead of slipping in quietly, she stood out, her dress clinging to her body, her skin covered in gooseflesh as she shivered, sick to her stomach with the knowledge of what she was about to do.

She took her seat and blew out a steadying breath as the first gentleman came to make an introduction. Her palms were sweaty, and she clutched her reticule in her hands. Her back was straight, her knees ready to launch her to standing so she could cut through the crowd, wasting no time.

Rain slashed against the window of the hall, loud and relentless.

An older gentleman, tall with rounded shoulders and wild, silver side whiskers, approached the podium and gave a short nod before his mouth pulled into a smile. "Thank you all for attending this evening. You certainly have heard by now how this novel has swept through London, and we are lucky to have the author here tonight reading for us." He held up his hands in a grand sweeping measure. "Without further ado, please welcome Lord Chadwick to the stage."

Percy stepped onto the stage, clutching the novel and giving a brief wave to the

audience. He leaned in and whispered to the older gentleman before taking his place before the podium.

Marjorie stood up, then dashed onto the stage. The older gentleman laughed. “Miss, you can’t be up here,” he said, calmly trying to shoo her away. Percy laughed and pointed, playing off the whole event as if it were some pre-planned jest.

But Marjorie persisted, turning around to face the audience. For weeks now, she had been terrified to admit the truth, but finally, it poured out of her. “I am the true author of this novel.”

The audience gasped collectively, then a few laughs began, followed by mumbled insults. She looked upon the audience, her eyes eager to find one friendly face but finding none.

Percy, a few feet away, growled. “What are you doing?” he snapped. “Get off the stage, Marjorie. Enough with this nonsense.”

“I am the true author of this novel,” she repeated, louder this time. “You may know me, if at all, as Marjorie Merryweather. But for the past few years, I have written successfully as M.E. Gastrell.”

The crowd gasped. A few chairs scraped against the floor as people stood and began making their way out of the room.

“Wait!” She held up her hands, pleading. “Wait, please.”

“Are we expected to believe you’re M.E. Gastrell?” one man called out.

Percy stepped in front of her.

“Exactly, good man. I am sad to say this woman is not speaking from reality. Please, is there a surgeon here? Someone who can help us?”

“I’m fine and of sound mind.” And though she glared at Percy, she kept her voice soft and even. In her experience, the male sex never appreciated a woman confident in her voice. Funny that they didn’t prefer wallflowers either.

“Do not humiliate me,” he said slowly. “Get off the stage now.”

“I can prove it,” she called out.

Boos erupted.

Marjorie sensed the tide was turning, and the momentary lapse of them allowing her to continue was quickly fading. She felt she would soon be forcibly taken off the stage, marked forever as a madwoman: Marjorie Merriweather, the crazed spinster who hangs around with her raven and writes until her hands are stained black.

“I can prove it!” She dug through her reticule, pulling out her journal. “These are my notes from when I was writing this manuscript. The viscount obtained the original and published it under his name, but it’s my story. It’s been stolen from me, and I wish to make that right.”

Percy laughed, a cruel, wicked sound cut short when the door swung open.

Across the stage stood Alfie, his friendly green eyes now filled with untapped rage. He marched forward down the aisle and stepped onto the stage before ripping off his coat and draping it over Marjorie.

“Miss Merryweather is telling the truth, and I ask you to hear her pleas instead of dismissing her.”

Percy mumbled something under his breath, and Alfie spun around to face him. “We will speak after. Now, I want an apology. Go ahead. Make one.”

“I will not be making an apology,” Percy said. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You have. That book is hers, and you will no longer be profiting from it.”

Soon, a few more people filed into the room—two gentlemen and the Duchess of Abinger herself.

Marjorie’s hands wouldn’t stop shaking as her heart drummed in her ears. She stuffed her hands inside the pockets of Alfie’s coat, surprised to feel paper against her fingertips.

“Go ahead,” Alfie urged.

She slowly removed the papers from his coat, stunned to discover they were the notes she had been searching for all along.

Alfie leaned forward, his lips brushing against her ear. “They were in that desk at the folly all along.”

He reached for her hand and clasped it, turning back toward the crowd.

\* \* \*

“Finally, the formidable Duke of Abinger returns to London,” someone shouted from the crowd.

The stage swayed beneath Alfie as he clutched Marjorie’s hand, his mouth dry as he scanned the crowd.

When he had entered, it had been chaos. Now, an eerie silence.

He cleared his throat, glancing down at her for a moment. At least she wasn't shivering any longer under his coat.

"I have known Marjorie's secret these past years, and she tells the truth. Along with her journals, I have her original notes with dates."

