



The Worst Possible Match (The Marriage of Inconvenience #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: How can she find love and happiness with the man who ruined her life?

Emily Clay grew up in a boarding school, never knowing who her family was or where she belonged. When she finds a gentleman who meets her guardians requirements for a suitor, shes delighted to have a chance for love and a home of her own. But then one mistaken kiss on a darkened balcony changes everything.

Alexander Westcott had suffered much at the hands of his father, but now that the man was gone, Alex could take care of his mother and sisters on his own. He even had a delightful marriage prospect for himself only to have his plans dashed when he finds himself married to a complete stranger, whose fiery disposition matches his own temper.

He wants to find a way to save their future together, but hes not sure if he can convince his new wife to fight for their marriage too. Can they come together to find the perfect spark, or is their marriage doomed to burn down in flames?

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Chapter One

March 1819

Emily Clay never could have imagined that holding hands with a gentleman under the dinner table would make her feel so scandalous.

She did everything possible to appear unaffected. Using her right hand, she took a sip from her glass, then used the serviette to dab her lips. The Duke and Duchess of Norland, her guardians, were talking about some thing or other, along with the duke's mother, the Dowager Duchess of Norland, and Emily smiled to bear the look of someone invested in the conversation.

Meanwhile, her left hand was secretly occupied, and her thoughts were focused entirely on that one thing. Though her cheeks burned, Emily was certain it would not be visible in the dim candlelight. Her heart pounded inside her chest, and were it not for the current discussion, she was certain it would be plenty audible to anyone in the room. Any time Mr. Richard Evans brushed his thumb over the back of her ungloved hand, Emily had to bite her lip to keep from squealing with delight. She didn't want to do anything that might jeopardize all the hard work she'd put into finally finding someone to marry.

She'd already met countless suitors, only for each one of them to be shot down for having any minor flaw in the duke's detailed perspective. He had been meticulous in permitting callers, which meant Emily had endured multiple seasons in a row, nearly marking her as a wealthy spinster for good. But luckily, just after her twentieth birthday, they had finally discovered the perfect gentleman.

Mr. Evans seemed to meet the duke's lengthy list of requirements. A gentleman of good breeding, despite not having a title, though he had more wealth than some titled gentlemen. His manners were pristine and his character impeccable. He had not an ounce of depravity or disgrace in his family or history. He was well-educated and had traveled much to expand his mind. All points in his favor.

But of perhaps more importance, he met Emily's simple qualifications. He was good and kind. He spoke softly and honestly. He did not care for London society and had a country estate that he longed to return to, with plenty of horses and acres for horseback riding, which would suit Emily and her mare, Morgana, just fine. To her great astonishment, he was not put off by the duke's boorish behavior, and he laughed affably with both the dowager and the duchess. He had even charmed the duke's son before little Theodore had been returned to the nursery. And he did not care that Emily had been brought up in a boarding school, that her parentage was entirely unknown. That spoke volumes of his character and what he valued.

And lastly, he was inherently attractive.

Emily had to guard herself any time she glanced his way, because she could easily stare at Mr. Evans for any length of time and never tire of the sight. His light hair often caught the sunlight on a bright day, and his blue eyes were a paler shade compared to her own. He bore a straight nose, a strong jaw, and an easy smile that often puddled her heart into butterflies. That she had found such a gentleman of near-perfect qualities who also suited her in personality was a blessing she realized not everyone came by, which is why she was desperate not to lose him.

The Duchess of Norland, Isabel Barrington, stood from the dining table and tugged on her gloves. "Ladies, why don't we leave the gentlemen to their drink and talk? We can wait for them in the drawing room."

Mr. Evans dropped Emily's hand, and immediately she hated the lack of his touch.

“Very well,” she replied, reluctantly doing the same with her gloves.

“Ah, yes.” Anne Barrington, the dowager duchess, grinned, wrinkles appearing at the corners of her smile. “In fact, I received Lady Whetstone’s pamphlet this afternoon, and such scandal requires an audience. Shall we?”

“Nothing entertains you more than gossip, does it?” Isabel asked her teasingly.

“Indeed, for she wields a mighty pen, and her words are as sharp as her name suggests.” The dowager stood with a cough, but when Isabel placed a hand of concern on her back, the older woman shook her head and carried on.

“Actually,” Mr. Evans said, standing from his seat, “Do not leave on my account. I cannot stay long. You will excuse me for not partaking in your hospitality, Your Grace.”

“No need to apologize to me, Mr. Evans. The less entertaining I do, the better.” James Barrington, Duke of Norland, sat back in his seat with a satisfied smile. The man rarely smiled, reminding Emily that he’d previously been called the Undesirable Duke, though she’d never uncovered the reason why .

“I thank you all for the kind dinner invitation.” Then Mr. Evans stood and bowed. “We’ll be certain to have you to dinner once my father’s health improves.”

“Of course, my boy.” The dowager duchess waved him on. “Do give him our very best.”

“Allow me to see you out,” Emily said in a rush, not ready for him to be gone yet.

Meeting him at the end of the table, he extended his arm to her and they walked out into the foyer.

“Must you go?” Emily whispered. “I thought you would take the opportunity to speak to the duke tonight.”

Mr. Evans looked up with regret in his eyes, no doubt knowing that his words would disappoint her. “My father is not feeling well, else he would have joined us, and I only want to be sure it is not something serious, that it is not the same illness that took my mother.”

Emily’s heart sank. “Yes, of course. I hope he has a quick recovery.”

He nodded, taking up her gloved hand in his own again. “But I did not want this day to pass without having an opportunity to see you again.”

There was no stopping the grin that spread across Emily’s lips, and she was certain he would see stars in her eyes she could no longer conceal. “I’m grateful for whatever time we have, and only hope for more in the near future.”

“You will be at Lady Hartfield’s ball?” he asked.

Emily nodded emphatically.

“I hope by then, my father’s health will be secure. And if so, then I will seek out a moment alone with the duke.” He looked down and intertwined his fingers with hers, making her heart skip a beat. “I feel it’s possible I may have won his approval, however reluctant he might be to give it.” Mr. Evans then met her gaze, holding her hand firmly in his own. “And I intend to prove myself worthy of you, in hopes that we might have a chance to create a beautiful life together.”

“Mr. Evans...” His words left her breathless and ready to swoon. They were things she had waited so long to hear. She only needed a chance to secure it. After years of uncertainty, without a place or person to call home, she felt certain she’d finally

found where she belonged. With him.

“I must go,” he said. “But only until the ball.”

Emily nodded, clearing her throat. “Until the ball.”

He gathered his hat and disappeared out the front door, and Emily immediately moved to the window beside it, pushing the curtains away to watch him leave. She pressed a hand flat to her chest and let out a sigh that released what was both painful and beautiful in her heart.

“Ahem.”

Emily jumped at the sound and turned to see the duchess standing in the corridor doorway with a knowing smile.

“Isabel!” Emily rushed across the foyer with her hands outstretched. “Please tell me the duke sees Mr. Evans as a suitable option.”

The duchess simply tucked Emily’s hand into the crook of her elbow and walked with her down the corridor toward the drawing room. “Are you so desperate to leave us?”

“Oh, not at all! You know that I have never been happier than I have been with you.” That much was true. She’d always been content growing up in the boarding school, blessed with the presence of friends and never mistreated. But she’d always harbored a desire to have a family of her own, to find the place she belonged. And now, she might have finally discovered it.

Emily shook her head and continued. “But out of all the suitors these past seasons, I’ve never grown so attached to someone as I have with Mr. Evans. And if the duke refuses his suit, I feel that my heart cannot bear it. ”

Isabel chuckled. “You do not often take to dramatics, Emily, but whenever you do, it reminds me of your moth—”

Both of them stopped in their tracks. Emily gasped as Isabel closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

“I knew you knew the truth!” Emily whispered, tugging on her arm in desperation. “Isabel Barrington, you must tell me what you know!”

But the duchess shook her head, bearing the same look of regret that Mr. Evans had worn mere moments before. “I cannot. I am the duke’s secret-keeper, and I will not betray my husband. However,” she paused, patting Emily’s hand, “I would never betray you either. He will tell you the whole of it someday. Will you at least trust me that much?”

Emily could hardly take this new information in peace, but she reluctantly nodded. “Very well.”

“And try not to think ill of the duke,” Isabel said as she returned to her pace down the corridor. “He really has only tried to do what he thinks is best for you, given the circumstances.”

But it was those mysterious circumstances that Emily wanted to know. What had brought the duke to the boarding school that night after so many years? Why had he brought her out into society with the promise of such a hefty dowry hanging over her head? Was it his way of paying some sort of penance from the sins of his past? Of his parents?

“Now as for Mr. Evans,” Isabel said, drawing Emily’s thoughts away from her curiosities. “I encourage you to hold on to your hope. Out of all the eligible gentlemen in London, and it certainly feels like we’ve met the lot of them, I say with

certainly that I feel that Mr. Evans is your best possible match, and I will do all I can to ensure the duke sees that as well, if he doesn't already."

Emily nodded, pulling Isabel into a tight embrace. The duchess was only a few years her senior, and the closest thing to a sister Emily had ever known, especially if her suspicions about the duke were correct. Now all she could do was hope and pray that her guardian would give up whatever sense of guilt or regret had shielded her from any previous entanglements, while at the same time thanking the stars above she had been saved from marrying anyone before she had the chance to meet Mr. Evans. He was the only man she wanted.

"Now, come along," Isabel said. "I believe the dowager duchess will not rest until her gossip is shared."

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Chapter Two

Alexander Westcott examined the empty bottle in his hand, rotating it every which way to ensure he had calculated correctly. Everything had been prepared just so, with a delicate hand and concise measurements. Now he had only the final step left. The miniature masts and sails had been readied and made to lie down flat, so rolling up his shirt sleeves, he secured the bottle on the table with one hand and picked up the ship's hull with the other. With precision and command he hoped his grandfather would be proud of, Alex held his breath and carefully inserted the ship inside the nozzle. It required a bit of gentle twisting in order to not damage the rigging, but once the hull had settled in the paste at the bottom, Alex let go of the bottle, releasing his breath as he sat back in his seat.

Once the ship was secure in the bottle, he could again use his tools to right the masts and sails, tighten the strings, and trim off the edges before corking the bottle, finalizing the project as complete. Every time he finished, he felt an extreme sense of satisfaction and gratitude. At times, such goals of creating ships in a bottle seemed impossible, but the patience and attention to detail always paid off in the end. And he never finished without offering a prayer of thanks that his dearly departed grandfather had taught him the art. The man had been a retired general in the Royal Navy before he died, and though he bore the scars and carried the ghosts of his profession, he was not hardened by them. He remained a gentle and kind man, and some of Alex's most treasured memories growing up, the most meaningful lessons about how to be a real gentleman, he learned at his grandfather's side, as they painstakingly created one ship after another.

Alex could not offer up the same thanks for what he had learned from his deceased

father, for those lessons were nonexistent. Unless it included examples of how to drink oneself into oblivion or the easiest way to degrade a person with a single shouted word. The man was no more a saint than Alex was a seaman.

The softest snap broke Alex from his thoughts, and his stomach sank as he leaned in to examine the bottle: one of the mast ends had broken and now one string sat atop the paste, sinking to the bottom.

“Oh, damn it all,” Alex growled through gritted teeth. Rushing for his tweezers, he gently pulled the broken piece out of the paste and attempted to reattach it, but there was no wedge in which to place it. It would have to be repaired, which was the worst sort of problem in this scenario. Fixing it outside the bottle was difficult, but trying to fix it inside the bottle was nearly hopeless.

A knock sounded at the door, and Alex sighed. “Come in.”

His mother appeared in the doorway, dressed in warm traveling clothes. “I’m off, my love.”

Instantly, the ship and tools were forgotten, and he turned. “So early?”

She moved through the room to his side, patting him on the shoulder. “Still at this, are you?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes, well, I still have some improving to do,” he said, motioning to the fallen mast.

“Do not fret. I know you will find a way.” She sighed wistfully. “I do love that you took up this interest at such a young age. It is a lovely tribute to your grandfather, and the good man he was.”

Alex nodded and returned the pat to her hand softly as she straightened.

“Well, come and see me off, then. I would like an early start.”

“Must you be off already?” Alex asked. “I thought for certain you would linger after you arrived.”

She shook her head. “I only came to assess the mood for the season, to see if sentiments have changed for Edwina’s sake, but they appear to be very much the same, so we will remain in Bath for the time being.” She raised her eyes to him. “And do not fret, for I know you are doing all you can. Though I had also hoped to meet this mysterious young miss you’ve hinted at, but she’s conveniently nowhere to be seen.”

Alex chuckled. “That was not my doing. She had already left for the country to visit some family by the time you had arrived.”

“It’s just as well.” Mother linked her arm in his. “You will write to me immediately the moment you have news from her.”

“Of course,” Alex obliged, escorting her to the door. “You’re certain you have everything packed and prepared?”

The private carriage, sent by her dutiful new husband, waited for her in the chilly morning light as the footmen packed her trunks and bags. Alex was pleased they could afford such a luxury. After all his mother had suffered, he was grateful she did not have to worry over the troubles of traveling on the mail coach .

“There is no need to concern yourself, my boy.”

Alex handed her up into the carriage. “But you don’t need me to travel with you?” He sincerely offered his assistance, although knowing she would refuse him.

She waved a dainty gloved hand at him. "I have my maid, and that is more than enough. My home and husband await me on the other end. Besides, I would not dream of taking you away from the season, not for a moment."

"You will not even wait one day more for Lady Hartfield's ball? She will be quite put out if you miss it."

"Well, if her daughter ever marries and is in the final days of her confinement, then perhaps Lady Hartfield will not judge me so harshly."

Alex rolled his eyes playfully, then reached for her hand through the window. "Do give the girls my love, and offer my solemn promise to Edwina, that I will do all I can to mend the broken trust with the Grishams."

Mother's lips pursed before she sighed, not immediately releasing his hand. "You do dote on your sisters, however, that may be one bridge you're unable to mend. Edwina may have to give up on that front, but I know you will not give up for her sake. Only do not let that pursuit ruin your time this season. You must do what you can to secure your own match as well."

He squeezed her hand in return. "I will, Mother."

"I look forward to meeting her, the woman who has captured your heart."

Alex chuckled again. "Hopefully someday soon."

"And I want you to send me word of every detail, no matter the development."

"Won't the gossip rags in Bath keep you busy enough? Must I provide you with more?" Alex closed the carriage door and gave her a wink through the window.

“Only when it’s my boy they’re talking about. ”

He shook his head with a smile and gave her a wave. “Safe travels, Mother.”

“Write to me the moment Lady Hartfield’s ball has ended!” she called as the driver clicked the horses into action and carried her away.

Alex waved until the carriage was out of sight, knowing his mother would be looking for him until then at least. She loved her daughters, but she favored him as her only son and eldest child. They had experienced much together at the hands of his father, though Alex was loathe to ever refer to him as such. Now that the tyrant was gone, it filled Alex full of pride and relief to see his mother so peacefully occupied with her new husband and time with her daughters.

Returning to his townhome, Alex closed the front door and tugged off his cravat. “Radcliff, I’ll take my breakfast in the study,” he announced, then hurried back to the broken mast waiting for him in the bottle.

But as he took his seat again, Alex had a harder time focusing. He would see the ship in the bottle repaired and completed, but he had been reminded of what the following night held in store: Lady Hartfield’s ball. He had no desire to prance around in public with the marriage-minded mamas. He’d endured enough of society over the years seeing his sister Dorothea married off, and unexpectedly had a hand in his mother’s second marriage. Alex had not intended to find himself a wife until Edwina was happily settled as well, but one young miss had caught his particular attention, and their attraction had been mutual and swift. He had counted the days she had been away from London, but if she would attend the ball, perhaps he could finally secure her understanding. If everything went according to plan, he could end the evening with an engagement.

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Chapter Three

“Y ou most certainly will end the evening with an engagement.”

Emily bit her lip, hoping to stave off the heat rising in her cheeks. She had only invited her two friends for tea because it had been over a week since their regular visit. But now, Daphne Wilson and Georgiana Harris were grinning at her over their teacups, and much to her dismay, the conversation had turned to focus entirely on Emily.

“We cannot know for sure,” she mumbled.

“Of course we can.” Georgiana moved to set down her tea, stray strands of red hair falling across her excited eyes. “You said his words indicated as much after he left the dinner.”

“No need to be so bashful,” Daphne teased. Her heart-shaped face glowed in delight. “I shall look forward to the day when we celebrate your wedding.”

“Mr. Evans said he would petition a moment with the duke, yes. But that does not mean the duke will agree.” Emily’s fingers twisted together in her lap, the tea before her long forgotten. “Over the years, His Grace has found ample opportunity to dissect each possible suitor and disapproved with a list of their flaws, leaving me without much room to hope.”

“But the duke knows you care for Mr. Evans. This situation is different, is it not?”

Emily nodded fervently. “It is different.” She had never felt so attached to a gentleman before the way she was with Mr. Evans. Oh, what would she do if the duke refused? “Perhaps we should speak of something else. The nerves will eat at me until the ball.”

“Well, I can tell you of the latest gossip that even Lady Whetstone wouldn’t know yet.” Georgiana leaned forward conspiratorially. “Mrs. Pembroke is going to host a ball this season.”

“Indeed?” Emily asked. “Has she never hosted one before?”

Georgiana shook her head. “Not since her husband died. But I believe it will be an attempt to marry off her youngest son. And that means she’s requiring all her other children to be present as well.”

“How dreadful,” Daphne grumbled. “Didn’t you say her daughters were awful?”

“Yes, they’ve already married and settled elsewhere with their husbands, yet they always sneer and smirk at my presence. Even though their mother intentionally hired me as her companion. If she did not want me there, she would send me away. They have no say in the matter.”

“But the son is not as terrible, correct?” Emily asked with a purposeful smile.

“Oh, he is plenty kind, quite the outlier in his family, to be sure. But I know his mother has lofty expectations of him in marriage, I’ve not thought of him for myself.”

“Well, never mind him, then,” Emily said with a wave of her hand. “Once I am married, I will scour the country to find a perfect match for both of you. That way, you’ll never have to lift a finger again.”

“Don’t hold your breath on my account,” Daphne shook her head. “The chances of marrying off a governess in my situation are near impossible.”

“Even so,” Emily responded. “I will not settle; I will use all resources accessible to me on your behalf.”

Emily knew that their current positions couldn’t last forever. Mrs. Pembroke may have been a longtime friend to the dowager duchess, but the old woman couldn’t live forever. And a governess position was the most volatile situation for a young woman. Emily only hoped that finding suitable gentlemen for her friends would be as easy as finding them employment.

The clock struck the hour, and Emily’s stomach stirred with nerves. “Oh, dear. I suppose it is time to prepare for the ball.”

Daphne squealed with delight, moving to squeeze Emily in a hug.

“Then we will not keep you,” Georgiana said, standing from her seat. “We will want to hear all about the ball and the proposal.”

“You must recount every detail in a letter, and once you have confirmed the engagement, then we will return for our debrief in person.”

Emily laughed, releasing some tension in her shoulders. “Thank heaven for the two of you.”

They stood side by side in the parlor doorway, and Emily noted what an odd pair they made. Georgiana with her freckles and unruly red hair, stood a head taller than Daphne, the shorter brunette with a heart-shaped face. But they were the two dearest people in the world to Emily, and she would do anything for them. Both were older than Emily herself, and they had taken her under their wing when in school at Mrs.

Euphemia's Boarding School for Underprivileged Ladies. They had become accomplished young ladies and already gone off to their new positions by the time the duke had come to the school and found Emily there. She had become his ward and never thought to see her friends again, only to be happily reunited in London the same year. How lucky she was to have them in her life again.

Emily saw them to the door, and let out a sigh in the front foyer. Then she hurried to her bedchambers where her maid was waiting.

She would take great care in her appearance, knowing she would see Mr. Evans again. She and her maid had picked a blue dress that would match her eyes best. It boasted a square neckline with detailed trimming around the bodice, and a sheer overlay protecting her muslin skirts. Her blonde curls had been set to perfection with flowers and golden pins, and only the slightest of rouge to touch up her facial features. With one final glimpse in the mirror, Emily made her way downstairs where the duke and duchess were waiting.

"How divine you look!" Isabel said brightly, reaching for Emily's hand as she took the final step of the staircase.

"Indeed." The duke agreed with a nod, which was a rare occurrence. "Shall we be off?"

Isabel took Emily's hand in the crook of her arm and led her out to the carriage. She talked of one thing or another, but Emily could hardly focus on what was being said, for her nerves seemed to block her mind and bind her tongue.

The sun had already descended when they arrived at Lady Hartfield's estate in London. She entered Lady Hartfield's ballroom alongside the duke and duchess, a whirlwind of butterflies taking flight in her stomach. There was no sight of Mr. Evans yet, but she would be ready when he decided to show himself.

The thought made her bite her lip, attempting to refrain from showing too much enthusiasm. She needed to keep her head on straight, her chin lifted, her shoulders square, everything the duchess had taught her. Emily might have finally found the man of her dreams, the one who would rescue her from future marriage marts or life resigned as a spinster, but she would not do anything to besmirch the Barrington name, nor did she want to draw any ire that would keep Mr. Evans from offering for her. Everything about the night needed to go perfectly.

“Now my love,” Isabel said with a smile, wrapping her other hand into the crook of her husband’s arm. “Do try to refrain from any unseemly glowering this evening, hmm? We do not want to scare off anyone who might ask Miss Clay for a dance.”

The Duke of Norland rolled his eyes, responding with a brief nod.

Emily remembered hearing over their last dinner that the duke’s two friends would not be in attendance, for the Godwin’s had returned to their country house with their new baby, and Mr. Ramsbury was caring for his wife who was ill. And despite his nearly thirty years, when James Barrington was forced out into society without them, it left him looking like a young boy who had just lost his toy horse.

He had done the gentlemanly thing and found them seats amongst all the busyness, for which she was grateful. The seats at the head of the room provided her with a clear view of everything. She glanced over the sea of people, of which some were dancing, some were talking, some were eating, and others took advantage of the shadowed corners where the candlelight did not quite reach.

“Are you searching for someone?” he asked .

Emily hesitated. “Yes, for Mr. Evans. He said he would be here.”

When the duke did not respond right away, she looked up at him. He was effortlessly

regal with his dark hair and stern features, looking down at her with blue eyes full of concern. Eyes that were surprisingly similar to her own.

“So Mr. Evans is the one who has caught your attention?”

Emily’s heart thumped hard in her chest, and she turned her gaze to Isabel, who gave her a swift, encouraging nod.

“Yes. I do enjoy his company and I have yet to find fault with him.”

The duke let out a deep breath. “Nor have I, but not for lack of trying.”

She was about to ask him what he meant by that, when her eyes settled across the ballroom, catching a sight that made her gasp. Mr. Evans had indeed arrived, dressed in a dashing green coat, making him easy to identify. He spoke to another gentleman, but must have sensed her gaze, for he turned his head ever so slightly and gave her a subtle nod, a clue she was certainly next.

“Oh, good heavens,” she whispered.

The duchess asked her a question, but Emily did not hear it. Everything about the room faded away as Mr. Evans approached with a confident smile.

“Good evening, Your Grace, Your Grace,” he said with a bow to the duke and duchess, not even looking at them as he spoke. His eyes remained fixed on Emily, who had a hard time catching her breath.

“Might I claim your next dance, Miss Clay?” he asked, reaching out for her.

Emily nodded, placing her gloved hand in his, and let him lead her to the dance floor.

“You look a dream tonight,” he said in a low voice, and Emily’s pounding heart stuttered in her chest .

“Thank you,” she whispered before they took their places in the line.

They danced a lively reel that did not provide much opportunity for talking, but she didn’t mind; being the woman he had picked out of the whole ballroom was enough. For every time he pulled her around or took her hand or met her eyes, she felt a burning knowledge that he knew the same thing she did. They belonged together. They would make it official this very night.

Once the music came to a close and the dancers all bowed to their partners, Mr. Evans took her hand, tucking it safely into the crook of his arm.

“How is your father?” Emily asked.

“He is much improved, I am pleased to report.” He patted her hand. “Thank you for asking.”

“I am glad of it. Please tell him I wish him a speedy recovery.”

“I will, thank you,” he said, before pausing to swallow.

Emily could no longer keep her thoughts to herself. “And you will speak to the duke tonight?”

Mr. Evans smiled nervously, tugging at his cravat. “I intend to, yes.” He turned to face her, his eyes filled with concern. “Do you think he will approve?”

“It is my greatest hope, and I believe he knows that.” Emily had never expressed great interest in any of the other suitors before, so surely the duke would take it into

consideration.

“Then if you have no objections, perhaps you might wait for me on the north balcony, and I will come to you when it has all been confirmed.” Mr. Evans reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“To be sealed with a kiss?” Emily teased in a whisper.

She delightedly watched as his whole face flushed, and he rubbed a hand on the back of his neck. “ You are quite something, Miss Clay.” Then he turned on his heel and strode away.

With a sigh, Emily hurried across the ballroom to the large double doors and peeked out onto the north balcony. It was not occupied by anyone else. Though the March chill lingered as evening had fallen, she was willing to wait. Richard Evans would be worth it.

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Chapter Four

Alex stood in the corner of the ballroom, sipping the punch in his hand that seemed stronger than normal. He usually didn't drink much at all, knowing he couldn't hold his liquor well, but tonight he needed just the tiniest shot of courage. The night had begun when he greeted Lady Hartfield, who had indeed lamented the absence of his mother and urged him to seek out company on the dance floor. But Lady Hartfield did not know he already had one particular young lady in mind.

Miss Frances Allman had been nothing more than a recent acquaintance, but she had quickly become someone he'd grown fond of, more than he'd ever expected. It had happened over a few interactions, providing enough time to learn her nature and capture glimpses of what a future together would be like... only to have her whisked away to visit her cousin in the country. But tonight, he would be reunited with Miss Frances. Alex was certain she would respond favorably to his proposal, for he had already gone to secure the approval of her elder brother that very night. That alone was reason enough to seek the punch in the first place, and he desperately needed a calming of his nerves. Now he waited in the corner of the room, where he thankfully remained without the obligation of talking to anyone until then.

Until someone walked in the room who was not Frances, yet it still put his feet in motion.

Downing the last of the fiery drink, Alex set the glass down and shook aside the stars in his vision, then stepped forward.

"Good evening, Mr. Grisham," Alex said with a generous bow.

When he eventually lifted his eyes, the elderly gentleman took in Alex's appearance with an expression that let him know his presence was barely tolerated.

"Evening, Westcott," came the reluctant reply.

This was the relationship that needed to be mended at all costs. The man who had been dishonored by Alex's father and did not trust the Westcott family in the light of day. But it was this man's son that Alex's sister wanted, and Alex would do whatever it took to see Edwina happy.

"Pleasure to see you, sir," Alex said, hoping his words were not slurring together from the strength of the drink. "Is your family not accompanying you this evening?"

"My son is out visiting other friends, and my wife is feeling under the weather. I only came to support Lord Hartfield, so he wouldn't have to bear the evening alone, you understand."

"Yes, of course," Alex replied. The man's tone seemed conversational instead of dismissive, which Alex decided was a point in his favor. "If it would not be too much to ask, I wonder if I might occupy a moment of your time at some point this evening."

Mr. Grisham raised an eyebrow. "In regards to?"

Alex swallowed hard, praying for clarity. "Seeking your approval, sir. I know my father was not honorable in his dealings with you, and gave great offense to your wife, but I hope to help you know that I am not my father. In fact, I very much strive not to be. While I understand your hesitations, I hope to prove that his reputation is not mine, that I am a man of my word, and I hope to repair your good opinion."

The man lifted his chin and inhaled deeply before speaking again. "But why do you

seek to make amends with me?”

“On behalf of my sister, sir. I believe she is fond of your son, and I know that such a thing would not be possible without your approval.”

Mr. Grisham nodded in understanding. “I see. I suppose this is something we could discuss over drinks. Would you like to join me in the game room while I await Lord Hartfield?”

Alex could have cheered with relief. This was just the invitation he needed, his way in to repair all that was broken.

But just then, in through the doors walked Frances Allman. Alex had to remind himself to breathe and clear his throat that had suddenly become very dry.

“Thank you for the invitation, sir. Only I promised a dance to one young lady, and I would hate to leave her disappointed.”

Mr. Grisham patted Alex on the shoulder. “Go enjoy your frivolity and come join me afterward.”

Then the old man disappeared, leaving Alex alone to wait for the best moment to approach. Miss Frances stood alongside her mother speaking to a friend, and how majestic she looked. Dressed in a deep purple gown, cornsilk hair swept up in an elegant coif, accompanied by a matching bird feather. It seemed extravagant for her personality, for he knew she did not like to draw attention to herself, so he assumed it must have been at her mother’s insistence. It did not change how radiant she looked, even from across the room.

Alex abandoned his post on the wall and pushed through the crush of people to the other side of the room. Miss Frances eventually met his gaze, then immediately

blushed, and looked to the floor. One of the many things he admired about her was her humble nature, her quiet demeanor. She would never presume to be favored, but he could tell in her response she was aware of it now. There was no false modesty or pretended airs about her. She was genuine and calm, which very much suited his preferences, and he was convinced they would do very well together.

Mrs. Allman was speaking with another woman, but when she caught sight of Alex, she cut the conversation short. “Mr. Westcott, how good to see you this evening.”

He paused before them and briefly bowed, then lifted with a smile. “Indeed, I am pleased to see both you and your daughter here as well.” He glanced at Miss Frances, who ducked shyly again. “I trust your visit to the country was pleasant.”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Allman cooed. “My dear niece gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, so it was lovely to meet her little one. And to expose my Franny to the rigors of raising children. For she will need such experience someday, you know.”

Alex wanted to laugh. Some of these meddling mothers were quite obvious in their attempts to marry off their daughters, but Mrs. Allman needn’t try so hard. “Indeed.” Then turning to Miss Frances, he said, “I wonder, Mrs. Allman, if you would mind sparing your daughter for the next set? Unless the dance has already been claimed.”

“Not at all, Mr. Westcott!” the mother said. “We’ve only just arrived, so you would be the first. Do go on and enjoy yourselves.”

When he offered his arm to Miss Frances, she stepped into his reach and let him lead her toward the floor. Once they were a safe distance away, Alex whispered, “I am delighted to see you. ”

She bit her lip, attempting to hide a smile. “You are too kind, Mr. Westcott.”

His nerves too on edge, he couldn't help asking, "Are you not delighted to see me as well?"

"Oh, of course I am!" Her eyes shot up. "You have no idea, for when my cousin asked about my suitors so many times over, you were the only gentleman who came to mind—" Miss Frances's words cut off short, and again her whole face flamed in a blush. "Perhaps I have said too much."

Alex deposited her on the dance line and lingered long enough to place a kiss on her gloved hand. "You have said just enough."

He led her through the dance and remained by her side in an attentive manner, as he considered waiting. Perhaps he should not say a thing tonight, for she may consider him impulsive. Something about the dance steps made his head start spinning, though perhaps that was just the anticipation of his all-important question, or maybe even the punch. But he felt confident in his feelings; he did not need to wait anymore. So when the dance was done, he did not return her to her mother right away. Instead, he walked with her along the outskirts of the ballroom, trying to clear his head.

He finally had the nerve to ask, "Might I beg a moment of your company alone, Miss Frances?"

"Whatever for?" She looked up brightly.

Alex chuckled, her innocence endearing. "Perhaps I mean to steal a kiss from you."

She gasped in response and swatted at his arm with her fan. "Mr. Westcott, restrain yourself!" she hissed, though a smile teased on her lips.

"Then I confess, I actually have a question for you. Something important I'd like to ask you."

Her pretty face paled as understanding dawned, and her gloved hand pressed to her chest. “I... well, you mean... here? Now?”

“Well, yes. Preferably before anyone else has the chance to.” She appeared as though she might retreat, so he gently took her hand. “Unless you’d rather I not ask it.”

“No. I mean, yes...” She looked around the ballroom, still frazzled. “We can go out onto the west balcony.”

“Very well.” Alex nodded and turned his steps, but she protested, pulling against him.

“We cannot be seen going out at the same time. It will cause a scandal!” She dropped his hand. “I will go out first, and you will follow in five minutes.” Then she scurried through the crowd.

Alex could not help smiling in her departure. He secured a refreshment while he waited by the grandfather clock, this time seeking anything other than punch. Alex shook his fuzzy head, wanting to proceed with a clear mind, wanting to remember forever the moment she said yes. He thought for certain his heart would rage out of his chest at the thought of asking such a question. What if she refused him, after all?

But when the clock had finally passed five minutes, Alex looked around the room in confusion. Which balcony had she said? Westward? He tried to remember the direction the house entrance faced, but his mind still felt muddled. Looking at the corner of the room, he vaguely remembered which door she exited, and made his way around the dancers. It was now or never.

He opened one of the large double doors, closing it softly behind him. The light of the ballroom did not reach far, and the lanterns on opposite corners kept her shrouded in darkness, but he could still see Miss Frances with her back to him as she stared out over the balcony’s edge. His heart swelled in anticipation; they were finally alone,

and now he could propose.

As he quietly approached, he realized that the feather from her hair was missing. But perhaps she had removed it for this very moment. It had not truly been her style to begin with.

He placed his hands on the sides of her arms, and she jumped, glancing from the corner of her eye over her shoulder.

“I have missed you,” Alex whispered in her ear.

She giggled unexpectedly. “It has not been so long.”

Alex wanted to scoff. A fortnight might not seem like a great deal of time to her, but it had felt an eternity to him.

His finger trailed over her arm between her glove and sleeve, the dark of night turning her purple gown almost blue.

“Is that so?” he asked in a teasing tone. “Shall I provide some insight on the perks of my company?”

He pulled her back a step closer and lowered his lips to the bare skin of her neck, utterly satisfied when she gasped. With one hand, he caressed the length of her arm, while the other settled around her waist. And he was not ignorant of how her breathing grew increasingly unsteady as he pressed kisses to her soft skin in slow succession.

“What are you... I never thought that you...” she mumbled.

“That I what?” he asked, tracing his lips along the curve of her neck. “That I would

desire you like this?”

His mouth secured her tender skin again, eliciting sounds from her he knew he would crave forever.

“You certainly know how to make a woman blush, sir,” she sighed. “You must be a complete cad.”

Alex released his hand at her waist. “Then should I stop?”

Her hand reached back blindly and found his jaw, pulling him in again. “Never stop.”

Securing his hand around her middle, Alex returned to his ministrations, slowly becoming intoxicated by her scent. She must have acquired some new fragrance in her absence, for he thought she had favored rose perfumes, but tonight she smelled decidedly of jasmine, and he found it vastly more appealing.

“But you must tell me, did you secure the approval?” she asked, her voice a struggled whisper.

How did she know he had talked to Mr. Allman? “I did.”

“Oh, thank heaven,” she whispered, her back relaxing against his chest. She angled her head toward him ever so slightly, face still hidden in shadow. “And the kiss you promised me?”

Alex couldn’t help but chuckle. Frances was being quite impetuous tonight, something he hadn’t expected, but perhaps their solitude had revealed her true nature. “If you wish for more, then your wish is my command.”

With a finger on her chin, he turned her face, and once he caught sight of her parted

lips in the dark, he claimed them.

Upon meeting the soft reality of her lips, Alex immediately had to practice restraint. He needed to go slowly, not ravage her from the start, but something about the night or the drink or the jasmine or the dress, or her damned coquettish responses tonight, everything was fighting against him to not give in completely.

He kissed her slowly and thoroughly, once, twice, even three times. But when she turned in his arms and tugged at his cravat, there was no delaying further. He would have one more kiss from her, and then he would make this woman his bride.

Chapter Five

I ntotoxicated. Emily Clay was completely intoxicated. It was the only way to explain how she felt, and not just internally. Though she was not the only one, for she could not miss the warm scent of rum that accompanied him. She swam in euphoria as Mr. Evans eagerly kissed her, something she had not anticipated from him, but she should have expected after his willingness to hold her hand under the table. Now he was just as willing to bless her neck with his kiss, warm her arms with his touch, savor the affection of her mouth, and leave her in utter physical bliss.

The moment he deepened the kiss, urging her mouth open by teasing his tongue along her bottom lip, Emily couldn't stop the moan that sounded in the back of her throat. He growled as his grip tightened around her waist, and she welcomed his intensity, intending to match it. She returned every gesture of his kiss, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck and losing her fingers in the softness of his hair. She let the intoxication drive her onward, even if it led her to oblivion. She had never thought she would find a man with such explosive passion, but this would certainly be acceptable in her future husband. The feeling of being entirely worshiped like this would not be a burden.

He broke from her with a heaving breath, resting his forehead against hers. "I should never have dared to touch you so," he whispered raggedly. "But with this mouth," he paused, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, "You will be the death of me."

Despite her body's longing for more, Emily's eyes fluttered open and she briefly considered something was different. Had Mr. Evans' voice always been this low, or

was it just from being lost in the moment? Had his jaw always been so pronounced, or was it merely the lines of shadow in the darkness? Her mind was too filled with desire to think properly, so instead she simply grinned, and said, “Then come kiss your executioner.”

In one swift movement, he lifted her chin to meet his lips again, but this was not the same urgent kiss from before. Now his mouth moved slowly against hers, aching and heated in a way that made any winter chill long forgotten. He’d created a flame she was certain would raze Lady Hartfield’s entire estate to the ground.

His hand moved from her chin to her jaw, fingers braced along the side of her neck as he angled the kiss. It left her breathless, and as if he sensed her weakness, he wrapped his other arm around her in support. She leaned into him, the firm warmth of his chest, ever closer to his kiss. She couldn’t imagine wanting to be anywhere else, not for the rest of her—

“What in heaven’s name is going on here?”

A woman’s shrill voice ripped them apart, and Mr. Evans whirled around. Emily didn’t immediately recognize the woman at the door with a candlestick, or the young woman behind her with a peacock feather in her hair, but Emily was eternally grateful she had not been discovered by the duke.

“Lady Hartfield, if you’ll allow me a moment to explain,” Mr. Evans began, his voice again lower than Emily expected .

“You will hold your tongue, sir.” Emily then recognized the woman as the hostess, whom she only knew by name. “Unless you can explain in great detail for why you left this young woman on the balcony when she was expecting your promise of marriage, only for us to find you here instead with another woman.”

Emily looked beyond Lady Hartfield, at the young woman whose pretty face bore a frown with eyes near tears, and Emily's heart sank. Her mind still spun in confusion from the intensity of the kiss. Had Mr. Evans merely been toying with her, taking his satisfaction before he would go become engaged to another woman?

The man beside her stared for a long moment, then rubbed his eyes, and said, "Wait." When he turned to face Emily, she realized the cold truth that he, the man who had just dazzled her world and been the provider of her first kiss, was not Mr. Evans at all. This man, though undeniably handsome, she had never met before.

Emily stumbled backward, placing a hand on the cold stone of the balcony wall. How could she not have known? His hair was much darker than Mr. Evans, his nose sharper, his jaw pronounced. Mr. Evans had about matched Emily's height, and though Emily was tall, this man was taller still.

The man's eyes flared, his confusion obvious in the candlelight. "Who the hell are you?"

A new fire flared in her chest, one of defensive anger, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "I might ask you the same thing, sir! Where is Mr. Evans?"

"I am here."

Emily turned and discovered, in dread, that Mr. Evans had just passed through the balcony doors with James Barrington following closely behind.

She was doomed .

"What goes on here?" the duke asked in a gruff familiar tone that was edged with concern.

“I discovered them, Your Grace,” Lady Hartfield crowed with her head high. “Alone and embracing, and Lord knows what else. Grossly entangled without a centimeter to spare.”

The Duke of Norland took on a dangerous glare, and he charged the man of the kiss. Emily didn’t much know the man beyond the abilities of his lips, but she could not let him bear the brunt of the duke’s wrath unwarranted.

She was not quick enough to stop him from taking the man by the lapels. “What the devil have you done?”

Emily grabbed the duke’s arm and pulled, but in vain. “It is not his doing,” she pleaded.

“Then you seduced him?” the duke whirled on her, without releasing the man.

“I ventured onto the balcony looking for that woman,” the nameless man said, pointing to the girl behind Lady Hartfield.

“And I was waiting for Mr. Evans after he spoke with you.” Emily explained, tugging on the duke’s arm again until he finally relented.

“Miss Clay, you must have known that I never would have presumed to behave so...” Mr. Evans’ voice from the side broke Emily’s heart further. Yes, she should have known hand holding would have been the extent of his ardor.

“Then how did you end up so... entangled?” the duke seethed.

“The night was dark, her hair was fair... it would be easy for anyone to misunderstand.” Emily was grateful the man spoke, for she had no words, no excuse to give.

“Misunderstand?” the duke shouted. “Do you not have eyes, sir? Would you justify any gentleman who spoke as you just have? Would you ruin any woman who looked as your intended?”

“She is far from ruined,” the man retorted. “We shared moments of mere kisses, nothing more. She is still free to marry as she sees fit.”

Lady Hartfield gasped, placing a hand to her chest in a dramatic fashion. “Mr. Westcott, are you refusing to offer for her?”

The duke shook his head. “I demand that you marry her.”

Emily froze, her heart sinking into the pit of her stomach. “No. Your Grace, wait.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Westcott glowered at the duke. “This was clearly a mistake.”

“A mistake where you took liberties with a woman you do not know. Even so, there must be consequences. To ensure there is no scandal ruining her future, you will marry her.”

Emily blinked, coming to her senses enough to again tug on the duke’s sleeve. “Stop, Your Grace. Please, wait.”

But he shook his head. “This is an outcome of your actions, Emily. It was foolish to ever be alone with a gentleman, even if it would have been Mr. Evans.”

Emily shrank back in defeat. The duke had never spoken to her harshly before, and disappointing him broke her heart.

“You know nothing about me,” Mr. Westcott snapped. “Are you certain you want a

connection with me? I could be a fortune hunter, seeking out her vast inheritance. Have you not heard the rumors? I could be just like my father, a wicked man, a detriment to your family name.”

“He’s not,” came a tiny voice from the woman behind Lady Hartfield. “The rumors aren’t true. He’s the best of men.” Her words trailed into whimpers, and she excused herself back inside the ballroom.

Mr. Westcott lifted a hand after her, but it fisted in the air as the door closed. “Frances,” he mumbled under his breath.

“What will it be, then?” the duke asked sharply. “Will you maintain some semblance of an honorable gentleman and agree to the marriage? ”

The light from the ballroom hit Mr. Westcott’s face clearly now as he lifted his chin in defiance. “And if I refuse?”

The duke stepped closer, narrowing his brow. “Then I must demand satisfaction.”

Horror shot through Emily’s chest, chilling her to her core. Not a duel.

“James, stop this.” She never would have dared to use his given name unless it were the only way to get through to him.

The duke turned, his blue eyes imploring her. Emily saw what he was trying to do, save her reputation and provide her with some sort of security in the chaos, but she would not have him die on her account. She could not bear being responsible if Isabel became a widow, if young Theodore grew up without knowing his father the way Emily had.

“Do not be ridiculous,” Emily insisted. “I will not have you die on my behalf, for you

have a son and wife who need you. Duels are nothing more than a game for fools.”

Mr. Westcott growled, turning from them to run a hand through his hair. “Perhaps the chit has a point,” he grumbled before returning to face the duke. “Very well. I will marry your precious ward to spare her reputation.”

Emily swallowed. “You know who I am?”

“Well, I do now.” He smirked at her. “Who doesn’t know the Undesirable Duke?”

Her heart sank further and further.

“Though in order for a duke’s whims to be satisfied,” he went on, pointing a finger at the duke’s chest, “I will be sure you know that what you enforce will ruin the lives of four people instead of just two. And that will be on your head.”

Emily held her breath, willing him not to retort.

The Duke of Norland simply nodded. “So be it.”

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Chapter Six

Alex swore he would never drink again.

Who would have guessed that a simple glass of punch—a fairly innocuous mixture of rum, brandy, and wine—could result in a man finding himself engaged to a complete stranger by the end of the night? He had never noticed the drink affecting him so easily before, but then he'd never kissed a woman like that before, either. The entire night had been full of new experiences, and that the rest of his life would be changed forever seemed appropriate.

That didn't mean he wasn't still burning with rage as a result even days later. He regretted how his anger had exploded that night, for he'd tried for years to tamp down his temper, but the feelings still lingered. He was angry at himself for not catching the very obvious clues it was not Miss Frances he had been alone with. Angry at the duke for enforcing such an arrangement. Angry with that woman, whose trilling laugh and tender lips and jasmine scent had all but seduced him. Angry at himself again for letting the drink overtake his senses and weaken his defenses against such an enchantress.

Alex shook his head as he stormed down the busy London street. He could not think of her as such, for it would do him no good. But even the faintest memory of that night reminded him of her vigor in returning his kiss, that she met his every impassioned gesture. Granted, she had obviously thought he was someone else entirely, and he had assumed he held Miss Frances in his fierce embrace as well. But those brief moments of ignorance were too blissful to be easily forgotten.

A heat overtook his cheeks, despite the chill in the air around him, and Alex cleared his throat. He could not arrive at the appointment with the Duke of Norland appearing so... enamored, for it was certainly the last emotion he was feeling.

He pushed on through the streets, which were peppered with people out shopping or enjoying the rare sunshine. He was lost in his own thoughts and focused on his destination, and he did not meet their eyes or hear their words.

Until he heard his name.

“How dare Mr. Westcott show his face.”

Alex blinked and stopped, looking up to see Miss Frances and her mother coming out of a hat shop. His heart broke, realizing how pale Miss Frances looked, and he did not miss the enraged glare from her mother. He swallowed, unsure of how to proceed, but thankfully, Miss Frances placed a hand on her mother’s arm, saying something before walking the length of the sidewalk toward him.

Whipping off his hat, Alex bowed in greeting. “Good day, Miss Frances.”

She nodded in response, no pleasure in her expression. “Good day, Mr. Westcott.” She tucked a shawl tightly around her shoulders. “Are you well?”

“Decidedly not.” Alex shook his head. “Miss Frances, please allow me to apologize for the night of Lady Hartfield’s ball. It was a... disaster, to say the least, and I regret how everything unfolded.” He felt the need to reach out for her hand, but he was certain that would be the last thing she wanted. “I ne ver wished to hurt you. I hope you know at least that much.”

She took in his gaze steadily for a long moment. “Yes, I do know. I have tried to explain such to my mother, but she is still quite put out.”

Alex winced. “Understandably so. Please offer her my apologies, and to your brother, as well.” Oh Lud, her brother. Alex would have to avoid Mr. Allman for the rest of his days.

Miss Frances nodded. “I won’t take much of your time, Mr. Westcott. I only wished to...” She swallowed before continuing. “I hoped you could provide some clarity on the situation. Explain what truly happened.”

He wished he could avoid thinking of what happened that night, as it filled him with so much shame and regret. “I’m afraid I don’t have much of a reasonable explanation. We had a lovely time dancing and had agreed to meet on the balcony, hadn’t we?”

She nodded.

“I must have gone to the wrong balcony, and I assumed the young woman was you.” Again his cheeks burned with the admission. “I hope you will spare her reputation and keep her name unsullied by gossip, whatever your feelings about me.”

Miss Frances’s eyes flared. “You care about her so much already?”

Alex shook his head and sighed. An engaged gentleman would never confess to caring for one woman while promised to another, but as of that moment, nothing had yet been signed. “You know I do not. But she will be my responsibility going forward, even though it is not how I had planned. I had...” Alex lowered his voice. “I had fully intended to offer for you that night. Nervous if you would accept me.”

A cold breeze passed them by, and the tension faded from her face. “Thank you for saying so. It has put my mind at ease.” Then she straightened her shoulders. “And I would have accepted you, but that will not be a future for us, will it?”

Pursing his lips, Alex looked to his boots. How her words twisted his stomach.

“I will be leaving again for the country. I have a friend who has requested my company, and will remain there for the season, so our paths will not cross again, I dare say.” She gave him a small smile, but he could tell it was forced. “I bear you no ill will, Mr. Westcott. Despite how things have transpired, I wish you every happiness.”

As she bobbed in a curtsy and returned to her mother’s side, Alex found he had no words for her. He could wish her well, but it would be no boon to her broken heart. Nor his.

Alex waited until they had disappeared from sight, hoping that the ache in his chest would leave with them, but nothing would relieve him of that regret. Perhaps it would live with him for the rest of his days.

He again stormed down the street, heading toward his appointment with the duke and the bishop. He nearly missed the building entirely and would have walked right by had it not been for the sound of hearing his name. “Mr. Westcott.”

Alex turned to find the Duke of Norland holding the door open to his very fine carriage. “A moment of your time, please.”

Clenching his jaw, Alex pursed his lips and stepped into the carriage. The duke closed the door, securing them both inside.

“Your Grace,” Alex grumbled without an ounce of respect. “Shall we not be late for this appointment you claimed to be urgent?”

“I must make one thing certain before we are to proceed.” The duke sat straight in the large, cushioned seat, not appearing in the least bit put off by Alex’s disregard. “I have gone to work investigating your character, your family, your history, to determine just what kind of man you truly are. You mentioned that there were

rumors, and there are, in abundance. That you are as terrible and ruthless as your father. That he cheated wealth from the wealthy for his own gain, that he had no respect for his family or his marriage, that no one was safe from his mistreatment or cruelty. And some people say the very same about you.”

Bile rose in Alex’s throat. That is the kind of man his father was, the sort of man that Alex despised.

“But that is not who you are, is it?” Norland said.

Alex’s eyes shot up.

“From those who know you best, there is nothing but respect and praise. How meticulously you found a worthy suitor for your sister, and a respectable man for your mother as well. How you guarded your family’s inheritance on their behalf, and still somehow managed to keep your name from any real mischief. But what I need to know is, who is the real Alex Westcott? Are you the scoundrel or the gentleman?”

Alex lifted his chin. He wished he could force the lies to get himself out of the arranged marriage, but he cared too much what society thought. He couldn’t ruin Edwina’s chances for his own selfishness. “The rumors about my father are true, and that general dislike has passed to me now that he’s dead, merely because I am his son. But I am not the sort of man he was.”

“I am glad to hear it. For it was the one thing I wanted to be perfectly clear.” The duke leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “The way you have fought to protect your sisters is precisely how I feel for my ward. If you dare to mistreat her, by means of wasting her inheritance away or flagrantly disregarding the marriage vow, if I hear of any verbal or physical misconduct, then I will do what I promised on that balcony and demand you meet me at dawn. Do we have an understanding? ”

There was no way to misunderstand him. The Duke of Norland could not have been clearer. Alex had no intention of disrespecting his wife, no matter how reluctant he was to join the marriage. But he would have to learn how to rein in his temper, for he did not want to even toe the line that would bring down the duke's wrath. Even more than that, Alex wanted to remain far from the sort of man his father was.

"We do." Alex nodded.

"Very well. Then let us proceed." He opened the door and motioned for Alex to exit the carriage first. Stepping back out into the daylight, Alex straightened his coat and waited to follow after the duke inside. Their meeting with the bishop was to sign the marriage license.

But for Alex, it felt like they would be shackling him to prison for eternity.

Chapter Seven

Emily paced the length of her bedchamber, ignoring every glimmering brass candlestick and not sparing a glance at the floral wallpaper. Every so often, she dared a glance out the window overlooking Grosvenor Square. Only the wealthy and elite lived in this realm, the titled and educated, for London's high class made certain they could only rub shoulders with each other whenever possible. And it was because of all of them, with their judgments and hypocrisy and their noses in the sky, that Emily had been thrust into the situation she was in, and therefore, she hated them all.

She rested her head on the cold glass and closed her eyes, letting out a calming breath. She had been waiting to speak to the duke all day, but he had been out on errands. She had to find a way to talk some reason into him. Surely he could not enforce her marriage to a complete stranger, not when he'd already given his approval to Mr. Evans. Was that not why they had come to find her on the balcony together, to deliver the good news? The thought crossed her mind that perhaps Mr. Evans no longer would marry her if her reputation was ruined, but surely he would not judge her so when he knew the truth. He'd heard the explanation, the miscommunication. Would he still marry her if she begged it of the duke? Or if the duke refused to budge, would Mr. Evans dare to run away with her if she asked him? Emily would brave the travel to Gretna Green if it meant she could secure the future happiness she had always hoped for, but never dared to dream possible. She couldn't let her final chance disappear without a fight.

Her bedroom door opened, and Emily pulled her head away from the glass as Isabel entered. The duchess wore a grim expression. "He's in his study."

Finally.

Without a word, Emily rushed past the duchess and down the ornate staircase, through the front foyer, and into the corridor. Then she pushed through the door to the duke's study without knocking.

The duke sat at his desk on the opposite wall, bookshelves beside him, and a large painting above him. The room was not as big as his study in the country house, but this size seemed to suit him better. Yet, when he looked up at her entrance, he did not seem his normal, grumpy self. With jaw clenched and brows narrowed, he still appeared on edge, more perturbed than normal.

Well, good. So was she.

Emily opened her mouth to give him a firm understanding of her opinion when she was interrupted.

“Ah, good. You're here. Let's get this over with.”

Her head whipped to the side, only to realize that the duke was not alone. That man was here. She couldn't stop the immediate rush of memories, that of his heated kiss, the strength of his arms around her, but no. She could not be caught weak again. Emily fought off the warmth that surfaced in her cheeks, then straightened her shoulders and clenched her own jaw at the sight of him. She hadn't expected to confront both him and the duke at the same time, but perhaps it would be good for him to hear as well. This man should learn to pay for the consequences of his actions.

“Very well,” the duke said before she could speak. He held up a paper in his hand. “A Common License has been secured for your marriage. We will forgo the reading of the banns, and you will be married within the week.”

Emily inhaled sharply, her bravado fading. “A week?”

“You will marry at St. George’s church on Saturday morning, and afterward, we will have a breakfast here.”

Mr. Westcott stood with hat in hand. “Very well. I will send a footman to retrieve her things beforehand. My house is already staffed, but will she require a new maid?”

Emily bristled, despising being talked about and planned for as if she were not even in the room. “I will retain my maid,” she said firmly, glaring at him.

If Mr. Westcott noticed her indignation, he did not acknowledge it as he continued with a perpetual frown. “As you wish. And if you desire a specific location for a honeymoon, please inform me immediately so that I can make the arrangements.”

The situation was spiraling out of control. Her thoughts and emotions continued to escalate, but she tried to remain calm. “There will be no need for a honeymoon.” Those were for happy couples who enjoyed each other’s company. Besides, she was still trying to find a way out of this disaster.

“Very well. Then I will prepare for your arrival on Saturday. Until then.” He bowed stiffly and excused himself from the room.

Emily let out a tight, pent-up breath, fisting her hands at her sides.

“You have something more to say, Emily?” the duke asked, his countenance softer now. He seemed tired.

“Please do not make me go through with this, Your Grace,” she begged. “Did you not already give your approval to Mr. Evans?”

The duke sighed. “I did, but he might not be of the same mind anymore. Besides, he understands that situations change when a woman’s reputation is on the line—”

“Oh, hang my reputation!” She had never raised her voice at the duke, but now she had to in order to prove her point. “I am a nobody from the country. No one knows me or cares whom I marry. No one would know the difference if I were to marry Mr. Evans.”

“There you are wrong.” The duke folded his hands over his desk. “You are known in London as the Duke of Norland’s ward. Any member of nobility and their family is looked upon with the utmost scrutiny, which includes you.” He paused to look up at her. “And I need not remind you that it was Lady Hartfield who found you and is aware of what happened. Should you marry anyone other than Mr. Westcott, the potential outcome could be disastrous.” The duke shook his head. “She has a great deal of power and influence, and we would want her on our side should anything arise.”

“Do you not have more power than the Hartfield’s by rank?” Emily asked in desperation. “I assumed people would think twice before crossing you. Aren’t you the Undesirable Duke?”

He pursed his lips and hung his head, and immediately Emily cringed, regretting her words. She had never referred to him by that name in person, though she had heard it countless times before. Had she pushed too far?

The door to the study opened, and Isabel entered in concern. “Perhaps it is better if we return to this conversation another time.”

The duke shook his head. “I will answer her, Isabel,” he said gently, before turning back to Emily. “I am still trying to mend bridges from that time in my life, to restore the honor to my father’s name. I do not want to be someone feared or use my title in a

disrespectful manner.” The duke sat back in his chair. “Though I am surprised at you, Emily. I understand your hesitation, but such insistence from you is uncharacteristic.”

Isabel’s attempts at peace were no good now.

“Uncharacteristic,” Emily repeated after him, choosing her next words carefully. “Yes, for all my twenty years, I have been good and kind and obedient because I had no other choice in the matter, no hope for anything beyond what I was given. And more so recently because I had no reason to complain, as you and the duchess have taken such good care of me. But this is not what I want,” she paused, tears burned in her eyes as she tried to remain fierce and not crumble onto the floor, “and I can be quiet no longer.”

Isabel stepped forward, reaching an arm around her shoulder. Tears shone in her eyes as well, and Emily was grateful for her sympathy, but those tears would not help her cause.

“I know it is a difficult burden to bear,” she offered, rubbing Emily’s arm. “Perhaps we could speak with Marianne, Mr. Ramsbury’s wife. You know theirs was an arranged union and look how beautifully their marriage turned out.”

The duke shook his head again. “There is no time. Marianne is ill and unable to receive visitors. The wedding must go on as planned.”

Emily sank into the chair behind her in defeat. “Why must I? Why must I marry that man? I do not even know him.”

“His name is Alexander Westcott,” the duke explained. “You do not know him because he has spent the majority of his life outside of London. His father, by all accounts, was a difficult man, selfish and cruel to his family as well as in society, and the burden of that reputation has fallen to his son. Since the father’s death, it seems

Mr. Westcott has fought hard in order to find a decent match for his sister and his mother. All who know him personally speak highly of him, as far as I can gather, so I do not believe you are being shackled with a villain.” He stood from his chair and moved to sit across from Emily. “He may seem cross and distant, as he has been dealt the same hand as you, being unable to wed his beloved, but I do believe this is the correct path for the benefit of all. I only hope you will trust me in this.”

Isabel sank down next beside Emily’s chair, placing a hand on her arm. “It is for your benefit, my dear. You do not know what damage can be done to a person’s reputation, to their future, to their very happiness, by being subject to scandal. We are only trying to do what is best for you.”

Emily knew it made sense, that they were insisting to protect her, but that didn’t make it any easier to accept. Unable to control the quiver in her lip, Emily quickly wiped at the tear that slipped down her cheek. “It isn’t fair,” she whispered, looking away in her moment of weakness.

The duke nodded. “I know it isn’t, and I’m sorry for it.”

Bringing her gaze back to him, Emily was rushed with a new emotion. Though the lingering anguish remained, she was grateful James Barrington was a man of honor who cared for her. He had looked into the man that she would marry because he cared for her, and he even genuinely apologized for the entire situation.

But his apology would not make him change his mind, and it would do nothing to save her now.

Chapter Eight

Saturday morning dawned with the sun in the sky and a chill in the air. The weather seemed to mock him in its cheeriness, but Alex felt none of it, for he had grown numb to everything around him. Even his own wedding day.

The servants had already secured Miss Clay's belongings and brought them to his townhouse on Park Street. He had informed the housekeeper of a new incoming maid, and had the room attached to his prepared for his wife, but he couldn't imagine that the connecting door would be used any time soon.

By the time Alex arrived at the chapel, the Duke and Duchess of Norland were already there waiting for him, even though he'd made every effort to be early. He didn't want a hint or a whisper of him not being willing to perform his duty, not an ounce of shame or shadow on his name. His bitterness at the entire ordeal still simmered beneath the surface, but when he caught a glimpse of his future wife standing quietly behind them, his stomach soured. Her blonde hair was curled and pinned to perfection, and she donned a pale blue gown that seemed appropriate for the day, but she did not appear as a bride on her wedding day should, for she was miserable.

"Good morning, Your Grace, Your Grace," he said with a bow, greeting Norland and his wife. Then he turned. "And to you, Miss Clay." She acknowledged him with a nod but did not meet his gaze.

Last he'd seen of her, she'd entered the duke's study with a heated intention and a lion's aggression. But now she was pale and reserved as a lamb, hands tucked

together in front of her, eyes on the ground. He did not like the feeling of guilt that spread through his chest, for this situation was not entirely her fault, but he did not feel pleasant about shackling himself to a girl who did not want him, for he did not want her either.

“How good you look, Mr. Westcott,” the duchess offered with a smile. “Do you have any family to accompany you today?”

Alex shook his head. “My mother is in Bath with my sisters, one of whom is expecting, so they won’t be able to attend.”

“Oh, what a shame,” she responded. “I should have liked to meet them.”

“Perhaps another time,” Alex said, then realizing these two members of nobility would soon be family, he added, “I will be certain to introduce them when next they come to town.”

Alex dared a glance at Miss Clay, who still added nothing to the conversation.

“Are you expecting any guests?” Alex asked.

The duke shook his head. “I have acquired the witnesses, but our friends are out of the city right now, and my mother is ill.” Then he motioned to his ward. “Miss Clay’s friends wished to come, but it interfered with their employment.”

The statement shocked Alex; the woman kept friends with the working class. He had no objection to it himself, though it left him surprised that the duke would have allowed it, for such things were not common amongst the upper crust in London. Alex would have to get used to his connection to nobility now, even though they did not seem the normal lot.

The vicar appeared at the entrance and ushered them all inside. The pleasant old man reviewed how the ceremony would proceed, as if the day were a happy occasion.

Then the wedding began, and Alex was suddenly caught up in the reality of it all. The church was cold, despite the sun shining through the stained-glass windows, with the multiple pews void of any guests.

When Alex knelt beside Miss Clay and the vicar droned on about the rights of marriage and its sanctity, the only thought that crossed his mind was if he should be the one to object himself. Of course he would never do such a thing, bringing more shame to his fiancé and himself in their situation, but how he wished he could. There was no telling what his future would be, but he was certain it would be nothing like the life he had imagined with Miss Allman. His heart ached, but he had to dismiss it quickly. He could not long for one woman while married to another.

The ceremony carried on in a forgettable manner until the vicar asked him to take her hand. Alex glanced at Miss Clay, trying to remember something about her personality or her mannerisms, anything that would give him a hint of what their future would hold. The only thoughts that flooded his mind were vivid memories from the balcony; the press of her lips, the urge of her touch, the intoxicating scent of her that had lured him to his doom...

Alex shook his head, certain such thoughts would not be welcome in a church.

After the vicar drew the ceremony to a close with a prayer and asked them to stand, Alex offered her his hand. She took his help up, but when her eyes finally met his, he still saw heartbreak and disappointment in her expression. He felt the same heavy weight she bore and knew he would have a great deal of work to do for them to find some semblance of peace.

They signed the marriage registry, then Alex offered his arm again to Miss Clay, or

rather, Mrs. Westcott now. The vicar congratulated them, though the words felt empty. And eventually, they made their way outside onto the steps of the church.

“What a lovely service,” the duchess said, with a smile that did not quite reach her cheeks. Surely she recognized what a farce the entire ordeal was.

Norland, it appeared, did not wish to dwell on pleasantries. “We will hold the breakfast party in our home.”

“Yes, of course.” Then the duchess turned to Emily. “Why don’t you ride with Mr. Westcott, dearest?” She spoke lightly, ever so encouragingly.

Emily stiffened but nodded. “Very well.”

Once the carriages were brought forward, Alex helped his new wife inside and took his seat across from her, but she did not face him. She had turned decidedly toward the window, so Alex settled in for a silent ride to the duke’s townhouse.

As the carriage lurched forward, it did not escape him that she would be returning to her home for the final time; then she would leave with him as his wife. He glanced at her, wondering how he could start a conversation. Did she prefer that he call her Mrs. Westcott? Or Emily? Perhaps resorting even to madam?

Before he could open his mouth to ask her, the smallest whimper drew his attention. She did not speak or look at him, but there was no missing the tear that trickled down her cheek.

“Are you unwell?” Alex asked.

She shook her head, swiftly wiping away the evidence, leaving him unconvinced.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Why did you kiss me?” she whispered .

Alex paused, surprised as she whirled on him with her fiery blue eyes. “Why? That is the only reason we are in this scenario.”

Any sympathy he’d felt a moment ago immediately vanished at her accusation. “If I remember correctly, it was because you asked me to.”

Her teary eyes narrowed as her cheeks flushed.

“And I am not entirely at fault. You should not have been alone on the balcony.”

She scoffed. “Should I give that same advice to the woman whose company you sought as well? Or are you the only man in London who is allowed to be alone with a young woman?”

Alex ground his jaw. “If I had kissed the woman I intended to marry—”

“I am not responsible for your poor sense of timing and lack of direction.” Then she crossed her arms and turned back toward the window. “I would much rather have kissed the man I intended to marry as well, instead of marrying you.”

So this is what his future would be. Married to a woman who hated him. He was doomed to suffer the same fate as his own parents, locked in a miserable existence for the rest of his days. All because of one regrettable, life-altering kiss.

Perhaps he should have objected to the wedding after all.

All his life had been spent fighting against his father, and when the man died, he

fought to protect his family from further gossip and slander. Marrying for love was a rare luxury, as Alex had learned early in life. His parents' arranged marriage was certainly void of it, and it made him all the more determined to see that his sisters married well, with stable and respectable men, but also with affection, so that they would not have to suffer the same fate. That his mother had married a worthy gentleman in her later years was an unforeseen blessing Alex did not take for granted. But now, he was facing the same reality. His own marriage was doomed to become just like that of his parents.

He glanced out the window with a sigh, the sight of dead trees from winter not giving him any glimpse of hope. The world outside was on the brink of springtime, the potential for growth and newness, but his new life would have none of it. Any hope he'd had rested with Miss Frances, and that would never be.

The wedding breakfast at the townhome was nothing how it should have been, accompanied by family and friends who were overjoyed at the union. Instead, it was a quiet, formal affair, with the duchess the only one encouraging discussion. Alex tried to oblige her, but he was not in the most conversational mood, having recently been accused of ruining his new wife's life. The duke and his ward were equally quiet, offering nods or one-word answers when required. They were very alike in that way.

It was nearly midday when the breakfast came to an end. They had no reason to linger, so Alex called for his carriage again. He would return home and try to see if there would be any reasoning with his wife.

The duke and duchess saw them out, along with the nursemaid carrying the duke's young son. Alex bid them all farewell, then waited by the carriage for his wife to follow. She curtsied briefly for the duke, which seemed so distant and cold compared to when she had used his given name while tugging on his arm that night on the balcony. In the next moment, she was wrapped in a loving embrace by the duchess. He could see the duchess whispering things into his wife's ear, who only nodded

every so often. Then she pulled back and wiped tears from her eyes.

“Be sure to come and visit once you’re settled,” the duchess said fervently, while patting her hand.

Alex watched as his wife took the hand of the little boy, who hid his face shyly, clearly not understanding that she was leaving.

“Thank you all for everything,” she finally said, her voice wavering as it had before. Then she curtsied again and hurried into the carriage without using the hand Alex offered to help.

Trying to remain civil, Alex gave one final bow.

“Take care of her,” the duchess called, pressing a handkerchief to her quivering chin.

“I will do my best, Your Grace,” he said, though he wasn’t certain how much his best would actually accomplish.

Once he was seated and the carriage again moved forward, Alex let out a sigh. He did not attempt to engage in more conversation if it would end the same way it had before. Perhaps she was merely overwhelmed by the changes of the day, and she would be more accommodating after some rest.

It was a short ride back to his townhome, and when the carriage pulled to a stop, it shook Alex from his thoughts. He straightened in his seat, waiting for the footmen to open the door.

“I have advised the rest of the staff to call you Mrs. Westcott or madam, if that is agreeable to you.”

She nodded wordlessly.

“You may call me Alex or Alexander or Westcott or husband, whatever suits you. What would you prefer I call you?”

She sighed. “I have no preference.”

Alex clenched his jaw, wanting to sigh himself. Most unhelpful. “Very well.”

The footman opened the door and helped both of them out, then Alex led her up the stairs and into the double doors.

In the foyer stood a few of his staff, ready for introductions. “Allow me to introduce my housekeeper, Mrs. Jansen, and my butler, Radcliff. They should be ready to assist with anything.”

They bowed and curtsied in greeting.

“And this,” he paused, turning to his new bride, “is the new mistress of the home, Mrs. Westcott. Be sure that you see to her every need.”

They both nodded.

“Pleased to meet you, madam,” Mrs. Jansen stepped forward with a smile. “Your maid has already arrived, and we’ve shown her upstairs. Perhaps I can give you a tour of the place once you’ve rested up a bit.”

Again, she said nothing in response, just a nod with a forced smile.

“Then I’ll show you to your room,” Alex said, and she followed him up the stairs.

She did not look around as she walked, and he assumed that was because she did not care. It pricked at his pride, for though he might not live in the most expensive part of town, he was considered a wealthy gentleman. But perhaps this was not extravagant enough for her tastes, coming from living with a duke. Yet she did keep company with the working class, so perhaps he simply did not understand her at all. He still did not know much about her, besides the minimal details he'd learned from Norland. Did she have extravagant taste to go her with her hateful arrogance? Perhaps that would become more evident with time.

At the end of the long corridor, Alex paused. "This is the door for your bedchambers. Mine is just there," he pointed beyond his shoulder, "and there is another connecting door in yours as well, but that can be discussed late—"

"Do not think for one minute that door will be used for any purpose tonight," she snapped.

He was shocked to finally hear her speak again, but the words she chose were too hostile for him to engage properly. "Believe me, that is the last thing on my mind."

"Good, for let me make one thing abundantly clear." She took a step toward him. "You will not touch me unless I allow it, which I assure you will not happen until I am dead."

Alex stiffened. He had certainly not been about to press her on such details right away, but she was speaking definitively. "You would deny me an heir?"

"I was forced into marriage, but I will not be forced into your bed." The anger in her eyes bit at him like a blue flame.

"I have no intention of forcing you to do anything." Alex spoke through clenched teeth. "Might I remind you that I was also forced into this arrangement? I gallantly

save your reputation by sacrificing my life to marry you, then I bring you into my home and introduce my staff who will be at your beck and call. What could I have done to deserve such hostility?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "If I must bear with your presence for the rest of my life, then you must deal with mine."

A growl escaped his lips as he ran an exhausted hand over his face. "Lud, you are the most infuriating woman I have ever met." This is not how he had hoped the day would go. "Then let me make one thing abundantly clear to you," Alex said, raising his voice to match hers. "You're welcome to lock yourself up in your room for as long as you wish, as your presence will not be needed or wanted."