"They could be fake," Percy shot back. Alfie glanced over his shoulder, narrowing his eyes at his former friend, satisfied when Percy dropped back a step.

"I welcome anyone to come and examine them," Alfie continued. "I have bought the company and the printing presses of this publisher. The story will no longer be published as Chadwick's work because it does not belong to the viscount. Yes, it is true Miss Merryweather is M.E. Gastrell, and I urge you to consider holding back your disbelief when so many of you are true fans. It was an act of bravery today to confront Lord Chadwick onstage in front of you all. And it is just a sliver of who Marjorie Merryweather is as a person. If you must condemn anybody, it is not her today, but the man who is profiting off her hard work."

Marjorie sagged against him, and he peeked over once more at Percy, who was slipping toward the edge of the stage.

"I will pursue legal action if the viscount does not stop claiming this novel as his own. My lawyers are here in attendance today along with my mother." Alfie pointed his hand toward the two gentlemen standing by his mother, who had been working out how best to handle Marjorie's conundrum these past few days.

"She is a dear friend," he continued, "and she deserves credit for her hard work. She certainly doesn't deserve any of your scrutiny."

He heard her softly cry beside him, but he couldn't chance looking away from the crowd who sat there quietly, as if they were seeing a ghost. An uncomfortable quiet washed over the room at his pleas.

His mother stood at the back of the room and clasped her hands together. "Ladies and gentlemen, as this event has been canceled for the evening, I have refreshments in my ballroom, and I invite you all there now. Perhaps Miss Merryweather will join us to read."

Alfie couldn't fight the urge any longer. He glanced down at Marjorie, worried his mother had asked too much. But she nodded, squeezing his hand as if silently saying, "I love you."

Despite it all, it had been a long, horrible ride to London. He felt ill. But he wouldn't let that ruin her night. She would have her moment, and he would see that all of London fell at her feet, as they should, because Marjorie Merriweather was no wallflower.

"I would be delighted, Your Grace." Her voice wavered, but she forced a smile.

Alfie wished for nothing more than to gather her up in his arms and kiss her, to press his nose to her hair and smell her, to feel the weight of her in his arms.

But not now.

As the crowd began to filter out of the crowded hall, Alfie released Marjorie's hand and stormed toward Percy who remained on the side of the stage.

"An apology, Percy," Alfie demanded. "Now."

"I haven't done anything."

“Not to me, you blackguard, to Marjorie.” He held his hand up, ignoring how it shook. “Now, damn it.”

Percy scoffed. “If Marjorie is so prolific?—”

“It’s not yours,” Alfie snarled.

“Like how she’s not yours?”

“Actually—” Marjorie spun from her spot on the stage and slowly walked up to Alfie. She laced her hand back into his and smiled. “I believe you told me earlier today we were never engaged.”

Alfie was a little stunned by Marjorie’s confession, fighting back a pleased smile. “When we were at Eton together, you stole my work, and I allowed it to happen because I was never like you. I couldn’t walk into a room and demand attention. I hated that about you, envied it even. But we are no longer schoolboys, and you cannot live your life taking whatever you please, Percy.”

“I didn’t realize I would be receiving a lecture from you. I heard you couldn’t?—”

Marjorie stepped forward. “An apology, Percy. And then you can be on your way.” She reached into her reticule and tossed his mask at him.

“I’m sorry.” He sneered as he lifted the mask from the floor. “Will that suffice?”

Tempting as it was, no. “A sincere apology. With feeling.”

Alfie wanted nothing more than to toss a fist into his former friend’s smug face. But he relented, falling back to Marjorie as she held up her hand.

Percy rolled his eyes. “I don’t believe I have it in me at the moment.”

“Let me help, then,” Alfie said. “You will apologize, or you can admit your theft to the entire audience. If you do not, you will be hearing from my lawyers because you will be paying back all royalties and damages to the publisher. Including the lovely advance you received, which we both know you have already spent.” He turned to Marjorie. “Is that better?”

She shrugged, swallowed by Alfie’s coat. “Yes, I think it will do fine. Given you were never able to commit to our engagement because of...” she dropped her voice to a cold whisper, “ financial difficulties , I think an apology is fair given your sudden windfall.”

Faced with the audience, Percy quickly glanced between Marjorie and Alfie. “We were never engaged.”

“News to me, but please continue. I don’t think we have time for specifics.” Marjorie pasted on a shaky smile.

“I want to thank you all for attending this evening. It seems there has been some confusion.”

“Try again, Chadwick,” Alfie hissed.