She pursed her lips. "Very well." Then opening the bedroom door, she stepped inside and slammed it behind her.

Alex let out a breath that did nothing to relieve the tension in his chest. Perhaps he had gone too far, speaking so harshly, but there was no reasoning with a woman like her. She had been the one drawing the line, not him.

At this rate, it would require a sword and shield to even speak with his own wife.

Chapter Nine

The next morning, Emily took her time. She did not go down for breakfast, and instead took the meal in her room. Her husband had made his disdain for her clear, leaving her with no doubt he would not seek out her company, so she lazed about before her maid helped her in getting dressed. It was not a simple morning dress, but something fine, something to be seen in. She would still have her weekly afternoon tea with her friends, whether she was a married woman or not. Even if they could not be present for her wedding, now more than ever, she needed their support for how to proceed with such an unpleasant husband.

Emily wore a floral dress with a red spencer jacket, and one of her most dramatically decorated bonnets for emphasis. This would be her first visible outing since her wedding, and she would not let the world think this man had gotten the better of her. No, she would go make social calls as she pleased.

It was nearing midday when she finally stepped out of her room and made her way downstairs. Mrs. Jansen approached her with a smile. “Good morning, madam. Lovely to see you out and about.”

“Good morning. Where is...” Emily tripped over her words, for she had not quite yet decided on what to call the man who was her husband. She could not very well call him by his given name, it was far too intimate and personal for someone she desired less intimacy from. But calling him Mr. Westcott as his wife sounded perhaps pretentious, or even romantic. That would never do.

“Mr. Westcott has gone out on business, madam.”

She raised an eyebrow. This could be easier than she had anticipated. “Very well. I will be going out as well.”

Taking an umbrella from the servant at the door, Emily let herself out without a word. They could no longer meet in the duke’s home, and Emily was not about to invite her friends for tea where her new husband might overhear them. So they had agreed to meet at Gunter’s in Berkley Square, the spring weather turning warm enough for eating ices. But Emily only then realized her error, for while the duke’s home was a short walk to Grosvenor Square, it was a much greater walk to Berkley Square. Emily normally would have had pin money for a hackney from the duke, but now she had to acquire such things from her husband. How she dreaded that conversation.

But she would not let him get the better of her even in his absence, so she faced the distance under the protection of her parasol. Not that she needed to hide from the sun, as it currently hid itself behind gray clouds. But she would have to keep an eye on the sky, in order to not return to her new home in absolute shambles.

After she arrived, it was easy to spot Daphne and Georgiana who were waiting anxiously. With great exultation, they wrapped Emily in hugs, both sets of eyes focused on her alone. “How are you? Tell us everything.”

She could imagine their curiosities, for she had only written to them briefly to explain the whole ordeal, but she had no lovely stories of post-marital bliss. After they acquired their ices, they walked around the park as Emily recounted her experience from the entirety of her wedding day.

“I still can’t believe it,” Daphne whispered, her gaze somewhere off in the distance. “That the duke would force you to marry such a man.”

“The duchess assured me he had his reasons, but of course, she could not tell me a single one.” Emily sighed. “I’m not certain I would have accepted them as sufficient

anyway.”

“Perhaps there is a way out of it,” Georgiana offered, folding her arms and chewing on her thumbnail. “Some way to have the marriage broken.”

Emily shook her head. “The duke would never agree to a divorce. It would cause more scandal than the kiss he tried to hide.”

“But what of an annulment?” Georgiana turned toward them. “There are certain legalities around what allows it, but what if it was an option?”

A flicker of hope burned in Emily’s chest. “I suppose I could inquire.” Was an annulment any better than divorce? Was there a chance this could all be undone?

“But you must be discreet,” Daphne whispered earnestly. “For if your husband or even the duke found out, they might foil your plans.”

Georgiana sighed. “That you have such a husband at all is still astonishing.”

“Indeed. I hardly see myself as his wife, the Mrs. Westcott he insists on calling me. And there will not be any wifely duties to perform, considering he told me my presence was not needed or wanted.” Emily recalled his words with a sneer as bile rose in her throat. She had wept bitter tears of anger that night, feeling trapped by this terrible man. She doubted it was how a wife was supposed to feel, how the duke and duchess had hoped her relationship would start.

“But it is at least a fine house?” Georgiana asked.

Emily nodded. “It is. Comparable to Mrs. Pembroke’s, to be sure.” She had married into wealth and stability, so she should have been grateful, but those things alone could not promise a happy life.

“And you have met the staff?” Daphne asked. “Are they agreeable?”

“No different from any other, I suppose. Though they do not seem to bear his same disdain for me.”

Emily pressed her lips together, stifling anything further she might say. She had anticipated being happily married to Mr. Evans, never even considering she would need to know what an annulment would entail. It had not occurred to her even a week prior that she might have to put up walls around her heart to protect herself from the man she would marry.

Instead, she was stuck with a man she hated. She wondered if her words of spite had urged him on, pushing him to say such things, but it was not her fault alone. She had kissed him, yes, though thinking of those moments on the balcony made her face burn. But she had assumed the entire time it was someone else. How could she be to blame? And the duke said that this Mr. Westcott was a good man who had made great sacrifices for his family, but he surely would do no such thing for his new wife. Their life together was doomed.

Unless she could find some loophole, some way out of her current situation. An annulment would be her last attempt at breaking from her husband, and she would not rest until she had an answer.

The skies above turned dark, bringing their visit to an early end. Emily hurried away into the blustery day walking down the sidewalks with a frown. To all of London, she was a married woman, returning to the place that was now her home. But it was not a home to her; the last place she would ever want to be.

She opened the door to Mr. Westcott’s townhouse where the servants stood waiting to assist her. They greeted her with smiles, helping her with her umbrella and her spencer.

“Did you have a pleasant outing, madam?” one footman asked.

“Yes, most pleasant.” Emily gave him a forced smile.

She was halfway up the staircase when the sound of footsteps filled the front corridor.

“If you would be so kind,” Mr. Westcott boomed, “to inform me next time you go out, so that I might know where my wife is going and when she will return.”

Emily stiffened. She had hoped to avoid him for the rest of the evening. “Did you provide me this same courtesy?”

“I went out on a social call to try and secure a suitor for my sister, and I presumed you did not wish to be bothered, all of which I informed the staff. You did not.”

She pursed her lips at him. “Am I a prisoner then?”

He huffed. “Of course not. You may come and go as you please. I only ask that you inform me or the house so that I’ll know where you are if something should happen. That way, I will not worry.”

“Do not worry over a wife you do not want,” she mumbled as she fidgeted with her gloves.

“Where have you been?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“Visiting friends.”

“Of the male variety?”

Her head shot up in shock, then she narrowed her eyes at him. “Of the poor variety.

In order to avoid besmirching your name, I went to visit them instead. And since I do not feel comfortable here, I sought comfort elsewhere.”

He visibly flinched. Good. Let him be affected by her barbed words.

“Very well. I will inform you when dinner is ready.”

“Do not bother. I will take the meal in my room.” Then she turned from him and continued up the stairs, encasing herself in the safety of her bedchambers.

Emily let out a sigh of frustration. Between hiking across London and discussing the details of her marriage and her future, she was beyond exhausted, both physically and emotionally. She could not face him at dinner as well. She would keep him at a distance until she could find a way out of this, their ridiculous sham of a marriage.

Chapter Ten

With a sigh of relief, Emily dropped the gossip pamphlet on her bed. This Lady Whetstone was infamously quick with her reports, and Emily had been waiting impatiently for the next release. She only had to be sure her name was not mentioned with an ounce of suspicion. Thankfully, it was all very tame, at least in comparison to others whose names had been dragged in the mud. The only mention of the marriage was that it was small, which suited any ward of the Undesirable Duke, but that otherwise she and her husband made a charming pair.

That line made Emily snort. Thankfully, this Lady Whetstone knew nothing of the truth.

With the knowledge that her reputation was safe, Emily picked up a book that she had been trying to read for the last half hour before the gossip rag arrived. The book's contents were hardly riveting enough to distract from her current situation, that of being a new wife with a new husband in a new house. The book waxed poetic about falling in love and the joys of springtime, but the world did not appear so to Emily. In fact, it made her quite cross. Outside her window, the city of London was drab and cold without a trace of spring in sight. And though she'd had hopes of romance before, it seemed as if the book mocked her aspirations, for her husband would provide anything but that.

A knock sounded at her door. "Who is it?" Emily asked.

"Mrs. Jansen, madam."

Emily closed the book and set it aside on her bed. “Come in.”

The housekeeper entered, balancing a tray with one hand. “Tea and biscuits, if you like?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.” She set down the tray for her then bowed as she went to exit, but Emily suddenly had a thought. “Mrs. Jansen, did anyone ask you to prepare this?”

The elderly woman shook her head. “No, madam. I simply thought you might enjoy something to eat at midday.”

She appeared innocent enough, so Emily nodded and let her go. She was almost certain the tea had been sent by her husband, but perhaps he was not so thoughtful.

She had grown accustomed to the staff bringing food to her room now, for she had no desire to dine with her husband. It wasn't that she feared him. No, indeed. In fact, it was more an act of defiance. She could not appear compliant when this entire situation was against her will. Perhaps he might find her immature or childish for behaving so, but she was not ready to settle just because this was the hand dealt to her. She would find a way to end it if she could, find a way to secure an annulment to free her from his grasp.

If there was any way she could be rid of him, she would do it.

Emily enjoyed her tea and biscuits and had finally made some progress with her book when there was a knock at the door again. Assuming it was the housekeeper to retrieve the tray, she said, “Come in, Mrs. Jansen.”

There was a long pause. “It is your husband.”

She froze, heart stuttering inside her chest. What ought she to do? He had not sought out her personally since the day she arrived. What could change him now?

Emily moved from the bed, squared her shoulders, and lifted her chin as she opened the door just a crack.

He stood in the corridor, and it struck Emily how decidedly good looking the man was, dash it all. Perhaps some ladies did only hope for a handsome husband, but Emily had always hoped for something beyond that. Now she was stuck with him , with his dark brown eyes and the perpetual set of his lips. Only she could not linger on that feature for long. He did not appear angry or cross, nor did he look apologetic and demure. He seemed emotionless, which was almost worse.

“You have a guest,” he said evenly.

Emily pinched her lips together. “I have already informed the staff that I will not be seeing any guests for the time being.”

A glimpse of fear crossed his dark eyes. “It is my mother.”

Unable to stop the sharp intake of breath, Emily placed a hand on her stomach. Heaven and earth. This was the last thing she expected.

“You do not have to spend a great deal of time with her, but she did want to meet you. She will only be here the one night before returning to Bath.”

Emily raised an eye brow at him, unwilling to budge in her response.

But then his features softened, catching her off guard. “Please,” he said quietly.

Of course his begging would win her over, but she would not let him win in

everything. Perhaps this would prove that his mother is a terror, and she would have more complaints to take back to the duke. Maybe then he would allow an annulment.

“Very well. Permit me a moment. ”

He nodded wordlessly as she closed the door.

Her maid was not present to help her change clothes, but it wasn't necessary. Her morning dress would be suitable enough to meet his mother, but she did freshen up in the mirror, securing her hair and pinching her cheeks.

When Emily opened her bedroom door again, Mr. Westcott still stood in the corridor. He offered her his arm, which she reluctantly took so that he might lead her through the house. She realized she had not even had a tour from the housekeeper either, so it made Emily almost grateful for him.

“I would ask a small favor of you,” he asked in a lowered voice.

Emily looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

“I know I have no room to ask anything of you,” he began, “but I beg of you, please try to hide your hatred of me. You needn't pretend any affection, but if you can let her think this is a happy match, that would assuage her fears. She has worried for me enough over the years, and I do not want her to leave continuing to harbor such feelings.”

That did not sound like an unpleasant woman, unless she was the sort that thought no one was good enough for her boy. But if she was an elderly woman, Emily did not want to cause her additional stress.

“Very well. I will do it for her sake,” Emily mumbled.

Mr. Westcott nodded. "Thank you."

He led her to the front drawing room on the first floor, and when the doors were opened, Emily was first struck by how simple the trappings were. Very fine, to be sure, the sign of a wealthy gentleman, but nothing exaggerated as she had expected.

Then his mother came into view. Not as elderly as she'd thought, and a lively sparkle in her eyes. Her round face glowed with a smile as she stood to greet them .

"Ah, my dear!" she said, moving to take Emily gently by the hands.

"May I introduce my mother, Mrs. Agnes Martin. Mother, this is my wife," he paused after the word, casting his eyes at her, "Emily Westcott."

"You know, I think I remember your first come out," his mother said, patting Emily's hands. "I saw you with the duke and dowager duchess, thinking you were the prettiest thing, but I believe that was when we were still in mourning for Alexander's father, so it did not cross my mind to seek an introduction. How lucky that we can meet together now."

Blast it all, the woman was all genuine kindness, so that could not be used in Emily's arsenal. "Thank you, mum. Please have a seat. I presume, since you do not share a name with your son, that you have remarried?"

"Yes, indeed. My boy found a new love for me, which was a very lucky thing, more than I could have ever hoped for. And he worked so hard to find a match for both his sisters, though he still has the one remaining. Ever diligent and dutiful. You have married quite well for yourself, my dear." Mrs. Martin patted her son's hand, and Emily wanted to roll her eyes. She had yet to see such rampant kindness and affection from her husband.

“Of course,” Emily said with a forced smile. “How lovely.”

“And do not misunderstand, he has his gloomy days as we all do, but you need only take a trip to the ocean, and he’ll be right as rain. He did so enjoy trips to the coast as a child, especially Brighton.”

“Mother, please,” Mr. Westcott said.

“Mother, nothing. This girl deserves to know what the rest of her life will be like by your side, so I’m only making sure she’s fully prepared.”

Emily couldn’t help grinning. Already she’d learned so much more about her husband than she knew before, so perhaps the strategy here needed to be that she sought his mother’s help in an alliance.

“Indeed? What more could you tell?”

By the end of the evening, Emily found she was quite worn out, but not in the way she had anticipated. She had assumed spending any time in the company of her husband and his family would grate on her nerves and leave her desperate to be alone once more. Instead, she had found genuine conversation with his mother, more laughter than she’d experienced in some time, and a tired jaw from both of those things. She was ready for her bed, to be sure, but she could not say she regretted the evening.

Mr. Westcott had turned in early, likely realizing he would not quite have an ally amongst the two women, but Emily knew without question that Mrs. Martin would always advocate for her son. She might tease him or expose his flaws every so often, but Emily could never mistake the loving affection in her eyes every time the mother looked at her son. How she had longed for that look in a parent’s eyes, knowing it would never be.

When the flames in the fireplace had dimmed to mere coals, Mrs. Martin patted Emily's hand. "Perhaps I've occupied too much of your time. I must retire, and ready for my journey home. It was worth the travels to meet my new daughter-in-law, but I must return to my newborn grandson."

"Yes, of course." Emily smiled. "Thank you so much for making the trip. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance and meet the mother of my husband. It has been enlightening, to say the least."

Mrs. Martin laughed lightly as she took Emily's arm and together, they walked toward the parlor door. "Yes, I suppose he can be quite the paradox at times. I suppose I ought to warn you, for you may hear rumors about Alex, but I assure you, they are not true. There is so much misunderstood about Alex and his father, so much that society thinks they know. He is his father's son, there is no mistaking that. But Alex is so much more the better man." Mrs. Martin paused and turned. "I do not mean to speak ill of the dead, only to say that you need not fear as Mrs. Westcott. Things may seem difficult now, but they won't always be. If you be patient with his harsh exterior, I believe you will be blessed when you come to know his soft heart."

Emily forced a smile as they continued walking. "I fear I may be waiting in vain, mum, but I will do my best."

Again Mrs. Martin laughed. "So polite, even in her distress."

At the top of the stairs, Mrs. Martin patted Emily's hand. "I hope you will feel comfortable to write to me should you ever have any questions. Or even just to inform me of the goings-on in town. I do appreciate a little harmless gossip every now and then."

"I will surely. Thank you for your company."

Once Emily was alone again, she made her way to her room, but she felt revitalized. This union would not conquer her as she had feared before. No, she would conquer it herself.

Chapter Eleven

Normally working on a ship in a bottle meant distraction from the real world, and in a room where he was in control, it made everything about his life seem that much more manageable.

But not today.

Alex found himself unable to focus, he kept fumbling with his tools, the ship parts were not piecing together like they usually did, and he even dropped the bottle once, though luckily it did not shatter. Setting it down gently, he sat back in his seat with a frustrated sigh and ran a hand over his tired face.

Everything seemed impossibly out of control, like a real ship lost at sea, with no sail, no rudder. The reality was not something that could be fixed by him alone in this room. His life would not improve until he found some common ground with his wife. But how?

He spent the early morning in his study, thinking on the dinner the night before. His mother's surprise arrival came with the pleasant news of his sister's birthing a healthy baby boy, accompanied by a plethora of questions about how Alex had found himself in a situation to get married in the first place. He explained as little as he could get away with while saving both his and his wife's dignity, but none of that would satisfy his mother. She wanted to meet the woman and had been more than delighted with what she'd found in the new Mrs. Westcott.

There was also no denying Alex had been pleasantly surprised with his wife's

behavior. There was not a hint of outward animosity, but Alex could still read between the lines of her pointed words and hidden meanings. Aside from that, Mrs. Westcott had been civil, well-spoken, graceful, and talented. No doubt a result of her schooling and being trained by the duke and duchess. And yet, when his mother returned home, his wife would have no reason to shine any of that civility on him.

Their dinner had been pleasant and their evening enjoyable, which left Alex wondering if any of those moments could possibly be replicated under different circumstances. Would their conversations with his mother perhaps enlighten his wife's perspective of him, or make him seem even the slightest bit more tolerable? His curiosity and interest in his wife had increased, but he knew better than to expect anything different if she still hated him.

For the few days since their marriage, Mrs. Westcott took all her meals alone, she did not seek him out, and any requests were handled through the house staff. It was beginning to seem ridiculous. He didn't specifically want to seek out his wife's company, but they could not find any resolution or compromise if all they did was avoid each other. If they were to spend the rest of their lives together, then they needed to rectify the situation as best they could.

Alex found himself thinking on Frances, to his own detriment. Any longing in his heart had to be stamped down, but he couldn't help comparing the two women, and how differently his life would have been if everything had gone according to plan. In every way that Frances was gentle and calm and good, Emily Westcott had proved to be stubborn and prickly and outspoken. He hadn't necessarily tried to be difficult, but it seemed they could barely be more than civil when in the same room together, so they would have to think of something in order to make this marriage work. Or they were destined to be miserable forever.

Just like his parents.

Leaning forward again with a sigh, Alex rolled up his sleeves and returned to work. The pursuit of fitting tiny ships into bottles did not seem as difficult as being a newlywed.

A knock sounded at the door and Alex bade them in. Radcliff appeared in the doorway, looking out of sorts, which was abnormal for the man.

“What is it, Radcliff?”

He swallowed hard. “There is a gentleman at the door.”

Alex frowned. So early? But then, perhaps the morning had gotten away from him. “Who is it?”

“A Mr. Richard Evans.”

The name struck a chord within him, but Alex couldn’t quite place it.

“I asked if he wanted to be shown to the drawing room, but he said no, he only wanted a moment with Mrs. Westcott.”

Fiery recognition filled Alex’s chest as he shot to his feet. The coward from the balcony.

“She did not see him in, but he is still on the steps.”

Alex blindly pushed past the butler, made his way down the corridor and into the front foyer. His wife stood in the doorway in a pale green day dress, and a man’s voice spoke quietly beyond her. How dare she put on such a display for all of London to see? Of course their marriage was not a happy one, but could she at least spare him being the center of more gossip? Hadn’t they married for that purpose alone?

He stormed forward until he caught a glimpse of the man over her shoulder, and immediately Mr. Evans' face paled as he stepped back.

"Mr. Westcott, good day. I only..." but the man's voice trailed off.

Despite the fury beating behind his eyes, Alex managed to simply curl one hand into a tight fist. "You are not welcome here, sir, and I suggest you see yourself off," Alex growled.

"Yes, yes, of course. My apologies. It won't happen again." Mr. Evans bowed quickly, then cast a lingering glance at Mrs. Westcott before turning down the sidewalk and disappearing.

Alex closed the door and let out a deep breath. "How dare he." Then his eyes met with his wife. "How dare your lover show his face here."

"He's not my lover!" Mrs. Westcott shouted, her blue eyes looking crystal behind the sheen of tears. "He only came to bid me goodbye. Did you not have a tearful farewell with your beloved?"

Alex narrowed his eyes at his wife. "She was gone before the day of the wedding. However, this man," he paused, pointing to the closed door, "decides to show up well over a week later, standing in my doorway for all of heaven and earth to see, no doubt begging you with those cow eyes of his."

She shook her head. "He just—"

"He somehow manages the gumption to stand on my doorstep and plant your name back in the gossip that we sacrificed our lives to avoid, yet he knew with such certainty on the balcony, that he never would have kissed you as I did."

Any anguish in her features burned up immediately into a fiery rage, and Alex felt the full force of her blue gaze. She was a beauty, but by heaven, her fierceness overtook him when she was angry .

“It is your kiss that night that ruined everything,” she whispered.

Clenching his jaw, Alex took a step closer, but she did not cower, even lifted her chin in defiance.

“Let us be clear about some facts, shall we? I am not solely responsible for that night, because you reacted to that kiss as much as I did.” Alex did not want to recall that night, did not want to remember the feel of her lips against his in the dark, but the moment he mentioned it, he had to fight to keep his eyes from her mouth. Especially when her lips parted to fight for uneven breath. Even now, she still bore the same jasmine scent about her, which frustrated him to no end. “You thought I was someone else, I understand, but I thought you were someone else as well, therefore we are equally victims or we are equally at fault. Take your pick.”

Her narrowed gaze deepened. “You needn’t worry yourself over Mr. Evans, for I will never see him again.”

“Good. For if he dares to return to my house, he will see me or no one. He will eventually learn that you are my wife. You belong to me.”

She somehow managed to step even closer to him, her face mere inches from his own. “I belong to no one.” She may have intended her words as harsh defiance, her lips pursed and chin high, but she was unable to hide the break in her voice on the final word, or the sheen of tears that betrayed her guarded heart, and Alex understood her full meaning. She wanted to belong somewhere, but she had not found the place yet. Which meant even married to him in his fancy townhome, she still felt alone. A prisoner, as she’d said before.

“I may have taken your name and legally become your wife,” she whispered fiercely, taking a step back from him. “But you have done nothing to earn the right to claim me as your own. You know nothing about me, and I nothing of you, therefore we are mere strangers living together in this house. Do not attempt to ease your foolish male pride by trying to pretend otherwise.”

Alex seethed, unable to speak as she stormed up the stairs to her room and slammed the door behind her. Just as she had the first night of their marriage.

When he was finally alone in the front foyer, he closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall, groaning with regret.

She had been right on every count. He had done nothing to earn her trust or loyalty, and it was her life that had been uprooted to live in his house when they had married.

But did she always have to approach him as the enemy? Must their every conversation be a conflict? In all his thirty years, he had never met someone who was so continuously at odds against him. And the last thing he would have expected was that he would marry into a constant battle with such a person. It seemed her heart was well guarded, as if protected with armed soldiers, a border of shields and swords.

And why did she draw such anger out of him? Her barbed words seemed to strike him to the very core, and somehow it was his wife that had the ability to reach into the bottom of his soul and pull out the worst of him, the part that he was ashamed of, the part he tried to hide.

The part of him that was just like his damned father.

The thought made bile rise in his throat, the regret sickening him further. Would he never be rid of the blood in his very veins?

“Alex,” came a small voice from the top of the stairwell, and he whirled around. Half of him hoped it would be his wife, but he should have known better. It was his mother who stood there, looking down on him with a love that only a mother possessed.

“Forgive my shouting, mother. I know it was unseemly of a gentleman.” He waited as she made her way down the staircase and sighed. She knew the truth about his relationship with his wife now, so there was no use in hiding it. “It seems I am still working on finding common ground with Mrs. Westcott.”

When she reached his side, she linked her hand in the crook of his arm, and they walked into the front parlor. “What seems to be the problem?”

Alex collapsed into an armchair with a sigh. “She just seems to bring out the worst in me.”

To his great surprise, his mother laughed. “Marriage brings out the worst in all of us, but that does not mean we are destined to stay that way. My marriage to Mr. Martin is vastly different from my marriage to your father, but it still requires effort on both our parts. We work together to make ourselves better and make each other happy.”

“What if I’m not capable of either of those things?” Alex leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs. “I feel as though I will never be more than the kind of man my father was.”

“Look at me, son.” The sternness in her voice brought his eyes up to hers. “I never want to hear you say such a thing ever again, for you are entirely different from your father. He chose every day the sort of man he was going to be, and you have proved countless times that you are not the same. Where he was a heartless father and a selfish philanderer, you are honorable and selfless, and though you might have weaknesses as we all do, you are nothing like him. His blood might flow in your

veins, but you are so much more than that. You can choose to be more than a fiery temper.”

The smooth voice of his mother did ease his heated emotions, but the problem still simmered below the surface. “Even when I must face hers?” Everything about his wife unsettled him. She was young, but others had married younger, to be sure. And after yesterday’s dinner, he’d witnessed his wife’s enhanced understanding of the world in both her mannerisms and attitude. He caught a glimpse of who she truly was, but she still kept him at bay, on her guard. Emily Clay—Emily Westcott now—did nothing but battle him on every front.

“I think both of you are in an uncomfortable situation, and it is natural to be defensive. It seems you are both passionate people, so it may take some time to find calm waters, but I believe they can be found in time. Not all arranged marriages need end loveless and in shambles.”

Alex shook his head. Love was the last thing on his mind, but calm waters, that could be his goal. A marriage without fiery disputes and shouting matches, but simply civil companionship. He could find peace in that. Now if only he could convince his wife of the same.

Chapter Twelve

Emily stayed in her room until Mrs. Martin departed. She had nothing against the woman, but she couldn't let her husband know that. She would only disappoint her mother-in-law now, as Emily must continue seeking an annulment, but it did help ease the sting of her marriage, that her husband's mother was not a terror.

Once the woman was gone, Emily readied to depart herself. She couldn't think of anywhere she might go to get away from him, but she could go seek counsel from the duchess. Isabel might be a few years older, but she still treated Emily as an equal, even though they very much were not. She could discuss her feelings more openly with the duchess, and without the iron fist of the duke. He had proved himself a good man, and Emily had her suspicions about why, but she could not trust him with everything. Not yet.

Emily dressed for the day with the help of her maid, then made her way downstairs with her head held high. Per his instruction after her first outing, she intended to inform him of her departure, but she would do so with whatever pride left she had intact .

“Where might I find Mr. Westcott?” Emily asked the nearest footman.

“The master is in his study, madam, just down that corridor.”

Emily walked through the foyer, then squared her shoulders and took a deep breath before knocking on the dark wooden door.

“Come in.”

It caught her by surprise that he did not ask who it was, when she'd been ready to spit out “your wife” with every ounce of animosity she possessed. Perhaps that meant he might be comfortable with her entrance as a possibility, or perhaps he did not care one way or another. As for herself, she still could not stand his presence for any length of time without her hackles raising and the flame of anger burning in her chest, but perhaps she was on the verge of being rid of him for good.

Jaw clenched, she turned the gilded knob and pushed the door in.

Emily entered the study, and again discovered another perspective to the man she had married. This room, like the dining room, was not full of elaborate furnishings or decorations. It was still worthy of a gentleman in his status, but it was simple. She found him seated comfortably at a desk, surrounded by bookshelves on the walls and a table to his side covered in tools. He looked up casually, no doubt expecting a servant, then his eyes went wide, and he shot to his feet, his tools clattering to the floor. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbows, revealing his forearms, and his dark hair appeared disheveled, as though from active tousling more than lack of attention.

No matter. His physical appearance meant nothing to her.

Lifting her chin, Emily said, “I am going to visit the duke and duchess, and I will likely not return home before dinner. Is that acceptable?”

He clenched his jaw before clasping his hands together in front of him. “Of course. Should you need money for a hackney?”

“It is a short distance. I shall walk.” Emily quickly bobbed in a curtsy, wishing to be gone from his presence.

“Wait. Please.”

His voice stopped Emily in her tracks, his gentle tone catching her off balance and spreading uncertainty through her stomach. Taking a shaky breath, she slowly turned to see him round the desk and take a careful step toward her.

“What you said...” He started strong and firm, but he shook his head and sighed. When he looked up again, he bore the look of a vulnerable man, someone who was tired. “I spoke to you harshly this morning, and many times before that. It was ungentlemanly of me. You did not deserve such treatment, and you were right to censure me.” Emily’s heart pounded, for she had never heard such an apology, yet he went on. “We may not always see eye to eye on things, but I do not want this place to be a prison to you. It is your home, so whatever would make it feel more like that for you...”

Emily raised a skeptical eyebrow at him. “As in, changing the wallpaper in my bedroom?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “If you wish. Or if inviting the duke and duchess for dinner would put you more at ease to dine with me...”

Again her stomach recoiled, recognizing what he was trying to say. Hating it. He was trying to reconcile with her. Trying to find common ground in their marriage, a marriage neither of them wanted. Why did he just settle and accept it all? Why not fight back and find a way to end it if they were both miserable?

“The duke is much at parliament, but I will ask them when they are available.” Emily almost lost her voice as she nodded in departure. She bolted out the door without much help from the footmen, stiffening in the bright sunlight. Various ladies and gentlemen were already out taking afternoon strolls, or had hired hackneys to deliver them for morning visits, and all of this Emily had already anticipated. Only she had

hoped to appear more confident, but instead, she left feeling lower than ever. He had sought to find peace between them, and she had responded with cold detachment. Now she was on the verge of tears, ready to crumble should anyone even approach her. These were the repeated tears she had fought against since her wedding day. She'd struggled with her frustrations since the moment he brought her back to his home, but she hadn't actually accepted it as her future, as her fate.

His attempt at peace made her confront something she wasn't ready to accept: defeat. And she couldn't raise a white flag. Not yet.

Emily ground her jaw, hoping her quivering lip was not visible to the people in the street passing her by. She could not meet their eyes; she dared not in her current emotional state.

Finally she arrived at a familiar place; the duke's townhome in Grosvenor Square. It broke her heart to know that it was more appropriate that she should knock now, as she would be a guest instead of at home. Holding back a whimper, Emily knocked on the door.

The butler opened it and smiled brightly. "Miss Emily!"

She should have corrected him, but she didn't much care. "Is the duchess home?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes, of course. Do come in."

Emily stepped inside and realized what she had done. She had retreated. She'd sought comfort in her old home instead of facing the difficulty head on .

"Oh Emily!" The duchess grinned from the top of the stairs. "I didn't expect to see you so soon. The duke is out, but little Theodore has been asking for you..." Her

smile fell, as if suddenly seeing Emily's true state. "Whatever is the matter, my dear?"

Unable to keep the tears at bay any longer, Emily rushed up the stairs, and fell apart in Isabel's arms.

Emily didn't know how much time had passed, but eventually her nerves calmed. She found herself staring at the wall in the drawing room where she laid on the settee, her head resting on Isabel's lap as the duchess rhythmically brushed a hand over Emily's unpinned curls. She was exhausted now, having bitterly wept all her pent-up emotions, and vented all her frustrations. Isabel had listened and soothed so effortlessly until all Emily's anger had simmered away.

Much of the inner turmoil had been released, so she felt a little better, but that did not mean her situation had been resolved.

"Isabel?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there really nothing to be done?" Emily asked.

"I don't see what other options are available to you."

Emily sat up. "Not even an annulment?"

Isabel sighed. "Unfortunately not, my dear. Your situation would not merit an annulment, for it would require either mental incompetence, which neither of you have, or impotence, which would only be proved after three years of sharing your husband's bed."

Emily flushed.

“I believe there are grounds of fraud, as well, but neither of you are pretending to be someone you’re not. ”

Perhaps not, but there was always the truth about Emily’s identity, the nagging reminder in the back of her mind that she, in fact, could be more than anyone was telling her.

“Beyond that, there is only divorce, which you know would be more of a scandal than if Mr. Westcott had not married you at all.”

Emily leaned back and sighed. Hearing all the facts from someone who loved her, who would not judge her, helped provide a clearer perspective, helped her come one step closer to accepting the dreaded truth. “Then I must stay married to him.”

Isabel nodded, brushing a hand over her curls again. “Then so you must.”

“How does one even survive an arranged marriage?” Emily lamented. “It makes the rest of your days seem so helpless and doomed.”

“Not at all. I’m certain in some cases, but I do not think that will be your lot.” Isabel paused. “I still think you should speak to Marianne. Their situation was different, to be sure, but she could provide some insight that I think would help.”

Emily shook her head. “Mr. Westcott is no Mr. Ramsbury.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“That is why I sought you out.” Emily sat up, turning to Isabel earnestly. “My husband has a much more similar demeanor and temperament to the duke, so cross

and distant at times. Though I know His Grace is not always like that, is he?"

"That's right. But you said Mr. Westcott was kind to you just this morning, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but that was out of obligation, not out of sincerity." Emily shook the pressure from her head. "He does not care one whit about me. "

Isabel nodded. "And yet he did so knowing you do not care one whit about him either."

"Are you saying he is better than me?" Emily asked in mock offense.

"I am saying he is trying. Therefore, you need to try as well."

Emily sank back against the settee. "Then how do I try? How do I have a successful marriage, especially when I long for someone else?"

Isabel looked at Emily carefully for a long moment. "First and foremost, I think you will need to let that dream go. Cry your tears for Mr. Evans, wish him well in life, and then let him go. You will only make yourself miserable to linger there."

The words sank deep in Emily's heart, for she knew the duchess was right.

"After that, it will be up to you and your husband. You will need to work together to create an environment that makes you happy in your new home with him. For every marriage will require a good deal of work." Isabel placed a comforting arm around Emily's shoulder. "It will take sacrifice and compromise, but I do not think you are doomed to loneliness and despair as you might imagine for the rest of your life. It will require much of you. In fact, it may require all of you. But creating a home and a family is quite possibly one of the best joys there is."

Emily did not feel that joy yet, nor did she even have a hope for it, but she was buoyed by such a vision. “Thank you, Isabel.”

The housekeeper announced the tea was ready, but Isabel took Emily’s hand in her grasp.

“I will say one more thing. The duke and I love you, and you may always come here to visit. I will welcome you with open arms and be thrilled to see you in any moment.” Isabel’s eyes steadied with a soft smile. “But at the end of the day, you will need to return to your husband. He is your home now, and that is the place you need to fight for. Find common ground with him and make it your own. It is the only way you will find a sufficient path forward.”

Chapter Thirteen

Alex could not recall the last time he had entertained members of nobility in his own home. He did not make a habit of rubbing shoulders with the upper crust of society. It did happen every so often when out at a ball or a dinner, but seldom did such interactions result in an invitation due to his family's reputation. There had been one occasion where his sister had caught the attention of a baron, but their attachment had not lasted long. And none of that mattered any longer, for Alex had married into such a family with a duke. Hopefully that would help him overcome his father's rumors and better his family situation in the long run.

"You have a lovely home," the duchess said with a bright smile as she looked up from her dessert plate. "It's located in an excellent part of town."

"Thank you," Alex said, though he couldn't care less about the townhome or the location. "It was my mother's choice, but it has served me well."

"How fares your family?" she asked.

"Very well. My sister has delivered her first child in Bath, and I look forward to meeting him sometime soon."

Alex took a spoon of trifle and looked up to see the other three at the table with their eyes riveted on him. Had he said something wrong?

"Do you intend to take up residence there as well?" Norland asked.

Ah, were they concerned he would whisk away with their dear Emily? “Not necessarily. I lived in London at my mother’s insistence to find a wife, but that has now been accomplished,” he said with a tease. “My mother and sisters live in Bath for the time being.” He did not know how much detail they needed, that he was still honor-bound to find his last sister a match. “I do go and visit, but I have no plans to change the location of my home.” His eyes skittered to his wife, for it was no longer just his home. “Unless my wife wishes otherwise.”

Mrs. Westcott gave a nod of acknowledgement but said nothing, returning to her dessert.

“That’s a relief,” the duchess said. “I realize Emily must start her own family now, but I am pleased that doing so will not take her far away from us just yet.”

Alex did not have a response for that, so he said nothing and took another bite. Perhaps the duchess should ask his wife about just how long it would take for that new family to begin.

“Have you traveled much?” Norland asked, taking a sip of his drink.

“I did travel for a year in Spain and Portugal, but it was about that time that my father fell ill and I returned home. Since then, I chose to stay close to family. I return to my father’s estate when needed, but otherwise—”

“You have an estate?” the voice of Mrs. Westcott brought up his eyes. “In the country?”

Alex pressed his lips together. He really needed to find some time alone to actually have a conversation with his wife. “Yes, in Wiltshire.”

“How wonderful,” the duchess cheered. “I’m certain that would be a lovely—”

“Unfortunately, I am rarely there.” Alex needed to shut down this idea quickly. He would not go back to the old house unless absolutely necessary. “I have a steward there who oversees the estate, but I do not go in person unless my presence is required.”

The duchess faltered, giving him a false smile. “I see.” Then she placed her serviette on the table. “Emily, if you’re finished, perhaps you can show me the drawing room, so the gentlemen can have a moment with their port.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Westcott said, standing hesitantly from her chair. Alex had an inkling that he ought to mention where to find the drawing room, as his wife still might not know where it would be in the house, but Mrs. Jansen appeared to lead them away.

Once they were alone, Alex stood to ready the beverages. “Do you have a preferred drink of choice, Your Grace?”

Norland shook his head. “Any will do.”

The wine was served, and the duke took his sip, but Alex hesitated. Even the smell of it reminded him of Lady Hartfield’s ball, the kiss he’d shared with Miss Clay, which was how she’d now become Mrs. Westcott. He did not want to lose his faculties again, so he only took a sip, very slowly.

“How fares your father’s estate?” Norland asked.

Alex stiffened. He did not appreciate the duke pressing about the estate. “Well enough. It has extensive grounds with lots let out to farmers, and the income is enough to take care of the property’s needs. I receive regular updates from my steward.”

Norland nodded, though Alex could tell he had more to say .

“And you’re certain staying away does not leave the house in neglect?”

“I am certain,” Alex responded with gritted teeth.

“I only say so because I too receive updates from my steward when we are away from Wynnwood Park, but there is always much to do upon our return. Perhaps there is more needing the owner’s eye, and it would not be wise to stay away so long.”

Alex took a swallow of his drink, much longer than he had intended, then let out a deep breath before speaking. “Perhaps, Your Grace, if you had a father who despised you and the only courtesy he ever did you was dying, then you might understand why I have no desire to return to his home.”

Perhaps it was too far, but Alex couldn’t help being proud of even the slightest restraint. Such a snide remark spoken in a club would no doubt result in a bout of fisticuffs, but this was in the presence of nobility. If Alex was going to test his limits with drink again, doing so in company with the Undesirable Duke was likely less than ideal.

But Norland did not retort. His eyebrows shot up, then he nodded and took a sip of his own drink. “You are right. Unfortunately, I do understand, though only to a certain extent.”

Alex blinked. Was he somehow bonding with the duke over an insult?

“Forgive me, I hope my words did not offend. My apologies,” Norland went on.

Had the drink already gotten to one of them, or both of them? Had the duke just apologized? Alex thought for certain he’d be verbally beheaded by the man.

“I only suggested for Emily’s sake.” Norland straightened in his seat. “She is comfortable and confident in any setting, but she much prefers the country.”

“Of course she does,” Alex mumbled. She must be his opposite in every way .

“I only said so to perhaps encourage a visit, that way she might be more comfortable. Your efforts in any kind of gesture might make a difference in helping you find common ground together, and that you own property yourself, I had assumed would make it a little more convenient.”

Alex wanted to push back, to say it wasn’t convenient. And what about his own comforts, did they not matter? But the duke’s voice was not one using force or condescension. He spoke calmly, rationally. “Why are you telling me this?” Alex asked.

Norland let out a sigh. “I realize that I am the one who enforced this marriage, and as a result, both you and Emily are unhappy.”

Alex cleared his throat. It was an understatement, to be sure.

“I merely wanted to make a suggestion that would help, if they would be easy for you to accomplish. Something that would help ease both of your burdens, and generate some ease in your relationship. But perhaps I was too forceful, as this is not my house nor my relationship. I beg your pardon if my suggestion was untoward.”

Alex shrugged, still taken by surprise. “Not at all. That is, what you suggest is not an easy feat for me, but I appreciate the sentiment behind it.” Alex lifted his glass in the duke’s direction. “And here I thought I’d be meeting the Undesirable Duke.”

Norland chuckled, clicking Alex’s drink. “Not if I can help it. That man is long dead, though his ghost does show up every now and then. I may still be irritable at times,

but I am striving to make things better for those around me. Creating opportunities for happiness for those I care about whenever possible.”

The words sank down into Alex’s bones. He, too, was fighting a ghost, but sometimes it seemed impossible to keep out. Evicting the blood in his veins was not that simple. He might strive for his family’s happiness as well, but the ugly anger always showed its head, and too many times in his wife’s presence. He was repeating the past, the one thing he’d sought to avoid.

The duke drained his glass, then stood. “I do not wish to be seen as someone trying to control your relationship, nor as an obstacle to be overcome. I am Emily’s... er, I was her guardian. Though that title now falls to you, so I hope you will still consider us family. The duchess and I will always continue to worry for her, but now we will worry for you, as well. We wish to see you both successful and happy, and I hope you will feel comfortable enough to reach out should you need anything at all. I will be of assistance to you in any way that I can.”

Alex realized what he was offering. The duke had money and connections that could be used to Alex’s advantage, but he was letting Alex know he had a friend, an ally in this new path of life. Married men needed the support of each other, but he’d not offered it to him alone. The duke had a personal investment in Mrs. Westcott, so he was her ally as well. And Alex needed all the help he could get if he was going to overcome the conflict with his wife.

Standing and shaking the duke’s hand, Alex said, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Chapter Fourteen

The weather outside Emily's window had finally turned sunny and warm, and it called to her. How she would enjoy a stroll through Hyde Park on her favorite horse, but alas, Morgana remained in the country. Emily wondered when they might be reunited, and she assumed it might require taking a special trip with the duke and duchess to Wynnwood Park. She wondered if Mr. Westcott would want to accompany them or not... which resulted in Emily shaking her head. Perhaps he would permit her to go alone instead? That seemed more plausible, as he would likely be happy to be rid of her.

Emily went back to her stitching, deciding she would take a walk with her maid at the very least by the end of the day. Then a knock sounded at her door. "Who is it?"

"Your husband."

She could not help the stiffness that overtook her shoulders, knowing his presence was just on the other side of the door. She had nothing to fear from him, only she remembered the heart wrenching sobs she'd left on Isabel's lap, along with everything they'd discussed about her marriage and about him. Emily had thought long and hard about all Isabel had suggested, how everything in marriage required compromise and sacrifice, and how she needed to take a more active stance on the way their lives and marriage would be. So instead of putting down her needlework and going to open the door herself, as if confronting him and protecting her space, instead she tried to remember how he had done it, and just said, "Come in."

He did not respond or react right away, but eventually the handle clicked and the door

pushed open. Mr. Westcott stepped inside but only just, and he appeared about as stiff as she felt, but she carried on stitching.

“Forgive my intrusion,” he said, clasping his hands behind his back. “I only wanted to inform you... several weeks ago, I received an invitation to a dinner party and I accepted. Only now I realize the occasion is approaching, and... I suppose it is something we ought to attend together.”

Emily did pause her stitching then, her heart sinking. She did not have any desire to attend a public outing yet, for she hardly knew how to be around her husband in private. “Who sent the invitation?”

“Mrs. Lamb, an older widow and a friend of my mother’s.”

Her mind continued to spin, for she knew countless Lambs among the ton. But there was no use in delaying the inevitable. “And when is the dinner party?”

“This coming Saturday.”

With a sigh, Emily nodded. “Very well. You can inform them we will attend together, and I will make myself ready on Saturday.”

“Thank you.” She did not look up at him, but she could hear the relief in his voice.

And when she expected him to bow and leave, he lingered, so she glanced up. “Is there something more?”

He stood still in the doorway, nicely dressed and excruciatingly attractive. Emily watched the muscle work in his jaw, and the lump in his throat bob up and down, until he finally spoke. “This is not something I would require of you. Going forward, if there is some event or dinner you do not wish to attend, you are at your liberty to

decline.”

When his eyes met with hers, his brows furrowed together demonstrated his earnestness, and she found the depth of vulnerability in his gaze. That he continued to press the matter made her realize just how serious he was to mend the gap between them, and her heart thundered into pace. He was giving her very clear lines in the sand, offering her a way out.

Emily swallowed and nodded. “Thank you for the clarification. I will attend with you just the same.”

His lips slowly curved into a handsome smile, his brown eyes filling with light as a result. “Thank you.” Then he nodded a bow and stepped back out of the room.

Emily dropped the stitching in her lap and let out a sigh. This was perhaps the first step of many on the path of creating a life with her husband, but did it have to feel like the weight of the world on her shoulders?

When Saturday came, Emily had seen herself ready with the help of her maid. She wore a fine dinner dress of forest green with golden ribbons, and her blonde hair done up with decorative gold pins. There would be no easing the pounding inside her chest, no relieving the nerves that held her bound, but she would go through with it, as a woman who kept her word. It would be their first outing as a married couple, and she had to do her part.

Making her way down the staircase, Mr. Westcott stood in the foyer waiting for her. She tried to avoid his gaze, but when she reached the bottom step, he offered a hand of support, which brought her eyes up to his. He had cleaned up his appearance as well, but his eyes still bore the same reserved nature from when he’d arrived at her door the day before.

“You look lovely,” he said, brows knit together.

The praise brought a heat to her cheeks, and Emily had great difficulty swallowing. He spoke in a low voice, one that reminded her of their moments on the balcony, and she had to press her lips together to avoid looking at his own. Pushing the notion away, Emily nodded to acknowledge him. “Thank you. We must be off, else we’ll arrive late.”

Mr. Westcott helped her out to the carriage, but neither one of them spoke during their travels. She thought for certain he’d have more to say based off their previous conversation, or perhaps some preparation for the event itself, but it was nothing more than awkward silence.

When they arrived, Emily immediately recognized the location as the home of a woman she had visited before.

He knocked on the door and as they waited, Emily turned to ask, “Is this the home of Mrs. Katherine Lamb?”

Mr. Westcott blinked and nodded. “It is.”

“I believe she is a friend of the duchess as well, and we are already acquainted.”

Indeed, as the door opened and they were ushered inside, the hostess hurried to greet them.

“How lovely to see the both of you,” Mrs. Lamb cooed. “And may I offer my congratulations on your recent marriage. The duchess here was just telling me about the details.”

She motioned toward the waiting room, where Isabel stood next to her husband.

“Oh, I have more guests arriving. Do excuse me,” Mrs. Lamb said, flitting back to the front door.

Emily moved through the small crowd of guests with her husband. It had been called a small dinner party, of nearly twenty people, yet in Mrs. Lamb’s stately house, everyone fit comfortably in the front parlor awaiting the announcement to be seated.

When they arrived on the opposite side of the room, the duke and duchess looked up, and Isabel’s face brightened.

“Good evening, Your Grace, Your Grace,” Mr. Westcott greeted.

“What a happy surprise,” the duchess said. “I did not know we would see you here.”

Emily watched the two of them carefully. She had expected the duchess to immediately pepper her with discreet question about any progress since their last discussion, for nothing had changed since their dinner together, and though the duke was normally standoffish, he did not offer a word to greet them. He kept his eyes on the darkening window.

“Is something the matter?” Emily whispered, stepping just out of her husband’s earshot.

The duchess sighed. “It is not pleasant. James and I have just come from visiting his mother. You know she has not been well since the wedding, but the doctor said it is very likely she will not recover this time, and that perhaps, she does not have much time left.”

Emily gasped and froze. “Are you certain?”

“I am sorry to bear you such news,” Isabel said, taking Emily by the hand. Her gaze

was pointed, full of meaning, as if trying to convey a truth she could not speak out loud. “The dowager duchess lamented not being present at your wedding and has begged for your company since. She wishes to see you before...”

“Yes, of course.” Emily nodded firmly. She would go see the dowager duchess one last time. Perhaps it would be Emily’s only opportunity to learn the truth.

She looked at the duke’s profile, settling on the notion that once the dowager passed, he would quite possibly be her last blood relation alive. She would have to speak to him about it someday.

Mrs. Lamb’s voice welcomed them all to dinner, and requested the duke and duchess to the front, for they would eventually lead everyone into the dining room, starting with the highest rank. That left Emily alone with her husband once again as the crowds gathered.

“Is that you, Westcott?” a gentleman’s voice called.

Emily looked over at her husband, who caught the eye of a gentleman. “Ah, my lord.” He stood and gave a slight bow toward the gentleman, who approached with a lovely woman on his arm. “May I present my wife, Mrs. Emily Westcott.” Then he turned to her and said, “Allow me to introduce Baron Frampton, and his wife, Lady Frampton.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” Emily said with a curtsy.

“I believe your marriage was quite recent, was it not?” the baron asked.

“It was, some weeks back now,” Mr. Westcott answered in monotone words.

“Oh, how lovely. Congratulations!” Lady Frampton said with a bright smile. “And

the two of you look so well together.”

“That is very kind to say,” Emily responded. “As do the two of you.”

The baroness tucked her hand further into her husband’s arm. “We only claim a few months or so beyond your own time being married, but it is still a joy, is it not, my love?”

He patted her hand. “Indeed. Nothing greater.”

Emily could not be more thankful that Mrs. Lamb called the Frampton’s down to be seated as well. After all, nobility with nobility. She did not wish to witness their marital bliss or have them think it would be her lot sometime in the future, for it certainly never would be.

“They were acquainted with my sisters in Bath,” Mr. Westcott offered in a low voice. “In fact, he would have married my sister Edwina had Miss Beatrice not stepped in to become Lady Frampton.”

While Emily appreciated the insight, she had not anticipated his forthright explanation. But it was finally their turn to be seated, so Emily took his arm as they were led into the dining room.

There was a large table, beautifully decorated and well-lit with high candles. She caught a glimpse of Isabel and the duke, and further down the table she saw the baron and baroness still lovingly looking into each other’s eyes, but then she saw one face she did not anticipate: Mr. Richard Evans.

He looked up just as she looked away, her stomach churning and her face turning pale. How had she missed seeing him upon arrival? She clung to her husband’s arm a little tighter now, without explanation. Could this night become any more

ostracizing? The duke and duchess seated at the opposite end of the table, the dowager duchess at home on death's door, Emily's rejected first love in the same room again, her distant husband her only ally, and surrounded by characters like the incredibly amorous Framptons. It simply wasn't fair.

"Are you unwell?" Mr. Westcott asked quietly, his voice low and close to her ear.

"Well enough," she responded, hoping to somehow have seating arrangements that would avoid Mr. Evans. She could not bear her husband to have another outburst.

But of course, they were blessed with the luck to be seated directly across from him.

Unable to avoid his gaze further, she gave him a brief smile, then thanked her husband as he helped her into her seat. She checked quickly to see if Mr. Westcott had noticed, but he gave no indication one way or another.

The first course was served, and Emily had been spared from conversation across the table due to overly large centerpieces. The elderly woman seated beside her proved to be an excellent conversationalist, which meant she had not been left alone in awkwardness with her husband. And yet, he continued to serve her wordlessly by plating her food and filling her drink. Though he appeared to be ignoring her, when she foolishly dropped her fork on the floor, he was the first to get a servant's attention for a replacement.

By the final course of the meal, Mrs. Lamb caught the attention of everyone in the room by saying, "Mr. Evans, what is this I hear about you leaving for Bath?" and thus quieting most other conversations.

Emily kept her head down, pressing her lips together in anticipation as her fork pushed between the peas on her plate. She did not know how much the rest of the company knew her connection to him, but she did not want to face a single one of

them if they did.

The familiar sound of him clearing his throat filled the room. “It is true, Mrs. Lamb. I leave first thing in the morning.”

“But why now, in the middle of the season? You will leave so many eligible young ladies to mourn your absence.”

God in heaven, Emily prayed the earth would open up and devour her. Anything to deliver her from the barbary of the current conversation.

“Yes, well... I suppose I will return next season.”

There was an uncomfortable lull that settled over the room, and Emily looked down the table, giving Isabel a pleading glance that she might find some other topic of conversation.

“The food has been exquisite, Mrs. Lamb.” It was Mr. Westcott who spoke. “My compliments to your cook.”

Mrs. Lamb clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, I am glad to hear it. Though I hope you have all saved room for dessert! ”

A gentle hum of chatter overtook the table once more, and Emily let out a sigh of relief. She had no hunger for dessert or even company for that matter, but she was grateful to no longer feel on edge. And oddly enough, she had her husband to thank.

After the long evening, Emily collapsed into the carriage with a sigh, glancing at Mr. Westcott. She had the urge to smile at him, to thank him for his chivalry, and to congratulate him for their success in passing the night together. She wished to have that sort of relationship with her husband, but they certainly had not reached that

point yet.

“May I ask you a question?” he asked, shaking Emily from her thoughts.

“Of course.”

“What was it that the duchess had to apologize for when we first arrived?” Mr. Westcott sat across from her, his face shrouded in darkness.

A familiar sadness sank back into her stomach. “The dowager duchess, the duke’s mother, has fallen ill. They do not expect she will last much longer.”

“I see.”

“I will likely need to visit her tomorrow in order to see her before she passes.”

He nodded, then looked out the window. “Are you very close with them? That is, with the Barringtons?”

Various thoughts passed through Emily’s mind at once. Their closeness by blood had yet to be determined. The dowager duchess... she could not be compared to a mother, not in the way Emily would have wished. “The duke and duchess have been very kind to me,” was all she could say.

Alex opened his mouth, but paused before speaking, any emotion on his face hidden in the shadows. “Are you in love with him?”

Emily choked on her breath. “With the duke? Of course not.” It was such an inane idea, even without what she presumed to know.

“You cannot be surprised by my asking, for it happens a great deal, a ward falling for

a guardian.”

“That may be so, but he is my...” Emily swallowed the word. She could not speak what she did not yet know to be sure, even if he was her husband. “He is a duke, first of all, and a married one at that. I would never do anything to hurt Isabel so dreadfully. They have both taken such good care of me, and the last thing I would ever desire is to hurt them.”

“I understand,” he said, putting up a hand in defense. She had expected him to remain quiet after that when he spoke again. “But you are still in love with the other gentleman. The Mr. Evans. Are you not?”

His words were not spoken in accusation, merely stating facts, yet still they stung. Hearing the name again hurt. Seeing Mr. Evans after she had made the decision to give up on him was torture.

“One hardly has control over such things,” Emily mumbled, picking a speck of nothing from her dress.

“I understand,” he said, then he sighed. “And I’m sorry.”

A sliver of moonlight traveled up his arm, briefly lighting his face, and Emily caught a glimpse of his despair. She had to remember he knew what she suffered, and that he had also lost someone his heart may still long for.

“Thank you for saying so.” Emily swallowed hard. She’d had very little to apologize for in her life, for she’d had very little in ways to offend, but not with him. She owed him a great deal more than she had given thus far. “I suppose I ought to offer my apology as well. You have not deserved all the mistreatment at my hand.”

“Think nothing of it. Your words were required for me to see my errors, and it was a

needed perspective if we were ever going to have a chance for resolution.” He leaned forward. “The both of us seem to be strong-willed and passionate people, which is perhaps one of the many reasons we could not seem to get off on the right footing.”

“Indeed.” Emily smiled in spite of herself, fighting off a blush. No doubt he had used the word passionate in reference to their tempers, but it was their reaction to each other on the balcony that filled her mind.

“We had expected to marry other people, but now have only to face the future with each other. I know I am not your Mr. Evans, far from it, but even if I cannot be the husband you had hoped for, I will do my best to be a good husband to you. Perhaps we might be able to see each other happy, after all.” Then he reached out an open hand toward her.

Emily hoped he could not see her face in that moment, for she was certain there would be no hiding the blush that was burning in her cheeks, or the way she had to fight the smile from her lips. Her heart pounded in her chest at the prospect. He was proving to be wise and humble, more so than Emily had been, for she never would have found it in her to say such things first. She had accused him of being proud, but she was far too proud herself. And yet, his offer is exactly what needed to happen. The only way to implement what Isabel had suggested, to accept the future with sacrifice and compromise. It seemed almost an impossible feat, but that he had offered the olive branch first made it seem like a much more achievable goal.

She placed her hand in his, their fingers curling together in a firm grasp. She thought he might kiss the back of her hand and found herself almost wishing he would, but she had to purge herself of that immediately.

“Thank you.” When he released her hand, she couldn’t keep from saying, “Though I might caution you to be careful with your words, husband. Such a speech might take my breath away and make me believe you’re falling in love with me.”

He let out a breath of air between his teeth. “You needn’t worry on that regard, for such a thing will never happen.”

Emily attempted a smile in response, one that of course he could not see, but the darkness in the carriage suddenly turned overwhelming. His words shouldn’t have meant anything to her, and she should have thanked him for such reassurance. But instead, Emily found she was suddenly staving off the burn of tears in her eyes, for his words felt like a death sentence.

She had given up on Mr. Evans, that much was true, and with it should have gone any hopes of romance in her future. Isabel’s counsel had encouraged her to focus on finding contentment in her circumstance, and that had been her goal, to find balance with her husband. So why did his words devastate her so? Was there still some part of her deep down that harbored a hope for love to win out in the end? If he swore no such thing would ever happen between them, that future seemed like hell on earth, and she would almost prefer that he stay her enemy instead. A handsome companionable husband who did not love her was somehow infinitely worse.

Chapter Fifteen

Alex rested his chin on his fist, staring out the window and watching all those passing by on the streets below. There were ladies and gentlemen, both old and young, on foot and by carriage, filling the streets and the sidewalks with the purpose of business and leisure. Alex inspected them carefully, knowing that amongst it all, somewhere contained a clue that could help his current predicament. Which had nothing to do with his own matters of business or leisure, but instead of what to do with his wife.

How did one set a goal to win over a woman he had already married?

A knock sounded at the door, making Alex turn, attempting to appear busy with the papers on his desk. "Come in."

His wife entered, and Alex's heart skipped a beat at the sight. Not for any particular reason, for she looked as she did on any other day, but he was reminded of her beauty every time he saw her. And it wasn't only that, but also that he had just been thinking of her, and he felt somewhat guilty, as if he'd been caught. But what did he have to hide ?

"I'm off to visit the dowager duchess," she explained. There was no malice in her voice as there had been when advising him of her outings before.

"Ah, yes." Alex nodded. "Very well. Shall I go with you?"

"That won't be necessary," she said in a hurry.

He leaned forward. “But do you think she might ask for me? To meet your husband before she passes?”

Mrs. Westcott grimaced. “I suppose you are right. Though I don’t wish to impose on your time...”

Alex shook his head. “No imposition at all.” He’d rather be anywhere else than linger alone with his thoughts as he had all morning.

After retrieving his jacket and gloves, Alex followed his wife to the carriage. They traveled in silence again, which he had hoped would be a more comfortable silence than they’d had after the dinner. Only the last time they were in this carriage, he had tried to explain his thoughts and feelings clearly and provide a peace offering. She’d seemed to accept them, but his own words still burned in his mind. She had finally seemed comfortable enough to tease him, which he had countered with a reassurance that he would never fall in love with her.

It made him want to shrivel up and disappear from her sight.

It had been too dark to see her reaction in the shadows, but he had wondered how his words might have impacted her. He had intended them to be reassuring, but the moment they were out of his mouth, he had regretted them deeply, not knowing how to expound without making the situation worse. And his own words still continued to gnaw at him the day after.

Such a thing would never happen? From him, the man who had been determined to marry for love? His heart might still ache over the memory of Miss Frances, but now that his focus had changed to the wellbeing of his wife, he was starting to care more about her, what she thought, how she felt. Was it impossible to think, in their precarious war of words and emotions, that they could one day raise a white flag and fully reconcile? Truly become husband and wife who loved each other?

They arrived at the home of the dowager duchess, and once inside, they discovered the duchess was already there.

“How good of you to come,” she greeted them, leading them down a corridor. “She will be happy to see you both.”

They entered the woman’s bed chambers to find the duke seated by his mother’s bed. He looked up and stood, placing a hand on her arm.

“Mother, Miss Clay is here to see you.”

Alex bristled uncharacteristically. Miss Clay was, in fact, Mrs. Westcott now, wasn’t she? But perhaps that was the only name the dying woman would recognize. And besides, hadn’t his wife already set him straight before? He had no right, no claim to her. At least, not yet.

The elderly woman roused and turned her head. “Oh, my dear Miss Clay.” She lifted one hand and Emily hurried to her side. “You did not have to come all this way.”

“I wanted to,” she responded, patting the woman’s hand. “Only I am Mrs. Westcott now.”

Alex could not help but smile hearing her say the name. Perhaps it would become more natural with time.

“And who is Mr. Westcott?” she asked, urging him to step forward into her view.

“Alex Westcott, at your service, Your Grace,” he said with a bow.

The older woman gave a laugh without much force. “Well, you won’t be at my service very long, will you?”

He gave a forced smile at her dark humor. "I wish you a speedy recovery, Your Grace. "

She waved a hand. "Tush and nonsense. I will soon go the way of all things, and you'll think nothing more of me. But I am glad to meet the man who will take care of this sweet girl the rest of her days."

Alex swallowed. "Then I will do my best, Your Grace."

The dowager duchess sighed, and a moment of quiet settled over the room.

"Would it be all right if I had a moment with Her Grace alone?" Mrs. Westcott asked.

The duchess looked to her husband, and Alex followed suit. The duke bore pursed lips and a worried brow, but eventually he nodded, so they all stepped out of the room until the duchess closed the door.

"I will be in the study," Norland said before disappearing down the stairs.

The duchess remained, eyes of concern locked on the door.

"Will she be all right?" Alex asked.

"Emily will come find us should the worst happen." Then she looked up at him with a genuine smile. "Would you care for a tour of the gallery? There is quite the collection, and a handful of paintings there I've done myself."

"That sounds lovely." He followed her downstairs, not expecting much conversation in the gloomy circumstances, but she did have a question. "How has Emily taken to your home? Is she settling down all right?"

Alex grimaced before he could catch himself. He couldn't confess the whole tumultuous truth of it. "If she isn't, then I would be the one at fault, not her. Though I am trying..."

"That is what I was afraid of," the duchess mumbled, then shot up a look at him. "Not that I would assume you would be at fault, of course, only that... it is a difficult hand you both have been dealt."

He was certain of that much, at least.

"And though I do not know your life experience, I would have you know..." Her words trailed off before continuing. "Before coming to us, Emily had spent a great deal of time on her own. Thinking she had no one in the world, being strong because she had no other choice. She came to trust us after some time, and seemed to blossom when she met Mr. Evans, so I imagine the disappointment was severe, perhaps making her seem closed off and harsh." The duchess paused her steps and looked up meeting Alex's gaze. "Though I do not think any of that would be your fault."

He wanted to chuckle. "I think a good portion of it may be my fault."

She shook her head. "I would only ask that you have patience with her. I believe your efforts will not be in vain, that eventually her guard will come down, and you can create a beautiful life together."

"Thank you, Your Grace. That is my hope as well."

The duchess opened the door to the gallery, but Alex couldn't help looking back before stepping in, wondering what discussion was happening with the dowager duchess.

Chapter Sixteen

Emily pressed her hands against her dress skirts, hoping to alleviate the perspiration gathering there. Her heart raced, making it rather difficult to catch a normal breath. So many things were culminating in the moment before her. Her mind rushed with memories of friends in the boarding school who had fallen ill and died too young, who had no family by their side as they passed. Now Emily had the chance to face the possibility of her own family, only to have it also ripped away from her due to sickness, and it left her terrified. She had shared moments alone with the dowager duchess before, shopping on Bond Street and playing cards after eating dinner together, but she'd never felt confident enough to voice her concerns with the woman.

Now Emily felt the bravery had been thrust upon her, as this might be her final opportunity to get the whole truth about her own life. She had to dismiss her dark memories, and confront the discomfort before she didn't have a chance anymore.

"What is it, my dear?" the dowager duchess asked. "Are you disappointed I did not make it to your wedding? I hope you will forgive an old dying woman. How I wished I could have been there."

"Your Grace, I hope you will forgive my impertinence. I do not wish to disturb you in your illness, but my curiosity will not let me be a moment further without asking."

Recognition dawned in the old woman's eyes and she nodded. "You'll not disturb me, my dear. Ask me your questions."

Emily swallowed hard, forming the words in her mind before voicing them on her tongue. “No one has ever spoken of it, so I do not know if that means there is some great secret, or if I’m completely wrong in my assumptions, but I have reason to believe... that is, I’ve suspected for some time...” Finally inhaling a deep breath, she said, “Could it be possible that you are my mother?”

The dowager sighed, closing her eyes and leaning her head back as Emily waited, counting each heavy heartbeat in anticipation.

“Yes, child. I am your mother.”

Relief settled over Emily’s shoulders, the confirmation for what she had always known to be true, and yet, there was still so much more she didn’t know. “Then that means the duke...”

“James is your brother, but his father was not your father.”

Emily swallowed again. What could she mean?

“Mine was an arranged marriage,” the dowager began, and already Emily felt the chill of their similar circumstances. “I had been chosen to marry the old Duke of Norland against my will. He was a decent man, titled and wealthy enough to satisfy my family, to be sure, but I had already fallen in love with another nobleman, and found myself unable to marry him. So I became a duchess and dutifully provided the heir to Wynnwood.” Emily watched as the old woman turned wistful. “But I was unhappy, so I sought happiness elsewhere. We lived separately, and I kept the company of other gentlemen to soothe my heart.”

Emily cast her eyes to the ground. A woman hardly ever spoke of such things, though she knew it was generally accepted. Married men often had their dalliances outside of marriage, and women were permitted the same, once their lineage was secure and as

long as their dealings were discreet.

“Then years later I was reunited with the earl, the man I loved. I came to carry his child, and once you were born, you were sent away to the boarding school.” The dowager looked up at Emily with tears shining in her eyes. “I could not bring you up here in London, nor could the earl take another woman’s child into his home, for he had his own wife and family. I told James repeatedly he was his father’s son, but I couldn’t tell him about you, so he was somehow convinced he was a bastard, not worthy or suited to inherit Wynnwood. He stayed away from town, kept everyone at a distance, was considered cruel and unwanted company for neglecting his duties as a nobleman, which earned him that dreadful nickname, Undesirable Duke.” She pressed her lips together in a sad smile. “Only when your father died did James learn of your existence, and that he was legitimate after all.”

The truth of her existence settled in Emily’s stomach, her discomfort growing. The duke was not the illegitimate one, she was.

“I am sorry that you had to be on your own for so long,” the dowager continued. “But I hope you will have peace knowing that, even though you were not conceived in marriage, you were conceived in love. And it has brought me such happiness to see the woman you have become, so I do not have any regrets.”

Emily sat straight in her chair, not able to look the dowager duchess in the eye any longer. She had finally received the truth she sought, yet still she was unsatisfied. But how could she have expected anything else?

“So you do not regret abandoning me?” Emily asked shortly.

The dowager sighed. “I understand you’re angry with me, but I thought you of all people would understand, being stuck in a loveless marriage yourself.”

Emily stiffened. How did she know?

“Do not act so surprised, my dear. Just because I’m laid to rest in this bed, does not mean I’m excluded from the circulating gossip. I have plenty of friends and visitors who inform me of the goings-on in society, and your hasty wedding was quite the talk of the town, along with the speculation of a loveless marriage.”

The churning in Emily’s stomach worked and soured with every word. Had their mistaken kiss somehow been outed? Had she ruined Mr. Westcott’s reputation, or brought ire back to the duke’s family name? What if the truth of her own parentage also came to light? What then?

“Perhaps after some years have passed, when another chance at love comes along, and you find your peace with a man who is not your husband, then you will not think so harshly of me.”

Emily swallowed, shaking her head. “I do not care for your extra marital affairs, but I thank you for revealing the truth, for seeing me well-cared for even after being cast off, and for helping me find my way after I arrived in London. I will cherish the memories we have had together, though they may be few.”

The dowager duchess sighed, leaning back into her pillows and pressing her lips together. “I am sorry I could not be the mother you deserved, Emily.” She spoke with a gentleness in her voice and a sorrow in her eyes that Emily could only believe to be sincere .

But it was this finality that brought tears to her own eyes. The truth that she’d never had a mother she so desperately needed, only to have mere moments of knowing her as such before losing her. A jumble of thoughts and emotions, Emily felt the immediate need to leave. “May you have a swift and painless passing.” Then bobbing a curtsy, she rushed out of the room.

Emily blindly went down the stairs, step by step, tears blurring her vision. She finally made her way down the familiar corridor to the drawing room, and found Isabel taking tea with Mr. Westcott. They both looked up in anticipation, but words escaped her for two long beats.

“I wish to leave,” she said finally, and Mr. Westcott immediately rose to his feet.

“Won’t you come have a cup of tea, my dear?” the duchess asked delicately, placing a hand beside her on the settee.

Emily shook her head curtly. “I wish to be alone.” She was grateful the duke was not in the room. She wouldn’t know how to face him with what she knew now, that their similar blue eyes were gifted from the same woman. That he’d known from the moment he’d met her at the boarding school who she was and had never told her a thing. Emily would eventually talk to Isabel about all of this, to glean more information and form a better understanding of it all, but she couldn’t handle more right now. She needed to get away.

The carriage was summoned, and it took them away, with Emily clenching her jaw to stave off the tears. She did not want to cry in front of her husband any more than he’d already witnessed of her. He’d think of her as nothing more than a weepy mess, and she didn’t want him to think he was shackled with worse.

“I am sorry for your loss, and your pain,” he said quietly as they drew near to his townhome again. Their townhome. “Was the dowager duchess something akin to a mother figure for you?”

A mother figure... the words made Emily’s chin waver, for the woman hadn’t been, but oh, how she wished she could have been. What she would have given to experience her life from a slightly different position—to have a better relationship with the woman who was her mother, to be a legitimate lady, to have an actual

chance at love.

“Something similar, yes,” Emily whispered, for it was all the voice she had.

When the carriage came to a stop, she stepped into the sunlight without another word and hurried upstairs to her room. She needed to be alone to further clear her thoughts, or better yet, to even understand them.

Emily closed the door behind her, then turned around and rested her hands on the bed as she took heaving breaths in and out. Tears poured over her cheeks, and she did not stop them.