“Ladies and gentleman, it appears Miss Merryweather’s contributions to this novel were more significant than I first believed, and for that I apologize. However, let us not forget it is through my influence the work found this audience, and for that, I am proud.”

It was absurd. Every last word, and yet, she found she didn’t care.

Percy turned and bowed with a smug grin on his face before storming off stage. Marjorie finally sighed, feeling the stage waver once again under her feet as she was left there to face the confused crowd. She spun toward Alfie and stepped forward until they were toe-to-toe.

“You came,” she said softly.

“For you? Always.”

“Will you marry me, then?”

He cupped her cheeks and pulled her down for a slow, lingering kiss. “Happily.”

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### One Year Later

Marjorie grinned at Alfie over her teacup, titling her face up to the light peeking through the shady oak at Hollyvale. Beside her, Emily was deep in conversation with Lady Barrington about gardening and slugs.

She reached forward and placed her empty plate down, only a few crumbs left behind of the tea sandwiches and scones she had arranged for the small house party of close friends and family. She never envisioned she would leave behind the days of writing novels in her room and climbing through windows of childhood friends to this—hosting as duchess and openly celebrating her latest novel’s release.

Marjorie couldn’t help but sneak another glance at her husband as he stood a few feet away, speaking with her father, George.

She excused herself and rose, feeling the need to slip her hand into his. She had been planning this party for weeks now, and thankfully, it had all gone according to plan.

“Marjorie, darling,” her father boomed with a glass of lemonade in his large hand. “You must convince the duke to take you on a honeymoon. Go on a grand tour. Your book is finished.”

“We had a honeymoon,” she said, feeling the tension in her shoulders melt as Alfie clasped her hand. “And it was lovely here at Hollyvale.”

The truth of it was, while Alfie continued to become more comfortable traveling, he wasn’t ready to journey past London. She had faith he would get there in time.

“Nonsense, you two are young. You need to travel and see the world.”

“No, none of that. I need grandbabies,” her mother insisted, swooping in. “It is high time, and I would be a fabulous grandmother. They can call me Grandmama.”

“Pardon?” The dowager duchess’s bright blue eyes widened. “Did I hear mention of a baby?”

It was foreign once, in regard to Marjorie, but she had caught her mother-in-law’s appreciation in passing more often than not. Never directly, of course.

Alfie leaned down, gently knocking his arm against her shoulder. “Well, we’ve done it now, Jo,” he whispered. “One mention and all of London will be on alert.”

His soft chuckle was a smooth balm to her nerves, and the sudden blush creeping up to singe her cheeks.

“You and Father are busy enough,” Marjorie said diplomatically.

“Tut, tut,” the dowager said with a small laugh. “The world can wait if there’s a baby. Though I must warn you, I will spoil the child often and lavish them with all the sweets they can manage. And a pony. Every child should have a pony of one’s own.”

Alfie drew back, his brows drawn in frustration even as Marjorie stifled a chuckle. “Mother? I wasn’t allowed such?—”

“You are my son. Everyone knows a grandmother is meant to be fun.”

She couldn’t help herself. Marjorie laughed, enjoying the small moment between her husband and mother-in-law and, to some extent, herself. Everything was far more amenable since the wedding.

“Of sweets and late bedtimes and new toys?” Marjorie grinned. “And a pony, of course. She is right about the pony, Alfie.”

“Right, precisely.” The dowager gestured toward Marjorie with a hint of a smile, the sun glinting off her ruby bracelet in the warm September afternoon sun. “See, darling, Marjorie understands.”

Alfie rolled his eyes and hooked his arm through Marjorie’s. “It seems you have lots to discuss then. So while you do, please excuse me while I steal my wife away for a moment.”

Her parents adored the dowager even while, at best, the older woman tolerated them. But that farce apparently didn’t withstand the rumor of a baby.

Marjorie subtly wiped her forehead, feeling a tad nauseous. “I never thought I would escape that conversation, Alfie. Thank you.”

“Much too long,” he said. “Much too knowing ...”

“Wait, come here,” her sister said, flagging her over. Emily adjusted her glasses, glancing at Alfie’s hand clutched in Marjorie’s. “Have you seen the paper this morning?”

“No,” she hedged, fighting back the blush at the memory of what she had been doing instead.

“You haven’t received a letter from Georgie recently, have you?” Emily pushed herself up to stand, drawing Marjorie and Alfie away from the rest of the party and over instead by the arbor drawing in the last remnants of roses for the year. The air was perfumed with the saccharine smell of honey and myrrh.

Alfie pointed a finger at her twin. “Don’t you dare ‘Your Grace’ me, Em. Is there

something the matter?"

She smacked the paper, holding it out for them to see.