What was wrong with her? She finally had the truth she had always wanted to know, but at what cost? She had the relief of knowing where she came from, a cast-off child from a nobleman’s affair. But there would be a new all-encompassing anxiety that accompanied her the rest of her days with that truth, for she would have to keep such things hidden forever. Else she would ruin the lives of everyone around her, everyone she cared for.

Perhaps the duke and duchess would be fine if her parentage came to light, but when Mr. Westcott’s face appeared in her mind, it made her second guess the notion. If the truth got out, he would have to dismiss her, exile her, for his own reputation. He could not have a bastard for a wife and still be accepted amongst society, and she did not want to bring that shame to his name. They had already suffered a difficult start to their marriage; she could not bring another obstacle to the table .

Emily’s arms crumbled to the bed, making her turn onto her back and wipe her eyes. It was the only option—she would have to take the secret to her death. But what to do with Mr. Westcott? Their precarious marriage could only take so much. He had promised that she would be well-treated, but he would do so without love. Could she survive this secret and a loveless marriage?

Emily knew she could not.

But there was an option she had not considered. The dowager duchess, in her own arranged marriage, said she had lived apart from her husband.

If there was no way out, no divorce and no annulment, and if the man could not love her, even without knowing her true identity, then it would be better for them to do the same. Her husband might never come to love her, but she knew it would be all too easy for her to fall in love with him. It would save her the potential future of a broken heart, and it would save him the possible scandal of an illegitimate wife. She did not know him all that well yet, but she did care about him enough to know he did not deserve this from her.

Now she had to find a way to save them both.

Chapter Seventeen

Alex took a bite of his breakfast carefully, for this morning he was no longer dining alone. To his great surprise, his wife had joined him. Without any request or urging on his part. Since the passing of the dowager duchess, Mrs. Westcott had taken to her mourning blacks. He didn't know if he should do anything different himself, since the elderly woman had been nothing to him, but he didn't quite know what the woman was to his wife for her to take the death so personally. A guardian's mother? How long could that mourning period last? She had dressed in black for a week and taken meals in her rooms, and Alex did not quite feel it appropriate to ask more of her.

Only today, she wore a lovely lavender dress, a signal of stepping out of mourning. And that she joined him willingly led him to believe she might be making herself more approachable. After the tumult of losing the dowager duchess, perhaps she had remembered what he'd said about trying to make their marriage work. Though he hoped she would forget the last part of that specific conversation in the carriage.

He watched her for a moment as she took a bite of bread before sipping from her teacup. She did not appear cross or morose, though she did not look to be overly pleased about anything either.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, hoping his breaking the silence did not startle too greatly.

She looked up with indifference. "Fairly well, all things considered. And you?"

Alex blinked. “Uh, the same. Fairly well.”

She nodded and went back to her meal.

Not exactly conversational but still lacking the bite and sting from some of their previous encounters.

“Have you considered visiting the duke and duchess recently?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I wanted to give them some time alone.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “I wanted to give all of us some time alone. To properly mourn as needed.”

“I see. And have you completed your mourning period?”

She looked up and met his gaze. “For what she was to me, I believe I have mourned her sufficiently.” Her voice was near emotionless, but there was a sense of resolution in the set of her jaw.

“I am glad of it. I did not wish to see you hurting for long.”

Again, the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Her hand paused over her silverware, and he could tell she had felt the impact in a way that he hadn’t intended, or perhaps he had. He didn’t wish to see her hurting, though not for any romantic notions, at least that he was aware of. If she was going to remain his wife, then he wanted to see that she had more opportunities to smile than not.

“Did you know the dowager duchess for most of your life?” he asked, trying to carry on the conversation.

“No, quite the opposite, actually.” She dabbed the corner of her mouth with her

serviette. “I grew up at the boarding house, without knowing who my parents were. Then four years ago, the duke came to retrieve me and provide me with an opportunity for a season as my guardian. It was only then that I met the dowager.”

Alex nodded. He remembered Norland briefing him on such details. “And have you traveled much since then?”

“Not at all. My travels have been limited to the duke’s family estate in Berkshire, and the townhome here in London.”

A notion tickled the back of his mind, but before he could linger on it, she spoke again. “Why all the questions?”

Alex cleared his throat. “Forgive me, I did not intend to host an investigation. Only... I thought that perhaps if we knew each other a little more, we might get along better.”

His wife looked down at her plate, pushing around her food with a fork. “I see.”

Clearly, she was not convinced.

The clock struck the hour, reminding Alex of his appointment. A visit to Mr. Grisham’s was in order. “Ah, I must hurry to a meeting with another gentleman.” And yet, he wanted to linger.

Mrs. Westcott gave him a nod. “Good day to you.”

Alex stood and excused himself, making his way almost blindly to his bedchambers, for all the thoughts stirring about in his mind. He had to make himself the most presentable if he wanted to help his sister’s cause, and that’s if Mr. Grisham would let him in at all. Last time Alex went by, Mr. Grisham had gone out, completely forgetting about the appointment all together. Or perhaps he had been intentionally

out to avoid seeing him. This continued to occupy most of Alex's mind.

But it wasn't only that. Mrs. Westcott's words also stirred his thoughts, perhaps inspiring something she had not intended. He could only hope and pray she would not turn him away as well .

Reaching for a spare parchment, Alex was scribbling down a note so he wouldn't forget when Radcliff appeared in the doorway. "The carriage is ready for you."

"Thank you. While I'm gone, could you please send an inquiry on my behalf? To a Mr. Miller in Brighton, he's an innkeeper there."

"Of course, sir. Are you planning a visit?"

Alex bit his lip. "Perhaps."

Chapter Eighteen

Emily strolled through beautiful spring air, but she did not see the sky or the buildings or the people as they passed by. She caught herself wringing her hands together, dreading each step that passed. It was a short half-mile walk to the duke's townhome in Grosvenor Square, but it felt like an eternity, headed toward her own execution.

She had not attended the dowager duchess's burial, nor had she seen the duke or duchess since that day she had learned the truth. Emily wanted to speak to both of them, to have some clarity and closure on the situation, but she also dreaded it. The duke was no longer just her former guardian, he was also her half-brother. She had so many questions for him, but what if he didn't want to discuss them? What if her pursuit of the truth ruined the delicate relationship she had with him, and therefore, with Isabel?

All she wanted was some peace.

Emily blindly passed through the bustling city streets until they arrived at the townhouse. Taking a steadying breath, she lifted her hand to knock, and waited for a familiar face to answer the door.

She was ushered in and then removed her coat, just as Isabel descended the stairs. She was dressed in black and wore a sad smile, but Emily was grateful when Isabel wrapped her in a hug.

"I am glad you have come," she whispered, then pulled away to look into her eyes.

“How are you faring?”

“I am well,” Emily assured her. “And you?”

“As well as can be expected. The duke...” Isabel paused. “It is good that you are here.”

The duchess led her to a parlor and requested tea to be served. After a few minutes, the duke joined them, and Emily’s breath tightened in her chest. He looked tired, but not as distressed as she’d expected. She knew his relationship with his mother had been strained at times, but Emily hoped he was taking his mother’s passing well. Perhaps he was finding his own peace as she was.

“Welcome, Emily,” the duke said. “Thank you for coming.”

“I hope you have been well.” Emily spoke evenly, hoping to not draw too much attention to herself. “How were the services for the dowager duchess?”

“It was grandiose, as she had requested.” The duke gave a sad smile. “But she has been laid to rest now. I hope she finds the peace she sought.”

“And you?” Isabel asked. “How have you been?”

Emily paused, unsure how to express her feelings. She had been in a tumult the days following her visit with the dowager duchess, which continued after hearing of her passing. It was not common for women to attend funeral proceedings, and Emily did not feel comfortable joining anyway. But she had not fully found her peace, not yet.

“I am saddened by her passing, but I am relieved that she is no longer in pain.” She could not say more on the matter, and he nodded as if understanding .

After a beat of silence, the duke spoke. “I wonder if I might have a word with you, Emily. In private.”

Emily inhaled sharply, shooting a glance at Isabel. “If the duchess does not mind.”

“Of course not,” Isabel nodded, placing a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “I shall be in the drawing room.” Then she saw herself out, the door clicking behind her, leaving Emily alone with the Duke of Norland. Or, as she now knew, her brother, James.

“Isabel said you were distraught after visiting with the dowager duchess last week,” he said, pacing across the room. “I hope you are recovered.”

“I am well,” she said, heart pounding in her chest. Would he beat around the bush for long?

“Was it just your sadness at her illness or something more?”

Emily could not recall ever seeing this man nervous before. He had always been confident and sure of himself, but now, he cast his eyes all around the room except in her direction, his fingers fiddling with the edge of the sofa.

“No, I had asked her to confirm my suspicions about my family history before she died, and she was gracious enough to do so.”

Finally his eyes lifted to hers. His blue eyes that matched her own so perfectly, because they had received the same gift from their mother.

Then he smiled. “Of course you would suspect because you are so clever. I should not have thought otherwise. She told you the whole of it?”

“She did not tell me who my father was, only that the man had already died. Though

she did confess to being my mother, making you my half-brother.”

He nodded, lips pressed together. “I hope you know that in every instance, I have always tried to be just that. Tried to take care of you and look after you as an elder brother would. Tried to provide for you in ways that you should have had for years before.”

“Yes.” She could see that now, looking back over their few years together. Even though his most recent insistence of her marriage did seem a touch overzealous.

Though there was one thought that did still bother her.

“But why was it never mentioned before?” she asked. “I would have known to never mention such things in conversation for it would put me at such a disadvantage amongst society. Was it simply something the dowager duchess did not want mentioned in her presence?”

The duke sighed. “She had requested that I speak of it to no one, though I did tell Isabel. My wife deserved to know why I insisted keeping another young lady in the house.”

Emily understood that reasoning.

“But also I wasn’t sure how knowing would change you. Being a product of her unscrupulous nature, I didn’t want you to be influenced by her poor habits, or to idolize her in a way that would have you following in her footsteps.” He looked up at her again. “She was not a bad woman by any means, but that did not make her the best role model. Or mother.”

“I understand.” Emily knew that much to be true. And his words did have a soothing effect on her wounded heart. He had been trying to protect her, as always.

“Was the truth of it all so disturbing to you, when you left after your last visit?”

Emily shook her head. “I was overwhelmed, but it was mostly as I’d expected. For many years, I had wondered on my own origin, and wished that things could have been different. But I have been lucky in ways that many haven’t been. My friends, for example.” Some of the things Daphne and Georgiana had suffered made her heart ache, and she would never stop striving for some way to help them.

“I have wished the same thing as well, but there is no undoing the past, only deciding what our path will be going forward.”

Emily nodded. She still had much to decide in the going forward part.

“And I hope...” the duke paused. “I hope you know I only insisted that you marry Mr. Westcott in order to keep you from scandal that would result in keen eyes digging for more. To protect you from further scrutiny.”

“Of course.” There it was. Finally the clarity, the reason, the understanding. He would not have required her to marry any man without good reason, and looking back, she was grateful for his foresight.

“And perhaps you may consider my perspective limited on the matter, but I believe your future will not be bleak and burdensome. Even from our brief encounters, it seems your husband is a good man. It might require some effort to get past any differences, but both Isabel and I believe it is not the worst possible match. Together you can find a way to create a life full of purpose and happiness.”

Taking a deep breath, Emily pursed her lips. This was not something they would see eye to eye on.

The duke stepped forward, concern still evident in his eyes. “You are not convinced.

Do you no longer trust me?"

"No, I do trust you, and I suppose that is part of the problem." She gave him a sad smile. "Even if my suspicions proved to be wrong, I would have continued thinking of you as my brother, for I had always wanted one, and respected your opinion. Besides, I would not have married Mr. Westcott if I did not trust you. I had a half-brained plan to runaway to Gretna Green with Mr. Evans. "

This made James chuckle. "The man never would have gone through with such a scheme."

Emily nodded. "No, I suppose not." His words struck her to the core. She knew it to be true. Mr. Evans was a delightful man, but she was right to let him go. Despite all his good attributes, he was quite timid, which wasn't necessarily a bad trait, but perhaps she needed more.

She needed more from her husband.

"But Mr. Westcott..." she went on. "I do not know how we will make such a marriage successful."

The duke visibly stiffened. "Has he mistreated you?"

Emily did not miss the warning in his voice, and she shook her head. "He is only guilty of having just as much temper as I do, which I suppose I deserve. But it is more than that." Her cheeks warmed, not knowing how to approach the embarrassing topic with him. "He has promised to do all he can to take care of me and see me happy, though he made it clear there would never be a romantic relationship in our future. And I fear a loveless marriage might be too bleak and burdensome to bear."

She did not miss the way the duke's eyebrows shot up, likely the last thing he had

expected to hear. “I see.”

“Part of the reason I came today was to ask you...” Emotion was quickly gathering in her throat, so she had to get the words out. “I wondered if you might let me return to Wynnwood Park to visit my horse.”

He shrugged. “Of course, that is agreeable. Would Mr. Westcott join you?”

“No, I would travel alone.”

He blinked in understanding. “And how long would your visit be?”

Emily’s chin quivered. “Indefinitely.”

A long silence hung between them as she struggled to keep her composure. She had already wept on Isabel’s shoulder, she did not need another breakdown with James. But is that what brothers were for, even if he was a duke?

“Have you spoken to your husband about this?” he asked gently.

Emily shook her head. “Not yet. I didn’t want to make the suggestion if it wasn’t an option.”

“And you’re certain there’s no other course of action?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been in an arranged marriage before.” She tried to give him a teasing smile, but the tears were already welling in her eyes. “He seems to be the kind of gentleman who keeps his word, who does not change his mind. And though I have no intention of taking on extra marital affairs like the dowager duchess, when she mentioned living apart from her husband, it seemed like a good idea for my situation. If only as a trial to start.”

The duke nodded, listening carefully, and Emily held her breath. What would she do if he refused?

“I do not like the idea, Emily. I will make that much clear. But I will not keep you from Morgana, nor from Wynnwood, for any reason. You may visit if you wish, after you discuss it with your husband. But it is my hope and prayer that you can find another path, another option.”

Relief flooded Emily’s chest, and she had to clench her jaw to keep the tears from overflowing. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

He smiled gently. “Perhaps you might call me James now? At least when not in company.”

Emily returned his smile. “I would like that. Thank you, James.” She swallowed the well of emotion in her throat, hoping to dismiss the tears with it. “Though I do have one more question.”

“Anything.”

“Do you think I ought to tell Mr. Westcott? About my... history?”

James drew in a long breath. “I had given it a great deal of thought before the wedding, and I considered telling him, but I decided against it until you knew the whole of it. It is your story, after all, and he is your husband now, so I suppose that would be up to you.”

“My only qualm is if he would be at a disadvantage by not knowing, if the truth should come out in society somehow... or if knowing beforehand would make him more eager to seek an annulment or a divorce—”

“He won’t if he’s any kind of gentleman.”

Unfortunately, Emily didn’t truly know what kind of gentleman he was just yet, and perhaps she never would know, unless something of the like actually happened. If it did, it would be her worst nightmare.

Chapter Nineteen

In the following days, Emily had done her best to prepare for what she had to do. She had gone on a walk in the sunshine with her maid, she had finished her stitching project successfully, she had read more in her book, and then she had dressed for dinner. Now she stood at the top of the stairs with a lump in her throat, not nearly as prepared as she ought to be for a simple dinner with her husband.

But she took a deep breath and let the banister under her hand lead her safely to the ground floor, where she made her way to the dining room.

Her husband, she thought the word with more trepidation than anticipated, looked up when she entered, his gaze widening as he shot to his feet. “Good evening,” he said, his tone rising in shock.

She should have anticipated his surprise, for she had yet to join him for dinner unaccompanied. But it was a necessary step if she was to reach her solution.

“Good evening. Do you mind if I join you?” Emily asked, standing frozen in the doorway .

“Not at all.” Then he moved to pull out her seat on the other side of the table.

“Thank you for joining me,” he said, his voice close to her ear, before he returned to his seat.

Emily swallowed, grateful for the distance.

The food was served, and Emily took a spoonful of the soup. She tried to ignore the feeling of being watched, for every other moment, her husband would look up across the table, as if to check if she were still there. And she had to admit to herself that it was easier to eat at the table instead of hidden away in her room. Though she needed to find a way to break through the silence.

“Did you have a pleasant day?” he asked, making Emily look up.

“I suppose I did, though it included nothing of import.” Such dull conversation, but they had to start somewhere. “And you?”

He glanced down at his spoon, as if searching for some way to respond. “Perhaps. I stayed busy, but it was satisfying work. Letters of business, mostly.”

“I see.” She paused, wondering how to turn the conversation. “Does your business tend to take you from London?”

His eyes brightened. “Not often, but I do look forward to opportunities to travel. Have you desires to travel anywhere in particular?”

Emily shook her head. “Not that I can think of. At the moment, I’ve been longing to visit Wynnwood Park. I miss it dreadfully, along with my horse there, Morgana. She does not do well in the city, and perhaps she is like me in that regard.”

Mr. Westcott gave a forced smile. “I would think you have done rather well for yourself. It seems you thrive in any situation presented to you, and I have not seen you make a scene out in society that would be deemed a failure.”

She could not mention their run-in on the balcony, so instead she said, “Perhaps that is because you have not seen me out in the public eye enough.” They both chuckled, but Emily caught herself. This easy camaraderie was just the sort of connection she

needed to avoid.

“And where do you go when you travel?” she pressed.

“Mostly to Bath, to visit my mother and my sisters. But I remember visiting Brighton during my childhood, and those were some of my happiest days.” When he lifted his eyes to her, she felt his pointed stare, a sparkle in his gaze. “I have been thinking of taking a trip down there again.”

Her heart leapt in excitement; this was her opportunity. “That is an excellent idea. You should certainly take the time to visit when the occasion arises. Perhaps while you’re on your travels, I could go visit the duke’s home again, and spend some time with my horse. I’m sure she’s lonesome without me.”

He blinked in response. “You think I ought to travel alone?”

“Indeed. You can enjoy the place where you enjoyed so much growing up, and that would be a good time for me to go visit the duke’s estate.”

He paused before putting down his fork and knife, then looking to her. “So we should travel separately in opposite directions??”

Emily’s heart pounded, but she pressed forward. “I don’t see why not.”

He eyed her carefully. “What brought on this idea?”

Emily’s cheeks burned, but she fought it off, lifting her chin in confidence and choosing her next words carefully. “I know our marriage has not been ideal for either one of us. You mentioned putting in effort to make it work, but there might be an easier option. I prefer to live in the country, and you have made it clear you do not. We needn’t stay in the townhouse together if it makes us miserable or requires too

much sacrifice. We could live apart, me in the country, and you could stay here, or in Brighton, or in Bath. We need only see each other when necessary.”

She did not think it was possible, but her husband appeared distraught at her suggestion. The light she had seen in his eyes before had dimmed to nearly nothing, his lips drooping back to his near-permanent scowl. “You wish to live apart?” he asked, in a low steady tone.

Why was he acting so forlorn? She had been so certain he would jump at the idea. “Hadn’t you stated before you despised me?” she asked with a light tease in her voice. “While I appreciate your efforts at civility since then, it might not be needed.”

“I never said I despise you.” A pink color tinged his cheeks. “I merely said you were infuriating.” He mumbled something about how she truly had been, but Emily let it slide as he let out a sigh and shook his head. “This is not quite the topic of conversation I had in mind.”

She flinched. She had been too eager in her cause. “Forgive me, I did not intend to stray from proper subjects. What would you like to discuss?” she asked as the next course of dinner was presented.

“It would hardly be a welcome matter now,” he said with a wave of his hand. “Please, enjoy your dinner.”

And with that, any conversation came to a complete halt. It seemed neither of them could articulate what they wished, so the dinner continued in the silence she wanted to avoid. Emily wondered what he had hoped to discuss, but she didn’t feel confident in asking about it now. At least it hadn’t resulted in a fight. Their first dinner alone together was not a complete loss, but she certainly wouldn’t count it as a win either.

Chapter Twenty

Alex sat in his office, deliberating over the most recent letter from his steward. He'd done a good deal of that lately, and he did not like that his life had taken such a turn that such deliberating was required. The letter was nothing special, just an update on the potential selling off of some of their farmland at the estate. But it was the receiving of this letter that let Alex know it held the very thing to put his marriage on track and give him hope of harmonious living with his wife.

He needed to return to Markham Estate.

The thought made his insides churn. His childhood home did not hold many happy memories for him. Every room and corridor had been marred by his father's bitterness or his mother's tears. And it wasn't just the memories that haunted him. He had never been fully healthy in that place. Growing up as a sickly boy, he hadn't been able to defend his mother as he should have. It was only after he went off to school and grew into a man that Alex was able to leave Wiltshire, secure his own townhome and provide a safe keeping for his mother and sisters until the cruel old man died .

Alex didn't want to go back, but he needed to. He owned something that could provide a peaceful bridge between him and his wife. She could use a place for her beloved horse to roam free, and he just so happened to be in possession of acres and acres of land. Brighton might be important to him, but it was nothing to her, so he would need to do this. Showing some effort in her wants and needs would hopefully make a difference in their ongoing battle of wills, even if it meant sacrificing his own wishes in the process. He had made what felt like progress from his apology that night, and he wanted to continue in that same direction, not give up a white flag of

defeat. He could not give in to the idea of separation. Not yet.

There were many things that could keep him in London. Mostly being that of securing a good standing with the Grishams again for his sister's sake, no matter how long it might take. But Edwina might have to wait until Alex could be certain where he stood with his wife.

The clock struck the hour, reminding Alex it was nearly past breakfast. He'd spent most of the morning ruminating, completely missing the growl of his stomach.

He reached for his coat and hurried down the corridor to the breakfast room, where he found his wife already there, still eating. His stomach churned with nerves as she raised her eyes to him.

Alex gave her a bow. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she responded.

Alex silently filled his plate, his heart pounding as he considered his next choice of words. Would she only hate him further if he refused her?

Taking his seat, Alex inhaled a breath. "I have taken some time to consider your request."

Her eyes shot up. "You have?"

Alex nodded. "And I would ask for your patience before we resort to such measures, as I have a counteroffer."

Her shoulders fell. "I see."

“I would like to invite you to join me at Markham Estate.”

Her expression changed, the emotion in her eyes flickering as she took in the information. “Your country home?”

“Yes. And if it is your horse that you miss, then we can arrange for the duke to send your mare to Wiltshire.”

“Oh.” She nodded slowly in response. And then as if her curiosity got the better of her, her blue eyes brightened. “Are you certain? You had a hearty dislike of the place, as I recall.”

“Yes, I do not visit often, but I believe you should have an opportunity to see your other home, so that way you can meet the staff and become familiar with that part of the country. Have you ever been to Wiltshire?”

“No, never.” She bit her lip, eyes on the wall. “When would we leave?”

Alex had to fight off a smile, grateful she was not as averse to the idea as he’d anticipated. In fact, she seemed almost excited. “If you are not opposed, then we can confirm the transportation of the horse with the duke. And I can send word to my steward that we will arrive within the week.”

“Yes, that would be agreeable.” The corners of her lips turned upward, which was more of a smile than he had ever seen in her before, and for the moment, it was enough. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Westcott stood, any meal on the table forgotten, for she now had a faraway look in her eyes. “Oh, how long do you think we’ll be gone? I will need to write to inform my friends.”

Alex paused, for he didn't want to spend any more time than necessary at Markham Estate. "A fortnight, if you wish?"

"Yes, that will do quite nicely." She stepped away from the table, but before she turned to leave, she gave him a nod of appreciation. "Thank you, Mr. Westcott."

Again his heart stuttered. "It is my pleasure, Mrs. Westcott. "

Then she hurried away, and for once, Alex was left with a smile of his own, even though he knew that this trip would be the opposite of his pleasure.

With every passing mile closer to Markham Estate, Alex could feel himself withdrawing. It was a full day's journey to Wiltshire from London, and he had not known what to expect of spending so much time in company with his wife. They had begun the trip in silence, but their limited conversation was not as difficult as it had been before, and did not bear any begrudging tone in her voice. But still Mrs. Westcott did not smile, and when Alex's responses became fewer, eventually she returned to her silence and took to napping. As each hour ticked by, Alex could feel the dread settling over him like a blanket of darkness.

The city roads faded to country paths that were just as familiar, but with vastly different memories. Heading toward Markham Estate brought back to life the fearful sound of his father's voice, patriarchal dominance and drunken threats, alongside his mother's tearful prayers, and Alex's own spring and summer days spent in bed with the unnamed illness. There was nothing happy or worth remembering in his childhood home. He had hoped this trip would help him grow closer to his wife, and now he could only pray that such efforts would not be in vain, or that his nightmares would not consume him completely.

The sun had already taken to setting. A darkening sky over perfectly blooming country hills would have been a dream to anyone else, but Alex clenched his jaw and

monitored his breathing to avoid facing what they represented. He did not fear the place itself, but he had no desire to linger at Markham Estate. Would this fortnight turn out to be an eternity ?

The carriage turned off the main road with a jumble, which woke Mrs. Westcott from her ill-positioned sleep.

“We’ve arrived,” Alex said through gritted teeth, though he wished it would have sounded more civil.

Her face brightened, albeit somewhat reluctantly, and she straightened in her seat. “Thank you.”

After the carriage had made its way down the long drive, the night’s darkness made it near impossible to see anything out his window, for which Alex was grateful. But when the carriage came to a complete stop, his heart sank. He took a sharp inhale as the door opened, then he blindly took a step out and offered his hand to his wife. Alex did not want to face the grand building that loomed over his shoulder.

Mrs. Westcott stepped out and looked behind him. A small smile tugged at her lips. “Markham Estate is lovely.”

Perhaps she was right, but he could not see it. “Come, let us go in.”

He’d assumed the rest of the staff would have been out to greet them, but since night had fallen, it was only the butler and the housekeeper waiting with candles in hand.

“Meet Mrs. Westcott,” Alex barked sharply, then reigned in his emotions before speaking again. “She is my wife, I presume you will treat her with the utmost respect, and see that the rest of the staff do the same as well.”

Each elderly servant bowed and curtsied, and he went on.

“This is the housekeeper, Mrs. Barnes, and the butler, Nielson. They’ll both be at your service.”

“It is lovely to meet you, madam. And how good to see you again, young master.” Even in the dark, it was obvious Mrs. Barnes saw him through the eyes of a grandmother, and Alex counted that as one positive trait for the place.

“Forgive my insistence, you will find it one of my prominent characteristics,” Mrs. Westcott said, and somehow Alex already knew what she would say. “But has my horse arrived yet?”

Nielson shook his head. “Unfortunately not, madam. We’ve received word from Wynnwood Park that he should arrive any day.”

“She,” Mrs. Westcott gently corrected.

“Very good, mum,” Nielson nodded. “She. I will be certain you are notified the moment she crosses onto the premises.”

“Thank you.”

“Come on in, then.” Mrs. Barnes ushered them through the large double doors. “We’ll have you washed and fed after your long travels.”

As they stepped into the front foyer, it did not fill Alex with a sense of dread as he’d expected, and he noticed that everything did not seem as big as it had when he was a child. And yet, he was still overcome with a sense of smallness. He had never been able to prove he was a man here. Never been able to defend those he cared about or even take care of himself. It was a sense of powerlessness that made him want to

weep, and the weight of their journey suddenly brought to light his very weary legs.

“Actually, I think I should like to rest for now,” Mrs. Westcott said.

“Come then, I’ll show you to your room.” Alex picked up a nearby candle and motioned for her to follow, then turned to head up the grand staircase.

She did follow, albeit quietly. He did not want to disturb her taking in the surroundings, so he kept his eyes on his boots, not wanting to bask in it all with her.

Once upstairs, they moved down the corridor and passed many empty rooms. “You’re welcome to explore to your heart’s content in the morning. Mrs. Barnes can give you a tour. ”

“Your family home is lovely,” she commented behind him. “Why is it that you’re never here?”

They reached the bedroom doors and he turned around, bearing the truth heavy on his tongue. “It is not a place with pleasant memories for me.”

Her brightness dimmed. “Oh.”

“Your room is here. Should you need anything, the staff will be at your disposal, or my room is just beyond the connecting door in your room.”

She pursed her lips with a smirk. “Are you always to be on the other side of the door?”

“You are my wife now. Where else would I be?” Alex stated simply.

This raised her eyebrows. “Well, yes, of course. I only...” A beautiful blush crept

over her cheeks. “I do not mean this harshly, but I have not changed my stance on the boundaries of our relationship.”

Alex’s shoulders drooped. He was too weary to deal with such things. He had no intention of seeking out her bed during their stay, but he could not bear another enemy in this house. It was here, more than anywhere else, that he needed her as his ally in order to overcome the lingering ghosts.

“Nor have I changed mine. I am not your adversary, Mrs. Westcott.”

His words seemed to have a calming effect on her, for her eyes softened and she nodded. “I understand.” Then she turned and opened the door to her room.

Alex stepped forward. “Perhaps it would help the situation if you were to use my given name. Would that make you more comfortable in my company?”

She paused, meeting his eyes as she placed a hand on the side of her large wooden door. “Perhaps.”

He hoped she would. “And what shall I call you? ”

“Mrs. Westcott, if you please,” she spoke quietly, “but only for now.”

Her words settled over him, providing the peace he sought. She wasn’t quite ready to be his spouse and partner yet, but she could slowly let him in, and for now, that was enough.

“Good night, then, Mrs. Westcott.”

She nodded, closing the door until only a sliver of her was still visible. “Good night, Alex.”

Chapter Twenty-One

A lex. Alexander. Alex.

The name had lingered in Emily's mind from the moment it escaped her lips. Of course the journey had left her exhausted and she slept deeply, but his name was the last thing she thought of as she faded into slumber, and the first thing she thought of upon waking. It wasn't the possibility of seeing her horse or readying herself for a tour of the estate with the housekeeper. No, it was the Christian name of her husband that he had given her leave to use.

But was it unwise, considering the parameters she'd given? The only reason she had agreed to the trip was the prospect of seeing her horse, and she knew she would have to proceed with caution. The entirety of the fortnight would need to be spent creating distance between her and her husband, and maybe then he would see she was right. He was needed in London, in Bath. And maybe he would leave here there, so she could stay in the country, just as she had planned.

And yet, something within her wanted to use his name. Even if it was against her better judgement, she did long for that closeness to her husband, the intimacy of a real relationship.

Nothing but these thoughts occupied her mind the entirety of the morning.

As her maid came in and helped her dress for the day, Emily listened carefully, not hearing her husband on the other side of their connecting door. He had said he would not join her for breakfast, but she did not know why.

Once dressed, she made her way downstairs, recognizing how different the house appeared in the morning light. She spotted the butler by the dining room door, and her eyes widened expectantly when she saw him, but he shook his head. “No horse yet, madam.”

Emily nodded. She was disappointed, but she vowed not to let it make her cross. She need only practice some patience, for she was already in the place she needed to be, thanks to her husband. Thanks to Alex.

As she ate in silence, she couldn't help but think on him. What occupied his time while here? Especially if he was here begrudgingly. It did not go unnoticed that he had brought her here for her desire, not his own. That he was making this sacrifice for her sake. Emily still harbored her pride and certain disappointment in their situation, but this realization made her want to try, as he'd said.

She had just finished her plate when Mrs. Barnes entered the dining room with a cheery smile. “Good morning, Mrs. Westcott.”

Emily swallowed her food with a nod. “Good morning, Mrs. Barnes.”

“How did you sleep, mum?”

“Very well. Like a cat on a sunny windowsill.”

Mrs. Barnes let out a delighted laugh. “Oh, what a gem you are! You'll be sure to brighten up this dreary house, especially for the young master. ”

Questions sat on the edge of Emily's tongue, but before she could ask them, Mrs. Barnes continued. “I wasn't sure if you'd be wanting a tour of the place now or later. If you have any plans for the morning?”

Emily shook her head. “Not at all. I’ll only have plans when the horse arrives. Until then, I would love a tour of the house.”

Mrs. Barnes had the maids clear the table, then started the tour from that very room. Emily assumed wearing her day dress was suitable enough, for she had no reason to expect any guests or to be seen by anyone relevant. Unless Alex would be about?

They were passing through the downstairs corridor when Mrs. Barnes must have read her thoughts. “You’ll need not worry about the young master, for he is off inspecting the grounds with Mr. Finch, the steward. They’re reviewing a portion of the land that is to be sold off, so I imagine they’ll be occupied for some time.”

Emily nodded. “You call Mr. Westcott the young master, so I presume you have known him since he was very young.”

Mrs. Barnes flushed, all the way up to the gray roots of her hair. “Oh dear me, yes. I suppose I ought to call him the master of the house now, but he has always been the young master to me. He had a good proper mother who loved him, but I couldn’t love him more if he were my own.”

“I see.” Emily bit her lip, wondering how much she should press. “He’s not said so directly, but I’ve been able to surmise that he did not have a good proper father the same as his mother.”

She did not miss how Mrs. Barnes slowed her step. “Indeed. The elder Mr. Westcott was far from pleasant and made life difficult for the missus and the son, given the young master had been ill for so long. Once the daughters were born, he couldn’t take them crying, so he sent them all to live in Bath. It was there the young master finally was able to grow healthy and become a man, and only then that his father died.” Mrs. Barnes gave a forced smile. “Theirs was a sad lot for a long time, but I’m happy to say it worked out for all of them in the end.”

Emily nodded, taking the whole truth of things as she silently followed Mrs. Barnes. She had known of his sisters, but hadn't realized the struggles he had faced in the meantime. A temperamental father who had cast them off? A sickly childhood? Remembering what the duke had said about Alex seeing his mother and sisters settled before seeking his own happiness, it painted Emily's husband in an entirely new light.

"Let me show you something, just in here." Mrs. Barnes' words shook Emily from her thoughts as they entered a room. It didn't take much for Emily to deduce they had entered a gentleman's study. It was simple, as Alex's study had been in the London townhouse as well, so perhaps he had adjusted them both to suit his preferences. This room was larger, with more embellishments, a bit similar to the duke's study at Wynnwood Park. A large mahogany desk and walls covered in bookshelves, except for one shelf that was filled with bottles resting on their sides. As she grew closer, she realized each one had a tiny ship constructed inside, and it made her pause in astonishment. How did anyone accomplish such a feat? It seemed impossible, and yet the testament of its possibility stood on display before her.

"Are we allowed to be in here?" Emily asked.

"We'll not disturb anything, for I only wanted to show you this." Mrs. Barnes waved her arm up toward a painting of mother and son, which was easy to identify as Alex and Mrs. Martin. The woman was beautiful in her younger years, despite the hardship she had endured, and when her eyes fell to Alex, it caused a swelling in Emily's chest. His hair was lighter in the painting compared to how she knew him as a man, but the determined nature in his dark eyes remained the same. She thought of him as a child, dealing with a difficult father, worrying for his mother, while also struggling to maintain his own health. Emily lifted her hand, as if wanting to touch the poor boy's face, but she dropped it back to her side. Why reach out for the boy when the man was her husband in reality?

“This is the young master as I knew him.” Mrs. Barnes had turned teary eyed. “Of course, he is a man of his own, with a lovely wife to boot.” She offered a little smile. “He dreads coming here, not wanting to relive the memories of his father, and he may seem boorish or harsh at times, but he’s nothing like his father. Alex Westcott is the best of men, and I think it the happiest of circumstances that you’ve found each other.”