"This is a gossip rag," Alfie corrected, "not the newsprint."

"It's rumored there's an..." She paused, dropping her voice. "There's going to be an auction at a new gentlemen's club in Town where well-bred women will be selling their virtue to the highest bidder. And her name is rumored to be included on the list."

"Georgie won't step into a ballroom, never mind participate?—"

"Her father and brother have ruined the family with their gambling debts." Alfie reached for the paper, quickly scanning the few lines. "Best to write to her and find out. We might be able to change her mind, maybe help her somehow."

Emily bristled. "Maybe she wishes to be ruined, Your Grace."

"But like that?" Marjorie added. "No, it doesn't sound like Georgie at all. She's the sweetest, most soft-spoken person I know, so having her be named out of spite doesn't make much sense either. I agree. I will write to her today."

"Very well." Emily nodded, studying the two of them again. "I don't mean to keep you. Carry on, love birds. I must sneak away for a while. Mrs. Thompson needs help with her daughter who has the croup, and I have a poultice to make."

Marjorie and Alfie continued on through the arbor, walking deeper into the gardens and away from the others.

When they were finally out of view, she stopped and turned toward him.

"Georgie may be quiet, but I'm sure there's been a mistake," Alfie said before

Marjorie could speak. She hated at times how he could read her mind. And she loved it in equal measure some days, too.

“I know.” She bit her bottom lip, glancing over her shoulder before continuing, “Do you think they know? I swear Emily does. She shared her apple scone with me this morning, and she is absolutely wild about them. And then she watched me take every bite, as if expecting me to cast up my accounts right there at the table.”

Alfie reached out, placing his hand protectively over her stomach. “You’re not hiding a book, Jo. Sooner or later, they will see you are with child.”

She loved when he touched her this way. Marjorie adjusted her shawl, laughing at herself. “I want to keep it our secret a little longer. Just you and me. Us, three.”

He tipped her face up to his, love clearly etched in his eyes. “A year, and here you are with me at Hollyvale, hosting a party as my duchess and carrying my daughter.”

“It could be a son.”

“Maybe, but I like to think a daughter would allow for more practice.”

She licked her lips as he pressed his thumb at the corner of her mouth. “You do so love to practice, dear.”

“I strive to do my best for my duchess.”

Before she could roll her eyes, his lips met hers, and she swore he stole her breath away. A sweet, lingering kiss that carried more than desire—promises.

“I have something to give you,” he said. “It arrived earlier this morning, and I should have waited until this evening when everyone heads to bed, but I cannot wait one moment longer.”

He drew her deeper into the walled garden, then reached into his vest, removing a small package in brown paper wrapping.

Marjorie sank down to the painted bench, grabbing his present with a giddy smile. “Presents, Alfie? You were exasperated at your mother only a few moments ago, but I hope you know you do the same.”

With a small shrug, he winked at her. “I love you. I will give you whatever you wish, sweet. Don’t you know that by now?”

She swept her gaze up the length of him, a smile playing on her lips. “Hmmm.”

He sat down beside her, knocking his knee against her magenta skirts. “Go on.”

Slowly, Marjorie peeled back the wrapping and ran her fingers over a beautiful leather journal. “I caught you admiring it on Bond Street when we were in the city...”

His voice trailed off, and still, Marjorie regretfully felt a pang of disappointment. Almost a year later, and still Percy was haunting their lives. He had long fled London after initially paying back a small amount of the advance he had received. Last they heard, he was in the Scottish Highlands, leaving his mother and sisters to deal with his bad debts.

“A fresh start this time around, Jo. Your first novel as the Duchess of Abinger, not M.E. Gastrell. No more hiding.”

She laughed, reaching to wipe the tears springing up to her eyes. “This is hardly fair, darling. I will cry at anything now. And here I am weeping over a journal. You must think me mad.”

Alfie reached over and cupped her face with his hands, wiping away the tears with the pads of his thumbs. “I am so proud of you—today, yesterday, and every day until

forever. You must know that. Cry if you must, but you won't do so alone for as long as I draw breath into my lungs. You are no wallflower. You are incredibly strong and talented and kind, and I am thankful every day I have the honor of calling you mine."

She peeked up at him before bringing her lips to his, melting into his touch. Allowing herself to fall because finally she understood she would always be caught.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading Marjorie and Alfie's story. I hope you enjoyed it! Find out what happens next when...

Desperate to escape ruin, Lady Georgiana makes a daring gamble to auction off her virtue—but when her brother's best friend wins her hand, will their marriage of convenience spark a love worth risking it all? **WINNING THE WALLFLOWER'S HEART** releases on January 14, 2025.