Emily simply smiled. She couldn’t give the woman any kind of confirmation, not when standing with Alex still left her so confused. No matter how good of a man he might be, how could she let herself find peace and let down her guard around a man who had sworn not to love her? She didn’t know what their chances of happiness really were in that scenario, but she did know him a little better than she did before.

But that thought shocked her as they made their way out of the study. What did it mean that she knew more about her husband after one day alone at Markham Estate than she ever knew about Mr. Evans?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alex sat up in bed with a groan, bringing his hand to his head. The pressure behind his eyes had started building the night before, but it had blossomed into a raging headache overnight, keeping him tossing and turning in his sleep. It was a familiar pain, similar to what he'd endured as a child, though he prayed it would not escalate any further.

The day before had been a productive one. His steward, Mr. Finch, had led him across the estate to evaluate the property and the pending purchase of the decided acreage. While out, they had visited with tenants, inspected where money needed to be spent, things that he knew would require his approval and should occupy his attention during his stay. Alex knew his steward took good care of the estate in his absence, so there was no neglect on Alex's part, but he did not want to appear the ignorant landlord either. He had good staff here, and they deserved as much as they gave. But already being back at the estate had left him feeling ragged. He had intended to spend the evening with his wife, ask her how she liked the estate, establish some semblance for familiarity and camaraderie in their home here, but he was too exhausted for any of it. And this headache was evidence that his haunting illness had undoubtedly returned.

A knock sounded at Alex's door, and he looked up sharply. The sun had barely started to lighten the windows behind the curtains, so his valet was not expected for some time.

He gingerly stood and moved toward the door, opening it to find Nielson.

“Please forgive the intrusion, sir.”

“Is there something wrong?”

The butler shook his head, a small smile peeking at the corners of his lips. “No sir. Madam’s horse has just arrived.”

Alex’s shoulders lightened with relief. “Ah, excellent news.”

“She had asked that she be informed immediately. Should I wake her?”

“No.” His hands shot up perhaps too quickly. “That is, allow me. See that the horse is brought to the stables. I will see her down myself.”

Nielson bowed. “Very good, sir.”

Alex closed the door and moved toward the other connecting door but paused in raising his hand to knock. She had said she would never open this door between them. Would she assume he sought her for other purposes? But he knew she would want to know.

Squaring his shoulders, he gave the door three firm knocks. “Mrs. Westcott, are you awake? Might I have a word?”

He listened carefully, and eventually heard bustling in her room, followed by footsteps. The door slowly creaked open, half of her face appearing with a candle in the gap. “Yes?”

Her disheveled blonde hair and sleepy eyes presented quite a vulnerable image that nearly made Alex forget his purpose at the door. He cleared his throat. “I wanted to inform you that your horse has arrived. ”

Her eyes widened, and eyebrows lifted. “Truly?”

Alex nodded. “I’m having her brought to the stables. You can see her as soon as you’re ready.”

“Yes, just allow me some time to call the maid and dress.” The excitement dancing in her eyes was unmistakable. “Shall I wear my riding habit?”

He had expected nothing less. “Yes, of course.”

She moved to close the door, but then paused. “And will you accompany me?”

Alex hoped he veiled his grimace, for he did not feel up to galivanting across the countryside with his strong-willed wife. But perhaps that was the very reason he needed to go with her. In proving his loyalty, he would win her trust, resulting in the better outcome. The sacrifice would be worth it in the end.

“If you wish.”

She nodded and pulled the door closed.

Alex sighed, then rang for his valet. He took his time dressing, thinking he would wait for his wife downstairs, but when he walked past her door, it burst open, and Mrs. Westcott appeared. He startled at the blur of blue fabric that now stood beside him, but the maid lifted a candle from behind, and the vision cleared. Mrs. Westcott wore a dark blue riding habit, trimmed with ruffles and braids and buttons, and donned a simple cap with matching décor. Any sleepiness was gone from her eyes, despite the darkness of early morning still clinging to the world around them. Now she stood eager and ready before him, and Alex could not remember ever finding her more endearing.

“Shall we go now, then?” she asked in a hurry, the light aroma of jasmine surrounding her.

He could not resist a smile. “Yes, I will take you there directly.”

She nodded and fell into step beside him as they descended the stairs. They walked in silence, and when he caught a glance of her gloved fingers wringing together, he could almost feel the excitement emanating from her.

He led her through the house, out the door into the cool morning air where morning dew still lingered, and the sunlight shone over the distant horizon in a blazing greeting. His wife’s footsteps grew more agitated as they neared the stables, and Alex almost told her to go ahead of them. Then the stablemaster appeared in the doorway and smiled.

“Just through here, madam.”

She rushed in a rather unladylike manner into the stable, leaving Alex to chuckle behind her. He rounded the corner of the doorway just as she spotted her animal. She rushed to its side, and the horse immediately responded in little whinnies and whimpers of recognition.

“There you are, my dear sweet girl,” Mrs. Westcott cooed. “There you are, my darling.”

Alex watched as the horse nuzzled her neck, and she kissed her cheek, petting the long pretty mane in return.

“Can we have her saddled, please?” she asked of the stablemaster, and the man went to work right away.

“And please ready Hector as well,” Alex added, as his wife turned to wait by his side.

“Hector?” she asked.

Alex nodded. “It was my mother’s horse, but there is also Hercules, who is the stud horse. My father had decided to look into horse breeding before he died.” When she did not respond, he went on. “And what was yours? Morgana, was it?”

She looked up at him, as if surprised he would remember such a detail. “Yes.”

“How did you come across the name?”

“I believe it belonged to a water fairy or a witch of the sea. My horse has a particular temperament, rather feisty at times.”

“I see.” The next words formed on Alex’s tongue before he could stop them. “Then she is much like her mistress in that regard.”

Alex held his breath, waiting for his wife’s reaction. After a moment, she erupted in laughter, a delightful sound that meant his attempt at teasing was safe. “Indeed,” she replied.

The saddled horse emerged from the stables, and Alex finally got a good look at the animal. A beautiful mare, strong and lean. Morgana did have a very ethereal appearance, her body a muted tanned color with a white mane and tail. The stablemaster brought the mounting steps, allowing Mrs. Westcott to climb up and arrange herself on the sidesaddle. She sat tall and proud, patting the horse’s neck when she looked up and met Alex’s gaze.

The brightness of her eyes, the wide set of her grin, nothing could outshine her current state of happiness. Alex felt the fringes of his heart begin to flutter away, and

if he wasn't careful, the beating thing in his chest wouldn't belong to himself for very long. That smile had been hard won, and he found a thrilling sensation take over him. He would have little choice in the matter now; his purpose for the rest of his life would be making that woman smile just like that, as often as possible.

"Come along, Alex," she said. "We've only got all day."

Her words made him chuckle as he pulled himself up onto his own horse. Alex took a deep breath, getting settled. The sun was barely peeking over the trees now, and he wondered just how long he would be able to keep up with her.

"Off we go, then."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Emily pulled on the reins and placed a hand on her cap to steady it. The rigors of riding horseback remained the same, despite her lack of recent practice, but it was the views of the countryside that repeatedly took her breath away. Alex had led her along the riverbank that snaked by Markham Estate, through groves of trees, and wide open fields. She never knew what the next corner would reveal, and the morning had been a repeated thrill. Exactly what she had hoped for.

Alex, however, appeared more winded than she'd expected. He seemed grateful for any time she wanted to pause and heaved labored breaths with closed eyes. He had admitted himself he was not a frequent rider, but she did not mention that would be his own fault for not being present on his own property. If it were up to her, she would never leave a place like this.

"What a dream this view is," Emily said, turning to her husband for confirmation.

"I suppose so," he said, without even looking.

Emily smirked at him. "Do you not take any enjoyment in the countryside?"

Alex sighed. "Unfortunately not. I was frequently ill as a boy and did not venture outside often enough to enjoy it fully."

"Oh yes. Of course." The housekeeper had mentioned that. Perhaps Emily should not have spoken so thoughtlessly.

“But if you would like, we could plan a picnic. For a different day, when the weather does not appear as threatening.” The sun had disappeared behind a slew of gray clouds, though it did nothing to dampen Emily’s mood. The rolling hills were still beautiful to her.

“I would like that very much.” Perhaps that would be the perfect opportunity for her to bring up the idea of living separately again. He did not need to know the whole truth of her history, not yet. But she could not subject her heart to living day in and day out with a man who had sworn to never love her. Already she had felt herself softening toward him, and it was too dangerous. She was convinced their living apart might be the only way to keep her heart safe, and happiness for both of them intact.

“I do remember one time as a boy,” he spoke, drawing up her attention, “after being stuck indoors for many rainy days, I decided I would go off on a trek. I hiked to that hill over there.” He pointed to a distant knoll. “I was all alone, thinking it was some great adventure, but I had taken no food or water, and I had somehow lost sight of the house. I was completely lost and scared and thought I might die. But then I remembered my mother had told me to never lose sight of the river, for when headed north, it would always lead back to Markham Estate. Eventually, when I returned after nightfall, I received an earful, believe me.”

Emily smiled, pleased he felt comfortable enough to reminisce with her. “I can see your mother reacting just as you said. How terrible of you to worry her.”

“I think she had grown accustomed to me at that point. She knew I was pigheaded.” Alex then raised his dark eyes to Emily. “A trait you and I share, I think.”

Emily slowly turned to face him, and her cheeks flushed at his inference. “I beg your pardon? Are you aware that it’s hardly polite to tell a woman she’s pigheaded?”

Alex had the cheek to laugh. Out loud. Throwing his head back, allowing the wind to

tousle his hair beneath the rim of his hat. She would have found him attractive were it not for the accompanying insult.

“I said that I myself am pigheaded,” he said with a weary smile. “Only that you and I were similar in that regard.”

Emily lifted her chin. She wanted to be mad at him, but the more prominent emotion twisting in her chest could only be named humiliation. It was clear now why he could never love her; because he did not like her. Respect her. Perhaps was even ashamed of her.

“That is hardly an improvement.” Then clenching her jaw to stay her emotions, she turned her horse sharply and kicked her heels.

“I only meant—no, wait!”

She did not wait. Morgana took off running, and Emily did not care in which direction. She could not bear the sight of her husband, not if he would simply point out her weaknesses. She knew she was greatly flawed, and to have him bring it up so directly sat heavy on her heart. Could they never be happy together, not even once?

The gray clouds opened up in that moment, as if recognizing her severe disappointment. Gentle rain began to dampen the path before her, but she did not look back. She could no longer hear Alex’s words or the gallops of his horse behind her. She simply let the rain beat against her face, a welcome sensation.

But it quickly became a deluge, and her goal was no longer to keep ahead of her husband, but to find shelter. She did not want to wait out the storm at a tree with him, so when Markham Estate blessedly came back into view, she urged Morgana faster.

Emily arrived first at the stable, soaked to the bone and heaving for breath. The

stablemaster helped her down and placed a hearty blanket around her shoulders. She turned toward the path for the house, wondering how such a beautiful day could end so horribly wrong?

Then Alex rushed in on his horse. “Wait, please,” he begged, nearly falling off his horse to get to her.

Emily’s cheeks burned again, unable to face him. She wanted to whirl on him, tell him exactly why she couldn’t live with him any longer, why his comment had hurt her so deeply, but her tongue remained heavy behind her lips. And when she turned to face him, she immediately regretted running away. He appeared pale and disheveled. The way his shoulders sagged, his brows slouching in earnestness, filled her with shame. She should have waited. She had already pushed him to take her to the estate, then dragged him out on horseback against his will. And she had the audacity to blame him again?

“Forgive me. I’m not feeling myself, and I thought the comment was innocent enough,” he said with a sigh, running a hand through his hair and taking a step forward. “But are you truly ignorant of your own traits and habits? Do you deny being stubborn at all?”

“Of course I know it. I am stubborn and strong-willed, and perhaps a touch too independent.” Emily pursed her lips. “Damning traits for a woman, I suppose?”

“In London, yes. But those are the things I happen to admire about you.”

The disappointment that had clenched around her heart suddenly released, her lips parting in surprise. “What?”

He stepped closer still, his dark brown eyes searching hers. “You are fiery and obstinate, and I would not change that about you for the world.” His breathing

remained unsteady, though she couldn't be sure if it was from the ride, or from their close proximity, for she had a hard time maintaining her own breath. "However, you are also clever and kind, and many other things."

Emily stood firm without retreating, despite his growing nearness. She heard the jingle of the stable hands working, smelled the sweet hay surrounding them, but only saw the face of her husband, and the rain droplet that trickled from his dampened hair down the side of his clenched jaw.

"How would you know I am kind?" she dared, though her voice was barely more than a whisper.

He smiled, dropping his gaze to the floor. "Everyone who knows you says so. I suppose I will see it someday."

Emily wanted to retort something, but he was right. She had not been kind to him, and the regret in her chest sank deeper as his words rang true. But before she could open her mouth again, he continued. "Shall I tell you more I have noticed about you?"

Her heart skipped a beat, unable to refuse such access to his thoughts. "Such as?"

He searched her face again, and said, "You are quite beautiful, Mrs. Westcott."

The words somehow managed to still her breath, increase her heart rate, and disconnect her mind from any rational thought. He considered her beautiful, admired her tenacity, and still refused to love her? This handsome man who compared her to a pig? What on earth was she supposed to make of him?

He reached up, tucking her soaking strands of hair behind her ear, his finger lingering down her skin. A smile teased one corner of his lip as he said, "And thus, you remain

the most infuriating woman.”

She should have expected the words, but this time, they did not bear the same cruelty he had in the past. Could it be her imagination, or was there a hint of affection in his tone?

Emily shook her head in sheer frustration and scoffed. “I will have to speak to your mother, sir. She must have taught you nothing about how to compliment a woman.”

Alex laughed heartily, making Emily eventually smile herself, but his sounds turned to wretched coughs, doubling over from the efforts.

When he eventually straightened again, Emily watched him carefully. “Are you all right?”

He waved her off. “I am well enough, but will likely take the rest of the day in my room to rest, so you will have to dine without me tonight.”

Then before she could object, he ran out into the rain and disappeared into the house. Emily would have to do the same, hurry indoors to get out of her wet things and warm herself by the fire, but for the moment, she was frozen to the spot, dazed in confusion as she watched the rain pour over the path she would take.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day, as the pinks and oranges faded across the sky, Emily tipped her hat back and let out a satisfied sigh at her view. What a joy it was to be back in the countryside again, and to enjoy it with Morgana. The colors of the wild hills, and the fresh air that was not found in London, all left her rejuvenated for the afternoon ride. They had even kicked around in the cool water of the riverbeds and taken a nap under expansive tree branches.

Emily had decided to go out riding alone. She had not sought Alex's company, nor had she requested his presence. She'd had Morgana saddled on her own and gone to explore the countryside according to her pleasure. She had ridden out beyond the view of Markham Estate but had easily found her way back once she remembered Alex's story about following the river north.

All she wanted was to enjoy the time with her beloved horse again. Being with Morgana felt like home. Emily had never known home in the true sense of the word, so she could only assume it was the emotion she felt, the thing she sought. She'd had her friends in the boarding school growing up, then living with the duke and duchess both in London and at Wynnwood Park. And she had been content, but she had never felt she had found the place where she belonged. In truth, perhaps she did not belong out in nature with her horse either, but it was the place where she felt the most familiar and peaceful. Where she had some semblance of control in her uncontrollable life.

She made her way back up to the stable in the dusky evening glow, and Emily's thoughts continuously lingered on her husband. He had occupied her thoughts a good

amount recently, to the point that she did not know how to proceed. Perhaps she could broach the subject again over dinner. She couldn't very well say, "If you're unable to love me, then living apart is our best option," but how else would she be able to make him understand? She would have to face him and have the hard discussion. She would have to tell him the truth.

Well, maybe not the whole truth.

She kissed her horse on the forehead and left her with the stablemaster. Emily returned to her room and dressed for dinner, moved to the dining room, and waited for her husband to appear.

But he never came.

Emily had grown accustomed to eating alone, whether in her room or in the dining room, but that didn't mean she enjoyed it. Now she dined in silence, disappointment rampant, pondering on what to do next. Had she angered him again with her incessant pushback? Had he decided her positive traits did not outweigh the negative ones? She probably deserved his avoidance, and perhaps the time apart would do her good. Isn't this ultimately what she wanted?

If they were both confused, then she knew it to be her own fault. She needed to tell him her reasons; that way, they both might have clarity and peace, and come to a conclusion suitable for them both .

Once Emily had finished eating, she wandered through the downstairs corridors, hoping to remember where Mrs. Barnes had taken her on their tour. Eventually she came to what she hoped was Alex's study, lifted her chin and knocked on the door.

There was no response, but she could hear a fire crackling on the other side, so Emily turned the gilded handle and pushed the door open. The room was lit with various

candles. A fireplace indeed held a roaring fire, casting a glow on the wall of bookshelves, and making it feel cozy and inviting. Her husband sat at his desk, which she'd expected, though it was his appearance she found surprising. He must have fallen asleep at his desk, but her entrance had woken him in a startle. He gave a weary smile when he saw her, but Emily knew immediately.

The poor man was ill.

Even in the dark, she could clearly see he was unwell. His hair disheveled, his eyes puffy and tired, and his nose seemed red from perhaps too much use of a handkerchief. He sat hunched over the desk, and the long coat around his shoulders was tightly secured, as if he had been shivering.

"Mrs. Westcott," he greeted her in a groggy voice. "Good evening. What brings you in?"

His use of her married name made her feel even more wretched. Yes, she had told him not to call her Emily yet, which meant her regrets were multiplying. Had she driven him to this?

Any plans for confession now forgotten, Emily swallowed hard and thought quickly. "I enjoyed more of the countryside today on my horse, and I only came to thank you for bringing me here. It was very generous of you."

He waved his hand in response, but his dismissive sound came out like a stuffy groan. "Think nothing of it. I am glad you could find some semblance of happiness here."

She nodded, not sure how to proceed. She couldn't express too much care for him, could she?

"I also wondered if I might borrow one of your books." The thought had not actually

crossed her mind, for it was just an excuse to linger.

“Yes, of course. Take your pick of the lot.” He beckoned her to enter, then leaned forward to examine his desk. As she walked by him, she realized what he was doing. Miniature tools, small pieces of wood and twine, a bowl of paste, and a liquor bottle turned on its side.

So the hobby was his.

Emily picked up a candle and took to scouring his bookshelves, pretending to look over the titles, though she was more preoccupied with listening to him. He sniffled every so often and tinkered with his tools but let her peruse in silence.

“Have you a cold?” she asked over her shoulder, continuing her pretense of searching the shelves.

“‘Tis nothing serious. I will recover soon.”

Emily settled on a book of poetry that she wasn’t certain she would enjoy, but it was an easy enough excuse. When she turned to leave, she slowed by his desk, eyeing his project. “And what’s all this?”

A tired smile graced his lips. “A favorite interest of mine. Just as you long for your equestrian companion, I long for the simple puzzle of creating a ship that will fit inside a bottle.”

She watched him a moment longer, as his fingers and forearms worked the tools. “None of this seems small enough to fit. In fact, it appears impossible.”

“And that’s the beauty of it,” he said, looking up with a little wink. “It appears impossible, but with the right tools, and a little patience and effort, the impossible

results in something beautiful and satisfying and completely worthwhile. I suppose many things in life are the same, wouldn't you say?"

She met his direct gaze, feeling the rush of his words, as though he had tried to express some deeper meaning to her. "I suppose so."

He sighed, returning to his work, but Emily was not ready to relinquish him yet.

"Has this always been a pastime of yours?"

He nodded. "Since I was a lad. My grandfather taught me."

Just as she was about to ask another question, he erupted in a cough, grating and rough. It repeated over and over again, enough to make Emily put her book down and press a hand to his back in concern.

When he finally stilled, his breathing was labored and he let out a moan.

"Alex," Emily said.

He looked up to face her, and her stomach dropped. He was so pale.

"You should be in bed. You're not well."

His body shivered, despite his closeness to the fire, and she placed a hand on the side of his face. Just as she suspected, overheated and covered in sweat.

"I'm fine," he said hoarsely, but his attempts to push her away did no good. Taking him by the lapels of his jacket, she brought him to his feet, even though she knew he would be unsteady.

“You are not fine.” She pulled the jacket off his shoulder and one arm, then the other.
“You’re fevered.”

“No, don’t,” he lamented the loss of his covering, but did not have the strength to fight her. “I’m actually quite cold.”

“As I said, you’re burning up despite having chills.” She looked up into his dark eyes, hoping to express how serious she was. “You are sick and need to rest.”

“Very well. Call for Nielson and I’ll have him help me to my chambers.”

Emily shook her head. “Don’t be ridiculous. I am here now, so I will help you there myself.” She moved his arm around the back of her neck and pulled him out from behind the desk.

“Undressing me and leading me to bed?” he mumbled close to her ear as he leaned against her shoulder. “What can you be about, Mrs. Westcott?”

Emily pursed her lips together, determined not to gasp or laugh or do anything to encourage such teasing, and she hoped he did not notice that her cheeks were overheated without a fever of her own.

She bore his weight as best she could, trying not to crumble beneath him, and determined to be a help instead of a hindrance. They managed up the stairs and she pushed in the door to his room. She did not have a moment to look around for she could only help him collapse into bed, which he did with a sigh.

“You must rest,” Emily insisted. “Please.”

“Yes, madam. Of course. As you wish.”

He settled on his bed, and Emily sighed herself. "I'm sorry you've fallen so ill."

"Well, it's better that it's me instead of you," he said, cracking open one eye to look at her. "I'm grateful you have not succumbed to the darkness of this place."

Emily couldn't help but wonder if this was the same illness that had plagued him as a child. Or if it truly was the memory of his cruel father returning to torment him.

Or was it her own fault? Pushing him away time and time again?

The guilt swirling in her stomach did not diminish. "If this doesn't improve, then we'll need to call the doctor."

He groaned, shaking his head and turning on his side. "I am certain I will improve in no time. This is just a passing cold."

Emily clenched her jaw. She could only pray he was right.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alex did not improve. In fact, he grew considerably worse.

His cough had grown more difficult and strained, his breathing more labored. He couldn't lay down for any long period of time without triggering the tickle in his throat all over again. He had no control over his sneezes or the headache that consistently lingered. It was as if all his abilities to breathe had been compromised and there was no deliverance.

Just as it had been before.

He could recognize it as his childhood illness from the very first day they returned. Something about this house, this place, had always been against him. He thought perhaps he had overcome it, for after he'd left Wiltshire, he'd grown into a man and considered himself strong and healthy. The mystery illness had no longer plagued him. If his father were alive, it would have been the one thing he perhaps could have taken pride for in his son. But here Alex was, full-blown disease all over again, and somehow worse than ever before. Perhaps he wasn't as strong as he thought he was.

Alex sat on the edge of his bed in a sleep-deprived daze, wheezing into the darkness of the night. Morning would not come for some time yet, and he would remain in this misery. There was nothing anyone could do to fix him, and he would not deprive his wife of the one happiness she'd finally found since being shackled with him. He would have to find a way to endure, to suffer through it for her.

Another cough attacked from within, throat burning and chest tightening from the

strain. He wanted to collapse on the bed from fatigue, but being prostrate would only make it worse, so he simply crumbled to the floor.

He rested his head against the bed, and dozed into some dreamlike state, though he didn't know for how long when he woke to the sound of his name.

"Alex," a quiet voice sounded in the distance.

When he looked up, he was robbed of any remaining breath at the sight. A woman stood before him in a long, white robe with blonde curls cascading down her shoulders. She held a gilded candlestick, the only source of light in the darkness that surrounded him. Was she an angel, come to deliver him to heaven?

"What the devil are you doing on the floor?" she asked.

No, indeed. That would be his wife.

He let out a laugh that turned into an unsteady cough.

"I thought you said you would never use that connecting door," he said, hardly any voice left in him.

She glared down at him. "I will not let you die alone while I listen on the other side."

"I will not die," he said, his head lolling to one side.

"That is correct, you will not die. At least not while I am here. Now up with you."

Wrapping her hands around his arm, she pulled him up, and he tried to help her with what little strength he had left. He sat himself on the bed, and when she pushed him back, he shook his head .

“I cannot lie down, for it only makes the coughing worse,” he insisted.

“Very well.” She set down the candlestick on his side table. “Then we will prop up the pillows.”

She moved around to the other side of his bed, piling up pillows to provide a comfortable way to prop him in an upright position. Why had he not thought of such a thing himself? Perhaps he did not have enough mental power left.

“There. And if you need more, I will take the pillows from my own bed.”

Alex shook his head. “But you need—”

“I do not need eight pillows. I have done very well with less for most of my life.”

As he relaxed against the pillows, he realized how much he still did not know about his wife, despite how much he wanted to. He needed to redouble his endeavors to win her over, and to thank her for all her efforts on his behalf.

She moved to leave the room, but he caught her by the arm. “I’m sorry for what I said yesterday.”

“It hardly matters now,” she said sternly with a shake of her head.

“It does matter.” The pounding in his head continued, and he regretted saying something that could have waited, but he pressed on. “I had no intention of insulting you, only to appreciate you. That because we are so similar, it might be difficult, but it is not impossible.”

“Yes, Alex, all right. You are forgiven.”

But he did not release his hold on her. “And I do not wish for us to seek separate lives. I know that many others do, but I do not want to have to.” He hoped she understood the desperation in his voice. “We may have had a rough start of it, but I believe we can make this marriage work. We can still be happy together if we try. That is what I intended to tell you over the dinner back in London, that I am willing to try. For you. ”

He hoped his words made sense, unsure since his mind was still a jumble. Her words in the stable still broke his heart, and he had to figure out a way to make her understand before it was too late.

She sighed, as if admitting defeat before him. She slid from his grasp to hold his hand in hers as she sat on the side of the bed. “I understand, Alex. We’ll talk more when you’re recovered, all right?”

“Very well.”

She pulled her hand from his. “Now I’m going to ring for some tea.”

“Don’t bother, it can wait till morning.”

She turned her fiery blue eyes on him, and it stilled his words.

“Do you think Mrs. Barnes would rather you suffer while she sleeps? Of course not,” she said before he could respond. “I do not intend to wake the entire house, but you will have some medicinal tea. Something with chamomile and ginger, to address the cough and help you sleep. I will not have a corpse for a husband.”

Alex sighed, for he did not have the energy to fight with her. “So insistent.”

The position of the pillows had proved quite successful, for he finally found some

peace, not knowing how much time had passed when he woke again to not only his wife but also to a concerned Mrs. Barnes.

“Here, drink this,” Mrs. Westcott insisted, holding out a teacup for him.

The hot liquid burned his tongue, but it ironically soothed his damaged throat, and he let out a sigh of relief.

“Take more when you can,” she urged, before turning to Mrs. Barnes. “I want someone sent immediately for the doctor. If we’re lucky, he’ll arrive at first light.”

Alex lifted his hand and placed it on his wife’s wrist. “Don’t, please.”

She pulled her arm from his grasp. “Hush. I’m more stubborn than you, and right now, more able. I will do as I see fit.”

Unable to bear her anymore, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “Heavens above. You are the most...”

“Yes, I know. The most infuriating woman.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Emily bit her thumbnail, watching as the physician examined Alex. Her heart raced, though not for any health difficulty of her own. Her nerves were shot due to lack of sleep, from waking every time her husband coughed in the opposite room. She was not upset with him, for he obviously was experiencing much worse, along with the same sleep deprivation. But just the sight of the doctor, seeing his tools and the way he poked and prodded, brought back frightful memories from her youth, and when the panic set in, she did not want to face the reality that her husband might not survive.

“He has an infection of the lungs,” Doctor Smith explained, and Emily’s heart dropped. Such an illness would not be as easily overcome.

“Was it not just a mere cold?” she asked in a small voice.

“If it had been a cold before, it has expanded to his lungs, I’m sorry to say.” Doctor Smith returned his things to his bag. “We will need to administer milk weed tea for the infection, and laudanum for the pain. We will also need to let blood from his arm, as well as apply leeches to his chest, which should reduce the pressure there.”

Emily swallowed hard. Of course there would be drastic measures for such a dire situation.

She cast her eyes to her husband, who was finally sleeping in his upright position after so much difficulty. If it was her choice, then she would do what she could to alleviate his pain.

“Very well. Please proceed.”

From his black bag, the doctor pulled out a jar of leeches and a small medicinal tincture. The laudanum was administered first, then the doctor proceeded to retrieve a porcelain bowl to hold the blood, and a white cloth, which opened to hold multiple short blades.

“Please help me remove his shirt.”

Emily immediately stiffened. Remove Alex’s shirt? That belonged firmly in a part of their relationship that she had continuously delayed, but there was no avoiding it now.

Together they lifted his white shirt out of his arms and over his head, and Emily averted her eyes while the doctor turned to prepare.

“Please sit with him while I make the incision,” the doctor asked.

Emily moved to the other side of the bed and sat down beside Alex, wondering how any of her efforts would make a difference with his broad shoulders. But she put her arm around him, hands securely resting on top of his warm skin, then gave the doctor a nod.

The older gentleman held tightly onto Alex’s forearm as he made the incision in the divot of the elbow. Alex groaned and rolled his head but did not wake or open his eyes. Emily held him fast, shushing his fears, and caressing the side of his head.

She watched the blood slowly trickle down Alex’s arm into the porcelain bowl, and hot tears pricked in the back of her eyes, but she swallowed them away. What was wrong with her? She had seen countless friends suffer with similar illnesses and face death, but somehow this time, it was a bold, colorful reminder of her husband’s

mortality. There was no guarantee he would survive this, and that possibility terrified her.

Once Alex's arm was propped on the bowl that rested on the bed, the doctor reached for the jar of leeches, and Emily had to steel herself. The little black wriggling devils were placed on Alex's stomach and ribcage, until they attached. This was enough to make her turn pale herself.

Doctor Smith sighed. "Now we will give the arm some time, but I must fetch the milk weed. I will return shortly."

Emily nodded as the doctor took his bag and left the room.

Then she was alone with Alex again, so she sat back and sighed. She ought to go about her day as normal. Have one of the servants sit with him, for she was certain Mrs. Barnes would willingly volunteer. Emily ought to go ride her horse, enjoy the outdoors, read her books, visit every room in the estate, anything to distract herself. But she felt chained to Alex's side. Her mind would not be freed from the sickroom until she saw some improvement. But how could that be? She remembered seeing him in the duke's study, how every little thing about him repulsed her. She did not want to be near him, let alone touch him. And yet somehow, without warning, that had all changed. Now she was calmed being in his presence, grateful to be close enough to touch, to support him when his health was failing.

He let out a light groan, and Emily reached up to dab the cloth against his fevered brow. She did not like seeing him so deathly still, but she knew his poor body needed to rest.

"Come back to me, Alex," she found herself saying. "Come back and fight with me if you must. Just come back."

Her heart wrenched at the thought of losing him, but why? It couldn't be because of a simple signed marriage certificate that made him her husband. And yet the man she had previously despised was now the person she would willingly lose sleep over? Fight off tears at the sight of his blood?

Emily shook her head. She knew the panic likely stemmed from the nightmares of her past, losing friends to illness at the boarding school. So many of the girls came from wealth and status, and their families paid for the best possible doctors. Others did not have such means, and they were left with the local physician, without the support of loved ones. Emily had tried to help those girls as best she could, but even one death was too many. And she had seen many. The sound of the doctor's tools and the smell of blood was already too familiar to her. Emily could not endure another death. Especially not her husband.

But even more than just her past experience, Emily knew deep down she genuinely cared for Alex. No matter that he said he did not want her and consistently told her she was the most infuriating woman. No matter that he drove her to madness at times. And she had consistently pushed him away; she knew that much was true. Ever since that night in the carriage, when he had denied her access to his heart, she had sought for their solution in living apart. She had tried to keep him at bay, but it was no use, even with all his failures and repeated apologies. He was her husband, and she wanted her chance to actually live a married life with him. But what if she wanted all of this with a man who was only going to die?

She sighed, resting against the headboard and closing her eyes, despicable thoughts entering her mind. If Alex did not survive, she would be a widow, and a wealthy one, at that. She would no longer be bound by a husband or by the duke. She would be free.

She could even return to Mr. Evans if she wanted to .

But that thought was immediately rejected. In fact, it sickened her now.

Alex suddenly leaned forward, waking in a coughing fit. Emily balanced his bleeding arm in the bowl, made sure the leeches were undisturbed, and tried to soothe him until he leaned back again in fitful sleep, his labored breathing sounding that much worse.

Tears burned in her eyes again, but she did not let them fall. The all-encompassing fear that she might lose him settled over her, so she continued to run her hand over his sweaty hair and shush his aching sounds.

“Please do not die, husband,” she whispered, touching her forehead to his. “I do not wish to be a widow.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

So much in Alex's body still did not feel right. His arm was sore, his chest still tight, his throat still burned, and his mind was muddled. He knew he was not thinking clearly or possibly even seeing clearly. He had jumbled memories of teas and tinctures, coughs and blood... was he dying? Is this what dying felt like?

The angel beside him was an indicator that yes, he could very possibly be dying.

He had never woken in bed with a woman by his side, snuggled next to him so close they were sharing the same air. When he reared his head back, despite the pain in his body shifting, the sight before him robbed him of breath in a way that wasn't nearly as unpleasant.

God in heaven. What was this?

Emily Westcott. The name reverberated over and over again in his mind. It was clear that he recognized her as his wife, but she looked so different. Eyes closed, blonde curls lightly tousled against his pillow, her lips parted and releasing the smallest of steady breaths. Compared to the vibrant demeanor and angry tirades he was familiar with, in this soft morning glow, she now seemed more ethereal and captivating.

He wanted this forever.

With his mind still foggy, Alex lifted a shaky hand and managed to reach out to brush the locks of hair from her face, the backs of his fingers brushing against her cheek. The corners of her lips turned upward, and she let out a sleepy sigh, cuddling closer

to him.

His heart rate heightened to a gallop, and Alex worried something new was going wrong. He didn't want to cough or sneeze or even breathe if that meant she would wake. He wanted to keep this view of her, just like this. He didn't know what their future would bring, but he wanted more of this, if he could help it. In his deliriousness, his eyes closed in a desperate prayer.

“Please, God. Do not let me lose out on a chance to live a life with my wife.”

Emily folded her arms across her chest and bit her lip. The more she watched her husband, the more dissatisfied she became.

He was steadily getting worse. His breathing did not sound as labored as it used to but now, he was coughing up blood, which increased her anxiety. It was the same with all her friends who had died at the boarding school, the last indicator that their bodies would fail, and she couldn't fathom letting him go. Not yet. If there was any way she could save him, she would do it.

“There must be something,” Emily mumbled to herself. “Something else we haven't done yet. Something more that would help. ”

“The doctor has assured us he's tried everything,” Nielson said, while Mrs. Barnes wept in the corner.

Emily shook her head, returning to her seat on the bed and using a cloth to clear the sweat from his face. “This fever is going to burn him alive from the inside. Perhaps we need to remove the treatments. The tea does seem to help his cough, but no more leeches, no more laudanum.”

The butler nodded solemnly.

Unable to remain still a moment longer, Emily stood and took to pacing the room. The lack of sleep and abundance of worry had surely altered how effectively her mind worked, and it frustrated her to no end. How could she care for her husband if she couldn't use her own faculties on his behalf?

She thought back on everything he had told her. He had always been sickly as a young boy at Markham Estate. When he said he did not wish to return, she had assumed it was the unhappy memories he did not wish to remember, but now she was coming to learn it something far beyond that alone. Something about this place made him ill. It could not be that it was unclean, for Emily had seen firsthand just how hard Mrs. Barnes and the maids worked. She could never mention such a thing, but perhaps she did need to discuss the possible idea of getting him away. Perhaps he would heal with better surroundings. But where?

They could return to his townhome in London, and there would be more doctors accessible there, but would they say the same thing as this country doctor? Or where had he said his family was—in Bath? It was common to take the waters there to improve one's health, but perhaps it wasn't water he needed, rather clean air. And would his family have space for the both of them? Could she impose on them having only met the mother once? Would they know what to do when he was sick like this ?

Emily froze. What had his mother said when she met the woman before? Something about the sea?

“What was the seaside town that the young master frequented as a boy?” Emily turned, searching for Mrs. Barnes.

The housekeeper sniffled, stepping forward. “Brighton, madam.”

Confirmation burned in Emily's chest. She had to do it. It might be the only thing that would save him.

“Do you know the inn where he frequented?” Emily asked urgently.

“I do, and we sent an inquiry recently, but have not yet received word back. I think the master suspected it had closed in his absence.”

“He had inquired about Brighton?” Emily asked, her mind reeling. Yes, he had mentioned something about it before.

Nielson nodded. “I believe he had hoped to take you there, madam.”

Recognition dawned, and Emily wanted to double over for the regret in her stomach. That first dinner together, he had been trying to invite her to Brighton. And she’d been too focused on her plan to leave him to see anything clearly. Anything beyond her own selfishness.

“But he can’t go to Brighton now. What will the doctor say?” Mrs. Barnes asked. “What if Mr. Westcott is too ill to travel?”

Emily shook her head. “If he can rest in bed, then he can rest in a carriage. It might be difficult, but the seaside air will do him good, I’m sure of it. It will be worth the struggle if it means we can save his life.”

She did not want to consider if he did not survive the journey.

Of course, the doctor might object. In fact, Alex himself would probably object, if he had enough mind present. But she could only rely on herself now, and she would do everything within her power to save her husband.

“Call for the doctor if you wish, but we’re going no matter what he says.”

Nielson frowned but nodded. “Very well. Shall I make ready to leave by the end of

the week?”

“No.” She could not guarantee they would have that much time left. “We’re leaving first thing tomorrow morning.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

What the hell was all the commotion?

Alex's muffled mind did not quite comprehend what was happening around him, but there was plenty of hustle and bustle that woke him from his disturbed sleep. He looked around in blurry vision to see servants rushing in and out of his room, discussing his clothing trunk and all that needed to be prepared. What on earth could they be preparing for? Was this his funeral? Were they having guests to show off the sick, dying man?

He woke again to a multitude of people in his room, only this time, they all appeared at his bedside. A footman, a doctor, Nielson, Mrs. Barnes, and his beautiful wife.

"How lovely you are, Mrs. Westcott," he mumbled, immediately wishing to take back the words. Their relationship had not been the kind to produce compliments. Would she chalk it up to his fevered state?

"Thank you," she responded. "Come now, we need you to sit up, Alex."

He did as he was told, her hand gently pulling him forward off his pillows.

A man spoke. "I'll kneel down here, and he'll just need to throw his arms over my shoulders. It should be easiest to carry him out that way."

Alex blinked. "Who is carrying who?"

“Don’t be difficult,” Mrs. Westcott urged gently. “We need to get you into the carriage.”

He sighed, leaning his body against the back of the footman. Alex felt a bit silly, letting another man carry him through his own estate, but Alex had no strength or wits about him to do it on his own, so he supposed he needed to be thankful.

“I can’t very well be seen out of doors in my nightshirt,” Alex mumbled, suddenly becoming self-conscious how he’d been removed from his bed.

The light sound of his wife’s laughter made him open his eyes. “You’re properly dressed,” she said, “Though only minimally in a shirt and breeches. It’s for your comfort in traveling. Not to worry, you won’t be seen until we arrive.”

“Where are we traveling to?” he asked, just as the brightness of the sunshine pricked his eyes and he turned away sharply.

Only a moment later her hand covered his face, his shoulders relaxing at her touch.

“To the sea,” she said, and he softened even more. How did she know such a detail? That if he were going to die, he would want it to be close to the briny air and the crashing waves?

It took the coordination of a great many people to get Alex into the carriage, but eventually he was laying down on the seat again, and he found his head resting on his wife’s thigh. How could she ever permit such a thing?

“Someone fetch a pillow from his bed,” Mrs. Westcott asked .

He nuzzled against her. “I’m already quite comfortable, actually.”

She patted a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll be traveling for more than eight hours. You might be comfortable, but my leg will need some relief.”

He sighed. “Very well, if you must.”

And yet, even after the pillow was retrieved, she did not remove her hand from his back.

“Are you comfortable?” she asked. “I believe we’re about to depart.”

He grunted. “I suppose. As comfortable as one can be when he’s about to die.”

“You’re not dying,” she said, a firm steady voice. “I won’t allow it.”

And with that confidence, the carriage took a jumbly lurch forward, and Alex closed his eyes, comfortable in the fact that no matter what happened, his wife would be right there with him.

Alex didn’t know how many times the carriage had stopped or the horses had been changed. He’d tried to keep a running tally in his mind to stay alert, but his body still ached, and, in his dozing, he’d lost track. He’d had various coughing fits along the way, only a few of which resulted in blood on the handkerchief. Mrs. Westcott offered him water from a canteen, and that did help some, but it wasn’t nearly as comforting as a cup of hot tea. Which he knew he wouldn’t have until they arrived. Wherever they were going.

It was the most comforting thing he’d ever experienced, any time he woke, to have the assurance that her hand, her gentle touch, would always be with him. Despite what seemed like an eternal discomfort of the lingering illness, the burning chest and hacking cough and mental obscurity, as he rested on her leg, her hand would always be rubbing his arm or patting his back or softly brushing fingers through his hair. She

was proving to be a constant, and in spite of feeling like he was dying, her touch kept him alive. Wanting to live.

At some point, the air had turned cool, and their carriage had gone dark. Night had fallen, but Mrs. Westcott was not unprepared. She spread a blanket over him and retained a cloth ready to sponge away any moisture from his fever. Alex continuously repeated in his mind how much he appreciated her.

Until at some point, the scent of salt water in the air filled his senses, waking him from a deep sleep. “Am I imagining things, or can I smell it?”

She gave a light chuckle, and her hand patted his back. “We’re almost there.”

And then it wasn’t just the smell, but the sound. The road must have traveled close to the sea on the way, for he could hear the waves crashing in the distance. Alex wanted to open his eyes and witness it for himself, but in the dark of night, it was no use.

The carriage finally came to a stop, and Alex felt his wife move away from her seat. From him.

“I’ll be right back. I only need to secure a room,” she said, her voice low and close to his ear.

It seemed that only minutes went by, and then the carriage door opened again.

“I cannot thank you enough, Mr. Fox. I never could have done any of this without you,” his wife said profusely. “I will see to it personally that you are well compensated for your efforts.”

“Think nothing of it, madam. I’ll be most satisfied to see your husband fully recovered.”

Whoever that Mr. Fox was, Alex would be sure to see that man well paid.

Again Alex was lugged across masculine shoulders, and without enough energy to even open his eyes, he simply let them carry him. Indoors, upstairs, and then after fumbling with a squeaky key, into what he presumed was an inn bedchamber.

Mr. Fox must have leaned Alex backward, for he collapsed into a moderately comfortable bed, and even without all his faculties, he could tell a window was nearby, for the sound of the waves and the scent on the air was unmistakable.

“You’ve done well, Mrs. Westcott,” Alex said, the corners of his lips pulling upward. “I’ll have the best sleep of my life, only keep this window open.”

The rigors of the day’s travel faded away, and as he let sleep take him, he heard his wife’s voice. “Now that smile alone was worth the trip.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Emily could not deny that she had slept remarkably well. It was more than sleeping by her husband's side, for she had been doing so the last few nights back at Markham Estate. It wasn't just the sound of the waves and the calming ocean smell that had lulled her to sleep. It was the fact that they were finally here, away from that place. It was her chance to get him well again. She had to. And the relief that her plan had worked, at least that he had arrived without dying along the way, was a victory in her eyes.

She turned over in the bed, startling to find that Alex was already awake, eyes open and watching her. But he did not blink, and her worst fears immediately took root.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sitting up and leaning over to examine him. She did not even bother to cover herself as the blanket slid down to her lap. Surely there was nothing scandalous about a husband seeing his wife in her nightdress. And what were the chances he would even remember in his current state?

She touched the side of his face to gauge his fever, but instead of blinding heat, he felt clammy. Or was it simply a normal body temperature?

"I'm fine," he said, his strained voice the same it had been yesterday. But she was unconvinced, and she leaned over further to rest her lips on his forehead. Still, no heat. Could it have broken for good?

He stilled. "What are you doing?"

“Another method of checking temperature is using the lips against the skin, and it can have a calming effect.” She leaned back, relief settling over her. “I worried the difficult travels would take a toll on you, but it appears you may have passed through the worst of it.”

His hand reached for her, brushing his thumb over her knuckles. “You put your lips on my skin again, and it might light another fire within me.”

Emily’s breath hitched in her chest, her heart skipping every other beat at the way his gravelly voice impacted her. Was it her imagination, or was there a certain clarity in his eyes that had been missing for nigh on a week? He could not have possibly recovered so quickly. Overnight after a long journey was impossible.

The way his touch traveled over the skin on her hand reminded her just how much of an intimate situation they were in. Sleeping in the same bed, dressed in their unmentionables. She might openly care for him and worry over him when his mind was half gone, but she didn’t know if she was ready to have such a conversation with a fully recovered husband, even though she knew they desperately needed to.

She cleared her throat and moved the blanket off her legs. “Then clearly you’re still feverish. I’ll not fight you on your deathbed, so sleep, husband.”

But before she could remove herself completely from the bed, he caught her hand again. “Wait. ”

Emily forgot to breathe at his whispered word. She turned to face him again as he tugged on her hand. “Stay. Please.”

She tried to keep her wits about her, but Emily would have willingly done anything he asked in that moment. “You need to rest, and I need to bring you breakfast, and have them bring tea for your throat.”

He shook his head against the pillow and tugged on her hand once more, so she immediately returned to the bed, lying beside him. However, he had apparently decided it was not close enough, because he pulled her closer still, into his arms and against his chest.

“I’m not hungry,” he said, one hand pressing against the flat of her back, the other gingerly resting against her hair. “And I’ll rest better knowing you’re with me.”

Whatever chest pain Alex had spoken of before, Emily was certain to contract the same thing, for her heart pounded unrelentingly. She didn’t know how clear his mind was, how conscious his actions were, but she desperately wanted to linger here, melt against him.

“How did you know?” he asked in a whisper.

Emily swallowed with difficulty, trying to find her voice. “Know what?”

“To remove me from the house. To bring me to the seaside.” His hand brushed over her curls, in the same manner she’d done to him in the carriage, and it was as if he was coaxing the truth out of her.

“Your mother had mentioned it before. When she came to London.”

He pulled back then, looking down at her from up close, their mouths close enough to touch. “You remember that? From all those weeks ago?”

His brown eyes, dark and golden like the color of her favorite tea, bore into hers, waiting for an answer, but Emily found she was speechless. She had no words as his eyes searched over the entirety of her face and settled on her lips.

That’s when her mouth went dry, and she suddenly remembered with full force the

last time she had been this close to him. It had been the night they'd met, unknowingly speaking and joking and teasing – and kissing – someone they'd never met before. It's what had forced them into marriage in the first place. So many times before she had cursed that day, and cursed him for ruining her life. And now, the only thing she could think of was how she could get him to kiss her again. Close the tiny gap that separated their lips so she could once again feel his mouth against her own. Maybe then she'd have words enough to voice her concerns. Maybe then she'd be able to change his mind about loving his wife. Maybe then she'd be able to confess her feelings.

But the word confess shocked Emily out of whatever trance he had led her into. There was still too much he didn't know. It wasn't just her developing feelings, nor was it just finding clarity in the living situation; her origin could be of great importance. That one's wife is actually the result of a noblewoman's affair could be infuriating to learn. Especially to someone like him who still depended on society's good opinion, who needed to find a good match for his sister. A familiar fear and dissatisfaction settled in her stomach, twisting and churning. She would have to find the right place, the right time, to tell him the whole of it, and not when he had barely started to show signs of recovering.

As if he had sensed her sudden detachment, he let out a sigh and pulled her close against him again. "You are an incredible woman, Mrs. Westcott."

Emily so wanted to know if he truly believed that, and if he would still feel that way when he knew the truth about her.

"Don't you mean infuriating?" she replied, resting her hand on his waist .

His laughter resulted in a light cough, but it thankfully did not escalate into a fit. "That too."

Since her husband insisted, instead of going downstairs to get him breakfast, Emily lay in his bed, in his arms. He was clinging to her as if she were dear to him, something precious that he didn't want to lose, so she allowed herself a moment's weakness to hold him, pressing herself against his chest. She did not know what their future would hold, and if he might someday regret these interactions when he regained his full physical health and mental clarity, but she would never regret them.

Chapter Thirty

The following days in Brighton had done Alex good. To the extent that when he slept through the night without waking in a coughing fit, his first thought was wondering if something new was wrong. But no, it was just the simple recovery process. His chest no longer ached, he did not have as much difficulty swallowing, and the fevers that came and went were less frequent. He had more of his wits about him, especially noting that the hotel room they occupied had only one large bed. Which he frequently shared with his wife.

Except when Alex opened his eyes this morning, she was not there. Not in his arms, or by his side, and it made him frown. It had become his favorite way to wake up, watching her sleep in the calm, morning light. Seeing her without the worries she bore during the day.

He turned his head and found her on the other side of the room, standing in her dressing gown and covered in a robe as she stared out the window. Their room faced the ocean, and he had taken in his lot of the idyllic view. But even now, he preferred the view before him. Mrs. Westcott, his wife, with her blonde curls hanging over her shoulders, eyes glossed over and lost in the distance, arms folded across her chest while she nibbled on her thumbnail between her pink lips.

Lips that had wholly captivated him once before, and he found himself wanting to attempt again.

She must have sensed his gaze, for she whipped her head in his direction. “You’re awake?”

He nodded. "As are you."

"Let me check you," she said, returning to the bed. She sat beside him and pressed her hands to his forehead, and the side of his face. Alex would never object to this regiment, her morning routine of checking him for fever. He would never tire of her urgent touch, the flat of her palm on his face, her skin caressing his.

"You seem much improved." She said the words in a definitive manner, and such words should have been reason to celebrate, but her lips remained in a firm line.

"Shall we go take a walk, then?" he suggested. "I should very much like to go enjoy the seaside again instead of just looking at it."

But his wife shook her head. "Not yet. I will have Mr. Fox call a doctor to confirm your situation first. I will not endanger you unnecessarily."

"I feel fine," he insisted, but she turned her gaze on him.

"We will wait for the doctor." Her blue eyes were sharp and adamant. "I cannot tell you how many times I have witnessed friends on death's door, only to see their health momentarily rally, then suddenly... they're gone."

Alex nodded. "Very well." He did not know what horrors she had seen, and he did not wish to worry her further.

She moved to stand, but he caught her gently by the wrist. "I only want you to know that I have improved over the past days because of your quick thinking in getting me here. I could have died back in the country estate. I owe my life to you. "

She shook her head, brushing off his hand and returning to her stance by the window. "We never should have gone to the house in the first place. And we need never return

again.”

Her words surprised him, but it was not a case he would argue. “If you wish.”

“No, Alex!” she snapped. “You must have your will and your own desires. It cannot only be what I wish. It is my fault you were subjected to that place again. You did not wish to go, but you felt it necessary because of me. And I will not ruin your life any more than I already have.” Alex saw the clench in her jaw as she turned away.

“Come sit with me, please,” he asked gently, but she shook her head, so he went on. “I suggested we go to Markham because I knew reuniting with your horse would make you happy, when so much of our situation had left you unhappy. And I would do so again, without hesitation. Wasn’t that enjoyment worth it?”

Her blue eyes took on a dangerous sheen. Was she angry? Anxious? Fearful?

“A few days of horse riding is not worth your life.”

Alex swallowed. She was not saying something he’d hoped she would, but it was something adjacent to caring for him.

“You are right. I did not wish to go back to Markham Estate. It bore terrible memories of my father, and his mistreatment of my mother. I was a sickly boy there, which apparently still lingers to this day. But I do not regret making this trip with you.”

He watched as her defenses slowly came down. Her shoulders softened, her brows eased, her jaw unclenched as she listened to him.

“I was reminded of my grandfather. He was a General in the Royal Navy, and he had taught me how to make ships in bottles. His are the ones displayed in the study. He

was a good, kind man, much to the chagrin of my father. It was because I was a weak, sickly boy, that my father hated me. I was too much like his father, whom he disapproved of greatly. But I loved my grandfather, and everything he taught me. I grew up knowing the distinction between both men and vowed never to be like my own father. Though unfortunately,” Alex sighed, “I’ve failed on that front many times in your presence.”

Only then did she drop her folded arms and, hanging her head in shame, make her way back to standing before the bed.

“You have not failed,” she mumbled. “I must admit I made our whole ordeal more difficult than it needed to be.”

Alex reached up for her hand. “Then let us start over, here in Brighton.” He brushed his thumb over the back of her hand, and her eyes flitted to his. “A clean slate for the both of us. We are no longer enemies, but friends working toward a common goal of having a successful marriage.”

She bit her lip again, drawing his gaze down. There was firmness returning to the set of her jaw, and concern filling her ocean blue eyes. She was still clinging to some of her armor, still protecting her heart from him. That was fine; she didn’t have to blindly trust him right away. As long as she didn’t come after him with barbed words or threats anymore, he could be patient until she let down her guard over time.

She nodded, giving his hand a squeeze in return. “That I will agree to.”

“I am glad to hear it.” He smiled up at her, and he was pleased she gave him a small smile in return. “Shall we venture down for breakfast? I’m quite famished.”

“No, not yet,” she said, pulling away from him. “I’ll bring up your food and inquire about the doctor. Don’t push your luck.”

Alex chuckled as she moved to dress behind the changing screen. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Emily had never experienced such a sensation of casually strolling in public with a gentleman, let alone her husband, but she found it most invigorating. Emily had her hand tucked in the crook of Alex's arm as they walked through the streets of Brighton that were bustling with crowds in the sunshine. It thrilled her that such a thing was acceptable, that he was not opposed, that they could smile at passersby, or linger at window displays, or comment on the beauty of their scenic ocean backdrop, and it would be completely normal. She wanted to enjoy it.

But all of this was overshadowed by the lingering concerns in the back of her mind. She wondered if every passerby knew of her scandalous origins, if some store owner had heard the truth from a visiting nobleman from London, if her husband would abandon her there on the shoreline once he knew where she came from. She tried to smile and take in the beauties of Brighton, to appreciate her brief moments of happiness, but it all felt a lie. She was living a lie, and the happiness she was experiencing would no doubt be taken from her at any given moment .

“Shall we walk closer to the beach?” Alex asked, looking down at her with a sparkle in his eyes.

She could not deny him, though her worries for his health still lingered. “Are you feeling up for it?”

He patted her hand that was tucked in his arm. “I am not fragile, Mrs. Westcott. I will survive a jaunt in the sand.”

Together they walked away from the city streets toward the emptier spaces near the water's edge. She was ever conscious of the men more properly dressed to rush into the oncoming waves, and farther down on a separate part of the beach, the bathing machines for women to change privately and enjoy the water away from the public eye. Emily and Alex walked in the opposite direction, where she thought on what he'd said. How he still called her Mrs. Westcott.

"I suppose you ought to call me Emily," she said, breath tight in her throat and making the words come out uneven. "If we are to be friends going forward."

He slowed his steps and looked down at her. "You needn't feel obligated. I won't pressure you for something against your will."

"It's only fair, considering you gave me leave to call you Alex."

He examined her for a moment, his eyes searching her face, before he nodded. "Very well. Thank you for the privilege, Emily."

Her name on his lips caused gooseflesh to break out on her skin, which she ignored as they continued walking.

Only then was she able to relax her shoulders and fully appreciate their current surroundings. She was delighted by the call of the seagulls in the air, and the little seashells that dotted the shoreline. The spray of the waves and the warm sunshine felt invigorating against her cheeks, and as they neared the large cliffs ahead of them, Emily was ready to protest if he suggested they go back .

"Perhaps we should go explore the rocks by the cliffs," he said instead.

"Yes, that would be lovely."

So onward they pressed, him offering his hand when a step between boulders became too wide or precarious. In some places, the rocks at the bottom of the cliff were small enough to fit in her dress pocket, and in other places they were taller than her husband, statuesque and beautiful, with the salty waves often filling the gaps at their feet.

Emily followed Alex as they strolled, but she nearly walked into his back as he had paused at the corner of the rocks.

“Let’s go this way,” she said, stepping around him.

“No, wait,” he whispered, catching her hand.

It was only when she paused to ask him why did she see the very reason. Hiding around the rocky corner ahead, she spotted a man and a woman, locked in a passionate embrace, pressed up against the cliff wall.

Emily gasped, her hands flying to cover her mouth and muffle the sound. Her cheeks burned as she watched, unable to look away. The man’s arms had secured the woman by the waist and the side of her face, and she was not in any hurry to get away, the way she clung to his shirt and slid fingers into his hair. Emily’s mouth dropped open further as the man moved his lips down to her neck, and though they were still some distance away, the woman let out an audible moan of sheer pleasure.

This was just the sort of thing that would have delighted Lady Whetstone, but thankfully, they were in Brighton, and not in London, so this couple’s reputation would remain unscathed.

It felt like a short moment that dragged into eternity, until Alex lightly cleared his throat and whispered, “Perhaps we should leave them to their privacy. ”

“Yes, of course.” Emily turned immediately and rushed in the opposite direction. She moved blindly at first, not giving any heed to the rocks that were too large or the gaps where she might need to hold her husband’s hand to cross. She had been completely distracted by the sight, for it brought back all too familiar memories of her own.

Emily knew exactly what a moment like that felt like.

After passing through the more difficult portions of the rocks, they finally made it back to the sandy beach, with the edges of the cliff guiding them back toward the city. They walked in a careful silence until Alex spoke.

“We can laugh about it now, can we not?”

Emily could not look at him yet, her face still on fire. “Laugh at the couple?”

“No.” He cleared his throat. “The moment we shared on the balcony.”

Heaven have mercy.

Unable to keep from snapping her head to look at him, she witnessed his own bashful smile, with pink creeping up his neck.

“No, we most certainly cannot laugh about it.” Her cheeks burned as she quickened her step to walk past him. There would be no talking about the kiss that found them in their current predicament of being married. No discussion of how many times she’d had to put those passionate moments from her mind. No conversation about wondering what it would feel like if it happened again under different circumstances.

She had not heard when he caught up to her, but he gently took her by the elbow, pausing her steps.

“And why not?” he asked, his tone even and genuinely curious. “Are you ashamed of it? Do you still hate me for it? Or some other reason perhaps?”

Emily had no words. It was the latter, yes, some unspeakable reason she could not laugh about that kiss—because she wanted more. She could have wrenched herself from his grasp at any moment, but she couldn’t find the desire. For she wondered if he felt as she did, that perhaps, if they were to try it again, would it engulf her in the same fire she’d felt that night? She could not pull away due to the hope that if she remained silent, he just might attempt it again.

“I feel like I should confess to you, Emily,” he said with a lowered voice, taking a step closer toward her, “That I would very much like to kiss you again someday.”

His gaze wandered lower to her lips, making her mouth run dry.

Mr. Evans would have never...

Emily thoughtlessly brushed her tongue against her lips, and Alex took another step toward her. She tried to battle with her reason as time ticked on, her husband all the while looking at her like he would devour her at any given moment. Emily tried to remind herself that he had despised her before, that he said he would never fall in love with her. But she could not cling to those thoughts, as they slipped through her fingers, for her single-mindedness could only focus on the possibility of having his lips against hers once more. And heaven help her, if he meant to kiss her, she would let him.

He stepped forward again, forcing Emily to take a step back, and she found herself pressed against the cold rock of the cliff. Her escaping breath stuttered in anticipation, with Alex’s determined gaze fixed on her mouth.

The sound of the waves suddenly grew closer and closer, until it crashed around

them, frigid saltwater cresting over Alex's back, rushing up the wall of the cliff, and dousing them both, leaving them completely drenched.

Emily gasped repeatedly, her soaking clothes now freezing and clinging to her body. Any possibility of a kiss was immediately forgotten, except for Alex's arms on either side of her bracing against the cliff, letting out heavy breaths near her ear.

"So cold," he huffed, pulling back with a twinkle of delight in his dark brown eyes.

Oh, how she could have consumed him in return, the sight of a playful tease tugging at the corner of his lips. But the cold water had cleared her mind of any such ideas. "We must get back. I can't have you getting sick again."

So she took him by the hand and led him across the beach, ignoring the stares from other beachgoers who were more appropriately dressed.

Emily needed to think through things before they got that close again. She had only narrowly escaped that moment with her heart, but she didn't know how much longer she could keep it safe from him. Or just how long she could keep the truth from him.

If she wanted any chance for their marriage to be successful, the way he wanted them to try, if she truly wanted to live up to the ideology of friendship, then she needed to be honest with him first. They could not establish their relationship on lies, and he deserved to know where she came from, her true origins. She couldn't have some gossip rag out her first. She needed to tell him.

But she had been so horrible to him back at the start of it all. Certainly he would not jump at the chance to be her friend or want her as a wife once he knew. Perhaps it would be better to wait, give him some time to determine her character for himself before his opinion was shadowed by the truth. And it would also give her some time to determine how he would react, and at least prepare herself for it, should the worst

happen.

At the very least, she would confer with Isabel and James when they went back to London. They could help her decide the best course of action. The duke had said it would be up to Emily's discretion, but she did not have societal knowledge of how to approach the subject or what to expect. She would need to wait and discuss it with them first.

But until then, that would make sleeping every night in Alex's arms all the more difficult.

Chapter Thirty-Two

In a lukewarm tub, Alex sat close to the window, watching Emily on the streets of Brighton below. She had her maid by her side, examining something in a shop window together. They seemed to be discussing a thing of no importance, but Emily turned and gave her a dazzling smile, then threw her head back in laughter. He didn't know how it was possible that he would be so impacted even at a distance, but the sight of his wife, and to see her with such an expression of happiness, it sent his heart racing, his stomach jumbling with emotions he couldn't quite name. He leaned his head back against the copper basin and sighed.

He wanted her. There was no denying it further. Alex wanted his wife.

It was certainly a unique predicament to be in, for he did not know how to proceed. They had started at such a disadvantage but that did not mean they were doomed to fail. They simply had to find the right path. And he needed to know if she would be willing to travel it with him.

He could have discovered that answer too, were it not for that damned wave .

The moment had been poignant and beautiful, with the potential for so much more. Emily's kiss could have been the start to everything that would bring them together.

But it wasn't just her kiss that he wanted. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to not regret marrying him. He wanted her to trust him with every piece of her heart.

Perhaps they just needed more time. But oh, how the patience might kill him.

Having missed her jaunt back to the inn during his ruminations, the door to their room opened and she appeared. Alex stilled, waiting for her response as she untied her bonnet with her back to him.

“Did you have a successful shopping trip in town?” he asked lightly.

“I did. In fact...” She removed her bonnet and turned, then Alex watched in delight as horror spread across her face.

“Alex!” she cried, whirling around again and covering her face with her bonnet. “What the devil are you doing?”

Unable to contain his chuckle, Alex tried to say, “I did mention I would ask the innkeeper about a bath in your absence.”

Emily huffed in frustration. “Yes, well, I didn’t imagine you would take your time in doing so.”

Alex pressed his lips together, tickling his fingertips across the water. “This is not so out of the ordinary. I am your husband, after all.”

She shook her head, still hiding her face. “Our relationship is not the ordinary kind, and you know this. Please make yourself decent.”

He knew she had not intended the words as a jab, but he felt it just the same. With a sigh, he stood and let the water drip back into the tub before drying off with a towel and wrapping himself in his bathrobe. “Very well. I am covered.”

Emily dared a glance over the rim of her bonnet as he took a seat on his bed, using a towel to dry his hair. Once she deemed the view safe, she sat herself at the dressing table and started removing her hairpins.

“Now will you tell me about your shopping trip?” he dared to ask.

“You will pay for that trick first,” she said, obviously fighting off a smirk.

A knock sounded at the door, and Emily stood to answer it. A broad man stood in the doorway and said, “A letter has arrived for you, mum.”

“Thank you, Mr. Fox.”

The visitor was easily visible over Emily’s shoulder, giving a nod to Alex. “Good to see you up and about, sir.”

“Thank you, indeed.” The man’s name struck Alex’s memory of the night they arrived in Brighton, blurred images of a man carrying him up the stairs. When Emily closed the door, he asked, “Who is that man?”

“The innkeeper.” Emily took the letter and returned to her mirror. “Your Mr. Miller died, and Mr. Fox took over the inn.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “How do you know about my Mr. Miller?”

“The man who ran the inn when you were a boy? Nielsen told me while you were on your deathbed in the country. He explained that you had sent word looking for a place to stay for the both of us.” She placed the letter on her table and looked up at him solemnly. “You should have told me.”

Alex’s heart did a double take, thinking that perhaps she was right. “But would you have listened?”

She paused before moving to pull more pins, letting the golden hair fall across her back. “You are right, I suppose. At the time I would not have listened at all. I was so

determined to have my way, to find a way to end things.”

Her forthright confession left Alex on the edge of his seat. “And now?”

Emily froze, her hands hovering above her head. Her shoulders rose and fell in two breaths before she responded. “And now, I’m wondering if we should return back to London. You seem much recovered, so you should not be endangered on the trip.”

Alex let her avoid answering the question, but only for now. “Are you already tired of the seaside?”

“Oh, not at all! I have enjoyed it immensely.” She paused, biting her lip and drawing his attention down, as that motion always did. “But I have been gone from the duke and duchess for some time, perhaps longer than ever before.”

Alex nodded, moving toward the table where she sat. “That is understandable. Do you not wish to return to your horse?”

“I shall miss Morgana, but we cannot in good conscience return to Markham Estate so soon, knowing it might jeopardize your health.” She shrugged. “Perhaps leaving her at Wynnwood Park is the best option for now, and we can arrange a visit some other time.”

One of her curls had strayed from its remaining pins, and Alex reached up to tuck it back behind her ear. “Very well. As you wish.”

Alex felt utterly satisfied when she shivered under his briefest touch, a struggled sigh escaping her lips. But then she closed her mouth and lifted her chin. “Will it always be as I wish?”

He shrugged. “If you wish.”

They both chuckled then, and Alex wanted to reach up again to caress her lips, to touch that smile, but he thought better of it, and instead moved behind the changing screen to dress. “Who is the letter from?”

“Oh yes, I’d nearly forgotten.” The sound of paper ripping left Alex in anticipation. “I had written to your mother when we first arrived in Brighton, not sure I had made the right decision. I had wanted her counsel on what to do next. Do you think she will censure me?”

“Of course not.” Alex shook his head. “She adored you from the moment she met you, perhaps more than she loves her own son. And as you can see, I’m already recovered, so she’ll be singing your praises, to be sure.”

Alex listened in silence, hurrying with his dress shirt and breeches, anxious to know the contents of the letter. Finally presentable, he stepped out into her sight again. “And?”

Emily nodded. “It’s as you said. She applauded my quick thinking, and praised God for a daughter-in-law who would act to save her son.”

“Precisely.”

Emily stood to her feet. “Though we might have to postpone our return to London, as she’s requested that we come to Bath once you’ve improved.

“Is that so? It would not be a terrible idea. That way you could meet my sisters.”

Emily dropped the letter to her side with a creased brow. “And London is not along the way.”

“We don’t have to go,” he responded with a shrug.

“No, it is better that we do. I’m sure she is anxious to see her son after such an illness.” She straightened her shoulders. “And I have wanted to meet your sisters. It will be a worthwhile visit.”

Alex stepped forward, brushing a finger down the length of her jaw. “Then you don’t mind being stuck with me until then?”

Her lips parted in an unsteady breath. “Not completely,” she teased in return.

He liked knowing he had this power over her, that she wasn’t completely unaffected by him. Alex only hoped she knew the same for him, that he would do anything she asked.

“I’ll tell Mr. Fox that we’ll make ready to leave,” she said, taking a step toward the door.

“And I’ll have the maid and valet ready our things for departure.”

She nodded, disappearing out the door, and leaving Alex longing for her company.

Chapter Thirty-Three

It was more than a day's travel from Brighton to Bath, which meant Emily had an immense amount of time with her husband all to herself. Their first carriage ride together after the wedding had been full of anger and animosity, and the ones that followed not much better, including when he had been sick. But now, they were able to pass time together in comfortable silence, or even in pleasant discussion. There was plenty of time for dozing off, including when Alex claimed a headache, and rested his head on her leg again, but she hadn't minded too much. It gave her an opportunity to look at his face unabashedly, to trace every line and contour of what made him so despicably handsome.

They'd had to stop at an inn for the night, but she hadn't been too worried about the sleeping arrangements, considering they were both so exhausted from their travels. And when they arrived in Bath, it was already nightfall. They could have stayed with his sister or his mother in their guest rooms, but they'd decided once again to patronize an inn. The solitude suited them.

The next morning, when they arrived at his sister's townhouse in the Royal Crescent, Alex knocked on the door, then looked over at her with a wry smile. "Don't forget, you must pretend you don't hate me."

He chuckled when she gasped, remembering their similar discussion the day she had first met his mother. "I don't hate you," she mumbled, tucking her hand into his arm. She hardly remembered those emotions from before, as her feelings for him now were so very different.

When the butler opened the door and showed them in, Emily should not have been surprised when they were greeted with three different high-pitched squeals, belonging to that of his two sisters and his mother. They all greeted her with enthusiastic hugs, even before the introductions, until Alex broke them all apart.

“Give her some room to breathe, you zealots,” he told them with a laugh.

“We’re only so excited,” one said, clapping her hands as evidence.

“Mother said you were perfect for our Alex, and to be sure you are!” said the other, a darling baby resting in her arms.

Alex stifled a grin. “First, let me present my wife, Emily Westcott.”

Emily dipped in a curtsy, struggling to maintain her balance at hearing him call her his wife, with such a pleasing, confident tone. “I am so pleased to meet you both.”

“My sister, Edwina Westcott,” he gestured toward the taller of the two women, “And my other sister, Dorothea Lewis.” The shorter one who held the baby reached out her other hand.

“I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see my elder brother so happily settled.”

“Indeed, we thought he’d never have a chance for how long he waited,” Edwina tacked on .

“And she is darling, isn’t she?” Mrs. Martin stepped forward, a smile lighting her eyes.

“How good to see you again, Mrs. Martin.” Emily was happy to see a familiar face amongst all the newness.

“She really is, Mother!” Dorothea said brightly. “And she brought Alex back from the brink as well?”

“Indeed. Come here, my boy, and let me have a look at you,” Mrs. Martin moved to greet her son. “You do not appear any worse for the wear, so that means Mrs. Westcott has taken very good care of you.”

“She has indeed.” Alex winked at Emily, then placed his hands on his mother’s shoulders. “I am well, Mother. Please do not worry yourself.”

“In that case, come inside and have a seat, dear.” Mrs. Martin took Emily’s hand, leading her into the drawing room. “We must visit so you have to tell me all about your travels. I want to hear every detail.”

Emily looked back at her husband, who was the last to follow along, but he just shrugged. “I warned you, they’re going to adore you.”

He said the final words with a certain tone, and the look in his eyes made her wonder how he meant them. But she did not have time to examine his intentions further, for she was ushered into the parlor, and seated on a beautiful chair. The three women gathered around on the settee, expectant eyes waiting for more information, and Alex settled in the chair beside her, looking as if he was holding back a laugh.

“I must say, I had never traveled so far south before,” Emily explained. “Brighton is beautiful, but I would have liked to visit on more favorable circumstances.”

“You were very wise to take him there, my dear,” Mrs. Martin said. “Even if it was against the doctor’s wishes.”

“He did not favor the idea, but he eventually decided to help when I insisted. And thankfully, it was the right decision, for Alex has improved a great deal since then.”

Emily looked over at Alex, and he seemed to match his mother's fondness.

"I had not been to Brighton in some time, and it has changed so much, Mother. You would hardly recognize it, especially now that Mr. Miller is gone. Or perhaps that is just my perception since being there as a young child."

"Of course. I imagine I would feel the same going back to that musty old house in the country," Edwina said.

"How did you like Markham Estate?" Dorothea asked. "I remember it being very drab and spooky as a child."

The thought made Emily chuckle. "I suppose it could be seen that way. It is an old house, but the staff do a fine job of keeping it. And the countryside is beautiful. I enjoyed a good deal of it with my horse, but I don't imagine we'll be returning any time soon."

"That is probably wise," Mrs. Martin said with a slow nod.

But Emily would not allow a somber mood to settle over the conversation. She did not want to damper their enthusiasm. Rarely was she able to enjoy the company of such amiable ladies in London. "Perhaps you will tell me about your families. I believe two of you have recently married?"

Edwina's eyes lit up. "Oh yes. Mother married several years ago. Mr. Martin is a Spanish merchant, very sophisticated and well to do, and diligent in his profession. And he dotes on her so!"

From what little Emily had heard about the woman's previous husband, this news was a balm to her heart. How pleasant to be so well matched in a second marriage.

“Mine was more recent,” Dorothea explained, “Almost a year ago in August. I married a naval officer, and he’s simply delightful. Very often the highlight of my day.”

Emily smiled. “How lovely.”

“I suppose that leaves me as the last one,” Edwina said with a shrug. “I had been courted for a short time by the Baron Frampton, but we did not suit in the end.”

Ah yes, Emily remembered meeting him.

“It’s just as well,” Dorothea said, giving a teasing nudge with her elbow. “For her heart is otherwise occupied.”

Edwina shushed her sister, and Alex placed a hand on her arm.

“Do not give up hope, Edwina,” he asked earnestly. “I am making progress with Mr. Grisham’s father, and I do not believe it is a lost cause.”

Mrs. Martin leaned forward to whisper in Emily’s ear. “My first husband left quite a sour taste with most of society in London, making it difficult for the girls to have their seasons and find a husband. Dorothea was lucky to find a gentleman here in Bath from Alex’s efforts, but Edwina has a childhood friend she’s very fond of.”

“I see,” Emily said with a nod. Is that what he had been doing in London, when going out on business? Trying to find a match for his sister? Everything Emily thought she had known about his character in the beginning was so different now. He was more generous and self-sacrificing than she had ever given him credit for, and not just for his family, but for her as well.

She let her eyes linger on him, her lips forming an appreciative smile. He met her

gaze and lifted a quizzical brow, but it only lasted a moment, for Dorothea appeared at her side.

“We’ve recently added this lovely ball of joy to our family.”

She pulled down the blanket in her arms to reveal a tender baby face, scrunched up and still sleeping.

Emily gasped. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a baby so tiny! How precious.”

“Would you like to hold him?”

“I would, but I think his uncle should hold him first,” Emily said, casting a cheeky glance at her husband.

“Oh, that will not be necessary.” Alex immediately started to rise out of his seat in protest, but Emily caught his arm, pinning him to his chair. Dorothea immediately hurried to his side, enjoying teasing him, and placed the baby in Alex’s arms, despite the blatant grimace of hesitation on his face.

But Emily suddenly realized her mistake. Upon insisting Alex go first, she had brought to life the vision of something she had not yet dared to imagine. The sight of her husband holding a child.

The thought of Alex being a father.

The emotions Emily thought she had suppressed enough came rushing to the surface. She had to repeatedly blink the burn away and clench her jaw to swallow the sensations. Long ago he had mentioned having an heir, and the thought terrified her. She could not bear the thought of having a husband who might not love her, and therefore might not love her children. If she did have a family, she desperately

wanted a man, a husband, who would help her in creating a loving atmosphere, the home she had been denied in her childhood. But could she have that with Alex?

Watching him with a baby in his arms was a sharp reminder that she wanted it desperately.

Perhaps she would not be able to wait until London to have a talk with him after all.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The bustle of Bath had begun hours ago, but it did not bother Alex in the least. This was another city he had long been familiar with, just like Brighton, and here too, it seemed his favorite pastime was watching over his wife. He tried to think of countless ways to win her over, breach the distance between them, but each opportunity had its own difficulty. He had attempted various gestures to divine her stance, and she seemed to appreciate his efforts, but other times, she kept him at bay, defenses up. On the beach in Brighton, he had been so certain she would have accepted his kiss, but she repeatedly kept pushing him away. His wife left him utterly confused at times. What could possibly be going on in that head of hers?

Emily slept on her back with her head turned away, as the morning sun filtered in from the curtained window. When she stirred momentarily, her loose hair fell away from her face, revealing the creamy color of her neck. Alex swallowed, eyes tracing the curve from the base of her hair to where the skin disappeared under the fabric of her night dress. He had kissed that neck before, and he wanted to again, but he wasn't about to do so without express permission. He'd done that once before and the consequences had been life changing.

Yet, not wholly unwelcome.

She stirred again, her eyes blinking open. Then she turned to him, and her eyes left him stunned, stilled by their sharp blue hue.

"Good morning," she whispered, a dazed smile gracing her lips.

“And to you,” he returned, watching as she stretched. “How did you sleep?”

“Very well. And you?”

She pulled one arm out from her blanket, tucking it under her head as she turned her body to face him, and Alex had to physically restrain himself from reaching out to touch her.

“I had very pleasant dreams, indeed.”

She did not seem to grasp his meaning, for she immediately went on. “Do you suppose we shall go out into society while here?”

Alex shrugged. “If you wish.”

Emily giggled, and his heart skipped a beat. “No, I meant, will it be expected of your family? To attend an opera or a ball with them?”

“I doubt it, but we can if there is anything specific you would like to see. Generally, unless there is a specific outing that would benefit Edwina’s prospects, we have very little reason to go out. For we all enjoy each other’s company very much.”

“I’m glad of it.” She gave a peaceful smile. “You have a wonderful family.”

“I do. And they seem to love you as well.”

One word in particular seemed to catch her attention, and he watched a plethora of emotions flicker through her eyes. He could tell she desired what he spoke of, yet she also seemed to fear it. She had been so at ease and vulnerable first thing in the morning, but now he watched as her guard went back up. What could possibly leave her so conflicted?

“Then perhaps we should not leave them waiting. I believe your mother is expecting us this morning.” Emily pulled herself from the bed, and rushed to ring for the maid to help her dress. Alex sighed, for he would have to find another moment or another day to find an in with her.

However, it wasn’t long until they were out strolling down the streets of Bath, her hand tucked into his arm, appearing every bit the happy married couple to everyone who tipped their hat at them.

Just as he was thinking of something to say, it was Emily who spoke first.

“Alex, were you being sincere in Brighton?” she asked in a slight rush.

He looked over at her, nearly equal to his height, but she kept her eyes ahead. “I was ill half the time, you might have to be a bit more specific,” he teased.

She breathed for a beat longer before saying, “On the beach, when you said you wanted to kiss me again.”

His heart stuttered in his chest. She would approach such a topic now? Still she did not look at him, but he saw the swallow of nerves work in her throat.

“Yes, I was sincere.” His heart repeatedly pounding inside his chest made him stop and turn toward her. “But why do you ask?”

Emily took a steadying breath before finally lifting her gaze to his. “I suppose it left me confused. You had told me once before that you would never fall in love with me, and yet you seemed to be petitioning for a kiss.”

Her words devastated Alex, a punch to his middle. He had said those things, so she had every right to be confused. How could he explain himself out of this one?

“I know a husband is required certain privileges with his wife, and I suppose you will need an heir someday,” her cheeks pinked as she spoke, “But a kiss seemed even more intimate than that. A kiss seemed a romantic notion, so I did not know what you intended.”

Alex’s mouth ran dry. She was demanding an explanation in public, there in the sunshine on the street in Bath. “Emily, I...”

“And perhaps it was foolish of me to hope for such a thing, growing up in the boarding school, but I had always dreamed of a love match. Which is why I had been so distraught to lose Mr. Evans.” She shook her head. “I do not mean to bring up the past that has been forgotten, only to set proper expectations for the future.”

His heart raced faster than his thoughts could gather. “You want a husband who loves you?”

She nodded firmly. “Yes, I did.”

Alex stopped short. Did? As in, past tense? “But you don’t want me to love you?”

She pursed her lips and lifted her chin. “I will not hope for things that will never happen.”

“But... do you want hope?”

Her blue eyes pierced him. “Do you want me to hope?”

Alex let out a frustrated laugh, running a hand through his hair. “You refuse to yield.” Then he placed his hands on her shoulders. “You are without a doubt the most infuriating woman.”

And he loved her for it.

The words that followed in his mind caused a physical reaction to settle over his body as the realization took root.

He did love her. His one hand moved of its own accord, cradling her neck and her jaw. In his quest to see her happy, he had slowly been taken in by her stubbornness and quick wit and beauty, her sensitive heart, and her gentle touch. He was a lucky man indeed, to be married to such a woman. Even if they'd had to stumble a time or two in order to find a rhythm together down their path of life.

For a moment, Alex forgot their surroundings, that they stood out in broad daylight, that his mother's home was just around the corner. All relevant thoughts had conveniently left his mind, as he became consumed with the woman before him, her vulnerable eyes, her parted lips, the faint jasmine scent that always seemed to accompany her, and the distance he wanted to close between them...

"Westcott! Is that you?"

Alex's head snapped up, ready to bark at the person who dared speak to him when he was inches from what he truly wanted, but he swallowed his anger. He was getting better at schooling his emotions now. The gentleman approaching them was elderly and harmless, despite inconvenient in his timing.

"Unfortunately, we will have to finish this conversation later," he whispered in Emily's ear, then slid his hand from her neck down her arm, to tuck her hand back in its rightful place, in the crook of his arm.

"How do you do, Mr. Smith?" Alex greeted him.

"Very well, but not as good as you, I wager. Your mother mentioned you'd married.

This must be your new wife.”

Alex reluctantly made the introductions, and tried to excuse themselves multiple times, but Mr. Smith continued to carry on the conversation even after they started walking away. He accompanied them almost to the door of Mrs. Martin, until he finally bid them good day. With a sigh, Alex knocked on the door and waited silently, his mind still occupied by his wife.

He understood his own feelings, but he still did not understand hers. She had talked in circles, avoiding any kind of confession, and he did not blame her. She was confused because he, too, had not been clear in words about his intentions, so he could not expect her to be. She would not sacrifice her heart on the altar until she knew she was safe with him. He would have to be that for her.

When the door opened, they stepped into a bustling foyer.

“There you are, finally,” said Dorothea, busying herself at a mirror in the entryway. “I feel we’ve been waiting for hours. Have you been dawdling all morning?”

“Not all morning,” Alex said with a chuckle, casting a knowing glance at Emily, who flushed.

“We intend to visit Milsom Street,” his mother said, “to secure some fixings for Edwina’s new bonnet. Will you not join us?”

Alex stiffened, for Emily had asked about just such an outing earlier. To his surprise, she nodded and smiled brightly. “We would love to.”

“And before we go, I believe introductions are in order,” Mother went on, “for I believe, my dear, that you have not yet met my husband.”

The sound of boots on the floor filled the foyer, and Alex turned with delight. “Ah, Mr. Martin. How good to see you.”

He clasped hands with the Spanish man, who greeted him in return with a firm shake. “And you, as well, as always.” Alex saw him as more a friend than a father figure, but he still exceeded the late Mr. Westcott in so many ways.

“I’m sorry I could not have been present when you came to visit before,” Mr. Martin said to Emily with his accented English. “I had business at the docks in Bristol.”

Emily curtsied in greeting. “Think nothing of it. I am delighted to make your acquaintance today.”

His mother came and linked Alex by the arm. “Shall we be off, then? It is half a mile walk, so we can enjoy the outdoors.”

And like a small caravan, they all hurried out the door headed for the shopping district .

“How are you today?” his mother asked, her voice lowered so only he could hear. As if harboring a secret.

“I am well, Mother. Can you say the same?”

She pursed her lips and patted his arm. “Of course. But are you certain there’s nothing you’re keeping from me?”

The warmth of the morning sun felt suddenly like the direct heat under a magnifying glass. “I have no secrets.” At least not from her.

His mother watched him carefully, and he knew she could almost read him to the

core. “So you have not heard the news of Miss Allman?”

“Frances?” Alex blinked. “I have heard nothing of her since...” Since that day in the streets of London when she had bid him goodbye.

“I received a letter this morning from Lady Hartfield. She tends to send me any gossip I may have missed out on, but this time, she took great care to let me know that Miss Allman is now engaged to be married.”

“Ah.” Alex considered the information, nodding slowly. Any number of weeks before, such news would have devastated him, regardless of whether he had been married or not. He vividly remembered the striking pain in his chest, watching Frances walk away, and thinking there would never be any solace for him. He had been so bitter and cross over the whole situation, anger his only constant.

But now, such pain was only a memory, and it filled him with relief. If Frances had moved on enough to marry, then perhaps she had been freed from their heartache as well. And it left Alex even more delighted with the feelings he’d recently discovered for his wife. Perhaps he could have been happy with Frances and her quiet nature, but everything he knew about Emily, her tenacity and authenticity, his chance of true happiness had increased tenfold. “No, I had not heard, but I am glad of it. Do give Lady Hartfield my good wishes if she should ask. I’ll not have her spread gossip further on my account.”

“You are happy for Miss Frances, then?”

He nodded. “Very much so. I do not long for her as I once did.”

“And are you happy now, in your current situation?”

Alex narrowed his eyes at his mother. “Are you trying to retrieve gossip from me?”

Mother laughed. "I am simply trying to discern whether my son is happy or not."

"I am trying, Mother," he said with a sigh. "I believe we are on the right path, but it may take some more time yet."

"Very well, I will not pressure you further." She patted his hand, leaning closer to him as they walked. "But Emily is a lovely girl, isn't she?"

"The loveliest," Alex conceded without hesitation.

"Then do not give up." She glanced up at her son. "For she does not look at you the same way she did when I first met her. She has softened a great deal, and I believe there is a certain affection in her eyes now. Perhaps it will develop further with time."

Alex sighed. "We can only hope."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Emily found herself nearly too distracted to focus on the conversation at hand. She wanted to see more of what Bath had to offer, having never traveled there before herself. She wanted to continue talking with the very interesting Mr. Martin. But her thoughts were continuously pulled back to the moment before in the street with her husband. He had been about to kiss her. And she wanted it desperately, but it terrified her just as much. She had mentioned their conversation on the beach in Brighton, and she needed an answer to that question before they could make any progress in their relationship. Which could not happen while they were out with his family.

So she forced herself to focus on the conversation at hand.

“How is it that you met Mrs. Martin?” Emily asked, as they strolled down the street arm in arm, the tail end of their caravan.

“Ah, you will have to ask her for the story. She will tell it much better.” He spoke with a beautiful Spanish accent, a different emphasis on hard and soft syllables.

“And how long have you lived in England?”

“I suppose those stories are somewhat connected,” he said, nodding with acceptance. “I was a merchant in Cadiz, and I had met young Alex during his Grand Tour. We kept in touch, and he wrote to me of opportunities to expand my business in Bristol. It was some years later that I came to visit him in Bath, which is when I met his mother, who had recently been widowed. She was so beautiful and charming; it was impossible to resist her.”

With a sigh, Emily said, “You tell the story very well yourself, Mr. Martin.”

“Is that you, Mrs. Westcott?”

Emily froze in her steps, immediately recognizing the sound of the voice behind her. It belonged to a person she never thought she would have to face again, but of course he would be in Bath.

Mr. Evans.

She slowly turned and faced him. “How do you do, Mr. Evans?” she asked in a timid voice she hardly recognized.

“I am very well, only surprised to see you here.” He shuffled on his feet. “What brings you to Bath?”

Emily swallowed with great difficulty. “I am visiting my husband’s family. This is Mr. Martin, my father-in-law.”

Mr. Martin nodded in greeting, but he must have noted her discomfort, for he leaned in to whisper, “Do you not wish to see him? We can go, if you wish.”

The familiar turn of phrase made Emily smile, as well as his genuine concern. “It is all right.”

She looked over her shoulder, almost wishing for her husband to come rescue her, but perhaps this was something she needed to face alone. And she considered that maybe being out in society in Bath was not the best idea after all, for she had no control who would see her, who would see Alex, who would ask questions. Anyone might somehow learn or reveal her truth, but she couldn’t stay hidden forever. Though that did not keep her from standing on shaky legs.

“How goes your stay in Bath?” she asked hesitantly, not wanting to carry on the conversation any longer than necessary.

“Very well. It is a lovely place to visit.” Mr. Evans held his hat humbly in his hands, and as Emily took in the sight of him, she had expected a quickening of her pulse, or a return of the desire to hold his hand as she had once before. He had once been her only desire, but those feelings had thankfully faded away completely. She had not thought of him in ages, and the sight of him made her feel absolutely nothing.

Nothing compared to the way Alex made her feel.

She used to consider Mr. Evans so handsome, but as her affection for him had run dry, he appeared to her as any other normal man. She had once considered him the most perfect possible option for her, but now, she would not trade her husband for the world. Even with all their flaws and difficulties, Alex Westcott was the one she wanted.

“And how do you find it? Are you happy here?” He paused, taking a breath. “Happy with your husband?”

His last question should not have surprised her, but it did. He did not sound bitter or cross, and seemed to speak out of genuine curiosity. Yet she didn’t know how to answer him. She and Alex were so close to an understanding, so close to happiness, and yet Emily would choose that over whatever comfortable life she might have had with Mr. Evans. That had to have meant something.

“Now doesn’t this look cozy?”

Emily’s head whirled around to where her husband stood with his mother.

“There you are.” Mrs. Martin said, coming to claim her husband. “Let’s let these

young people talk amongst themselves.” Then they walked forward toward the open shop where the sisters had entered.

Without hesitation, Emily moved to Alex’s side, being very obvious about taking his hand. “Mr. Evans had seen us in the street and only wished to inquire after old friends,” she explained, then she gave a false smile to the visitor. “We are very happy together, to be sure.”

Alex squeezed her hand in return but said nothing as he stared the man down.

“And I am very glad to hear it. I wish you both very well. Enjoy the rest of your stay in Bath.” Then he bowed in departure, continuing in the opposite direction.

Emily remained still, clinging to Alex’s hand, should he decide to lash out after the man. But instead, he looked down at her in concern.

“Are you all right?” Alex mumbled.

“I am well.”

He tugged on her hand, drawing her attention up. “Are you certain?”

Emily nodded. “I didn’t expect anything to happen, but I’m grateful you came when you did.”

“Ever your rescuer,” he said with a smirk.

“I think thus far, it has been the opposite, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked in a tease.

But suddenly, all teasing was gone from her when he lifted his hand, her chin gently held by his thumb and forefinger. Her lips voluntarily parted to draw additional

needed breath, and his thumb brushed over her bottom lip in a torturous, delicate motion.

And was it her imagination, or was he leaning in closer?

“What are you doing?” she asked in a strangled whisper.

“Your lover is looking back.” His voice had taken a deep, unrecognizable tone, one that would have left Emily in a trance, were it not for his inference.

“He is not my lover,” she managed to say, standing firm in her stance.

Alex dropped his gaze to her mouth. “Then who is?”

You are, she wanted to say. The words were ready on her tongue.

Emily looked up into his terrifically dark eyes, wanting nothing more than for him to close this distance between them. She could feel his breath on her lips, feel the brush of his nose against hers; they were that close. In the middle of the street in Bath, without a care for reputation.

But then screaming to the forefront of her mind was the reminder of not only her reputation, but also his. Which renewed her fear of scandal, ruination, and societal damnation.

Not only that, but she didn’t want him to kiss her for show. She wanted him to kiss her out of sincerity, out of desire, for her heart could not survive on anything else. She could not secure her heart as his with a kiss, only to give him ample opportunity to break it.

“Alex, wait, please.” The tiny voice escaped her before she could fathom its meaning.

To her great disappointment, he pulled back, and she could see his regret as well. There was no escaping the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she caught her breath, wishing she could say something to ease the pain in his eyes.

But he simply nodded and said, “No, perhaps you are right.” Then he gently pulled her to his side. “Come, let us join the others.”

Emily returned to their party with a clenched jaw. They could not go on like this any longer. She wanted to finish the conversation they had started earlier, and more than anything, she wanted to be the recipient of his kiss once more, if he truly cared for her. But she would never know if they could actually end up happy together with the torment of her secret. She would have to tell him, here in Bath, without waiting to speak with the duke. She would have to be done with it once and for all.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Alex was awake. Emily could tell that much. The day spent with his family had been more than pleasant, first shopping and then dining, followed by singing and dancing until late in the evening. They had been already falling asleep when they returned to the inn, but neither of them had slept well. It had been a night of fitful tossing and turning for both of them in their shared bed. And she didn't know how the needed conversation would go, but her heart pounded painfully in her chest at the thought. How would she broach the subject?

"Are you awake, Emily?" his voice sounded behind her.

She had slept on her side with her back to him, but she took a stabilizing breath before slowly turning to face him. "Yes."

His morning face still fresh from sleep looked adorable. "If you've had your fill of Bath, do you suppose we ought to return to London?"

Emily shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "If you wish. "

Alex chuckled, reaching for her face tenderly. "I believe that would be my line."

She closed her eyes, not only wanting to relish his touch, but also so he wouldn't see just how much she craved him. She no doubt confused him, wanting him and denying him in every breath, over and over again.

But she could tell he was slowly learning everything about her. He knew that she was

most vulnerable first thing in the morning, that she would melt under his touch, perhaps say something she shouldn't.

"Emily," Alex ventured, his voice small and low, "if I someday come to the point that I want to change what I said before..."

Her heart sank. Was he saying he didn't want to kiss her after all? Had she pushed him away too many times? Kept the secret for too long?

"If I wanted to take back what I said about never falling in love with you, would that be all right?"

Emily's eyes burst open, meeting an expression of vulnerability on Alex's face she had never seen before.

"I'm sorry for confusing you, as that was never my intention. I think neither of us knew how to handle the start of this arranged marriage, for we've certainly stumbled a time or two along the way. And I realize that we've only just barely established this careful friendship we have, so I don't want to ruin it and become enemies again."

His thumb continued to caress softly over her cheek, as if he knew she would need soothing, but there would be no calming the thunderous beating of her heart, which she was certain could be heard echoing around their quiet room.

"I only want you to be happy," he whispered, his words emphasized by his hand steadying on the side of her face. "So if you truly don't want a husband who's in love with you, then tell me now. "

Emily could have drowned in the darkness of his eyes, his touch was the only thing keeping her afloat. What exactly was he saying? That he already loved her, or only that he might someday? She couldn't confess just how very close she was to the same

thing, not until she could tell him the truth. Not until she knew he would not abandon her for it. But she couldn't give up this chance either, not when it could possibly be her last opportunity for everything she had ever wanted.

"I do want that," Emily managed to say, her throat constricting and almost silencing her words.

He huffed a sigh and closed his eyes, his lips parting in a relieved smile. "You have no idea..." But he stopped himself, biting his lip. "I am pleased to hear you say so." Then his eyes bore into hers, somehow nearly sparkling and dancing as he spoke. "Then we will find our path together after all."

Emily nodded fervently, resting her palm over his hand on her face. She couldn't say in words just how much she wanted this as well.

But Alex did not move from the bed as she had expected, and she waited for what would come next.

"I might kiss you now, Emily."

His raspy morning voice was enough to lower her defenses. She would allow one kiss. "If you wish," she whispered, nodding thoughtlessly.

He leaned toward her, his hand tugging gently at her neck, and Emily closed her eyes, lifting her chin to meet him.

His lips pressed against hers, but not with urgency. It was not the same ravishing, impassioned kiss from the balcony, and she could not expect it to be. Their lives were completely different now, their relationship now more than it had started. They knew so much about each other now, having witnessed each other's flaws and weaknesses, caring for each other in difficult times, learning patience and true appreciation for the

other. This desire was genuine, and it meant so much more to her now. He meant so much to her now.

As Alex's mouth coaxed more from her, repeating the familiar motion over and over again, Emily realized just how much he meant to her. She had spent so much time worrying she might fall in love with him, she didn't realize that she actually already had. The way his touch burned against her skin, the way her heart skittered with each gesture of his kiss, her desire for him came from a very real place of love, deep in her heart. This was both terrifying and liberating to understand. She loved the man in her arms, the man kissing her in return, who sincerely wanted to be her husband. She could not have asked for more.

He deepened the kiss, bringing to life butterflies in her core that she had never experienced. His mouth slanted over hers in a slow, languid affection that made her reach out her hands. She wanted more of him. He reached for her in return, his hand sliding beneath her body and pulling her closer across the bedsheet. Emily tangled her fingers in his hair, delighted when his hand fisted in the back of her nightdress. She wanted to stay like this with him forever. Never wanted to be parted from him again.

But the stark reminder made her blood run cold; there was still the one thing that could separate them if she didn't get the truth out. Now.

Wrenching herself from him, Emily gasped for breath, staring into his dark brown eyes as he watched her in confusion.

"Emily," he spoke in a struggled voice. "What's wrong? I'm sorry if I—"

"Please do not apologize." Emily turned her back to him, sitting up on her side of the bed, and taking a moment to catch her breath. "You have done nothing wrong."

She heard him collapse back on the bed, steadying his own breathing before

continuing. “What is it, then? Please don’t close me out again, Emily.”

Swallowing hard, she nodded. Emily deserved that caution, for she would have if she didn’t know there was a possibility of such happiness with him on the other side of her confession.

“Before this can go any further, before we can finish the conversation from yesterday, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Emily stared at the wall of their room at the inn. She had to remember the reality of where they were in order to get the words out. She could not dwell on the fantasy of being in his arms just yet. For there was still the chance she might never feel such things ever again.

“Then tell me,” he urged gently, placing his hand on her back.

“Do not touch me.” She jerked away from him, then instantly regretted it. “You may despise me once you know the truth.”

“Despise you?” The mattress moved behind her, and he appeared at her side on the bed.

Emily rushed to her feet. “Just give me a moment, and I will explain everything.”

He nodded patiently as Emily took to pacing before him. She pressed her lips together while wringing her hands, searching deep within herself for the words.

“I want you to know that I never intended to deceive you, for there was a great length of time I did not know any of this myself. The truth was not revealed to me until recently, after we were already married. And because of that, I’m terrified of how it will change things.”

Alex reached out, offering her his hand, and Emily was slow to take it. “Please do not fret so,” he said, his brows furrowed in concern. “Whatever it is, I will do my best to help you, I promise.”

Oh, how she wanted to believe him, but she still did not know what their future would bring. Still, she couldn’t keep from taking his hand, and again sat beside him on the bed.

“What you know of my personal history is partially true. After birth, I was taken to Mrs. Euphemia’s Boarding School for Underprivileged Ladies. I never knew my parents, but my portion was always paid in full, and I presumed I would never meet them because I was not wanted.”

Alex squeezed her hand, as if he knew how much that had pained her over the years. “I remember you told me as much before.”

“That meant I could be the child of some commoner who could not afford a child and had been turned over to the parish. Or even a woman who had died in birth whose husband could not bear to bring up the child alone.”

He nodded. “Yes, these are all things I had considered, as well.”

“But it could also mean I am a bastard child, born out of wedlock and hidden away. Someone society would despise more than the prior options.”

Emily’s chin quivered as the stark realization filled his eyes; clearly something he had not considered. She couldn’t blame him, but still, it hurt. Which meant her chances were greater to lose him.

She loosened her grip on his hand, but he still did not release her.

“I learned that not only is that the case, but I know the family, if you can imagine.”

Alex blinked. “The duke and duchess?”

Emily took a deep breath and nodded. “The dowager duchess, to be precise. She was my mother, and my father was a nobleman who was not her husband. I was born in secrecy and sent away. No one knows of my existence as her daughter, nor of my relation to the duke as his half-sister.”

“Good God,” Alex exclaimed, leaning one hand back on the bed.

He still did not release her other hand.

“I had noticed certain similarities between the two of you, but such a notion never crossed my mind.”

Emily nodded. “Of course not.”

“Then the day the dowager died?”

“Yes, I asked her for the truth, and she confessed it all. I still do not know my father, only that he has already passed on.”

Alex leaned back on the headboard of their bed, casually brushing his thumb over the back of her hand. Emily waited in anticipation as he processed all the information.

“And you worried in telling me this?”

Again, Emily swallowed hard, possible words still thick in her throat. “You and I were not always on the good terms we have now. My parentage is not widely known nor should it be, but were it to get out, I knew how it might further damage your

reputation, your family's name, your sister's chances. I did not know how you would respond... and if it would result in you seeking of some way to end the marriage. A marriage neither of us wanted in the first place but have now resolved to save."

"Ahh, I understand now."

All her apprehension and expected doom seemed to pause, for her hand still remained firmly in his grasp. He must know how much she needed even the smallest notion of his support, and he refused to take it away, even with this her devastating confession. She waited on bated breath, watching the muscle work in his jaw, wondering what was happening behind those dark eyes .

Wondering whether or not she had kissed him for the last time.

Alex leaned forward, looking down at their intertwined fingers. "Thank you for telling me, Emily. I realize this must have weighed heavily on you for some time, for those are reasonable concerns."

Emily pressed her lips together, throat running dry.

"I think you are right, that perhaps the conversation from yesterday might need to wait."

Her stomach sank, understanding what he was saying. He no longer met her gaze, and his voice was full of obvious concern.

"We should return to London as decided, and we can take some time to think on the situation, to consider everything fully."

She nodded in response, pulling her hand from his grasp. She didn't want to take comfort in his touch if he had no more to offer. Instead, she silently moved from the

bed to ready for the long trip ahead.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The whole day and a half of traveling by carriage should have been easy for Alex. It wasn't difficult by any means, as they nearly mastered the art of travel by carriage from all their trips and change of plans. And after spending so much time together, he and his wife should have had an abundance to discuss, or at least felt at ease with each other. But instead, the small, shared space felt heavy now. He had tried to be reassuring for her sake, though his internal worries were eating him alive.

She was right to be concerned about her revelation, but now he had even more weighing on him. Any hopes he had for his sister might slip right out of his grasp should the word of his wife's parentage get out. He needed to fight for any chance to speak with Mr. Grisham, to secure a good match for his sister once and for all.

But almost more than that, he wanted his wife steady and happy again. They were so close to finding some semblance of stability in their marriage, so close to reaching the goal of actually being a husband and wife, but for this one last, great challenge that he could not have anticipated. And he wanted to help her overcome it, prove that he was truly invested in this marriage, dedicated to her.

It was raining when they returned to London, which was just his luck. He needed to be out making social calls, but the weather was determined to defeat him.

"I will change clothes and go to visit the duke and duchess," Emily said the moment they crossed into the front foyer.

"Are you certain?" Alex asked. "In the rain?"

But before she could insist, Radcliff stepped forward. “I’m afraid the Duke and Duchess of Norland are not at home.”

Alex turned. “What?”

“They went home to Wynnwood Park, and I believe will return by the end of the week. They stopped by to ask when you might return before they left.”

Of course they did. Just when they might be needed the most, they disappeared.

“And a good deal of post has arrived in your absence,” the butler went on, “but one in particular is the dinner party invitation hosted by Lady Hartfield. The servant who delivered it said she was adamant about your attendance. And the duke and duchess said they would be present as well.”

Alex winced as he accepted the letter. In loopy whimsical handwriting, the noblewoman had requested their company, and almost demanded a confirmation.

“When is it?” Emily asked, leaning over his arm.

“On Friday,” he said with a sigh. “I’m certain Lady Hartfield only wants to impose her demands since she is the one who discovered us and make us attend to judge how we fare.”

Emily looked up at him, no doubt wondering the same question bounding around in his head. And how did they fare?

“Very well. We will make ready for Friday, then.” She curtsied and took her leave, heading for the stairs.

“Emily,” Alex said, still feeling unsettled with where they stood. “I only want to

remind you of what I said before. You need not go if you do not wish to.”

She paused on her step, shaking her head. “It will be no great trouble.”

Then she disappeared the rest of the way, leaving Alex alone in the entryway, hoping and praying that she was right.

When Alex woke the next morning, he had a specific goal in mind. He knew Mr. Grisham to be a frequent visitor of the gentleman’s club, White’s. Alex did not frequent any club, as it was not an atmosphere or company he much enjoyed, especially after his last run-in with an abundance of alcohol. But he would have to go today.

However, all Alex’s plans changed when he realized he was not alone in his bed. In fact, Alex held his breath, refusing to move when he realized Emily was tucked under his blanket, snuggled close to his arm and fast asleep beside him.

Wracking his thoughts, Alex tried to remember the night before. They had both been exhausted from their travels and had taken meals in their rooms. Alex specifically remembered dousing his candle before the sun had fully set as drowsiness had come over him. He had no memory since he closed his eyes of anything he had said or done, let alone if anyone had addressed him.

Instead of fretting over it, Alex relaxed against his pillow and took in the view. She had told him she would never use that door that separated their rooms. What had brought her to him now? Had she been frightened by some storm? Merely missed his company? It did not matter, for he would always welcome his wife to his bed whenever she wished. Her eyes calmed in sleep, her parted lips taking even breaths, her simple beauty seeping in and wrapping a firm hold around his heart.

Now more than ever, he needed to find a solution that would make Emily his wife for

good. No more tumultuous setbacks, no more societal interference.

The clock struck the hour, and her eyes burst open. She met his gaze, her eyes growing wide.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Alex,” she said in a rush, pulling the blanket up to her neck.

“What have you to apologize for?” he asked in a gentle chuckle.

“I... I... I have to go.” She immediately tore from the bed, reaching for her robe draped over his chair.

“Wait!” Alex nearly threw himself across the bed to catch her hand, and she looked back at him, a sliver of sunlight cutting across her face from the window. With brows furrowed and lip caught in her teeth, she looked terrified.

“I’m not angry with you, only curious how you ended up in my bed.”

She took a deep breath before responding, “I think... I must have grown accustomed to sleeping by your side. While you were sick, and all our shared beds in Brighton and Bath...” Her voice trailed off, and his heart burned with the knowledge that she had finally grown comfortable with him.

“Never apologize for that, Emily.”

But the look in her eyes still bore his same concerns, the final obstacle that stood between them, and he understood her desire to flee.

He released her hand, for the only way they could be together was if he found a way to resolve their distance for good.

She disappeared into her room, and Alex sighed, collapsing on his bed. Then he rang for his valet to help him dress. He had work to do.

He was nearly ready for a visit to White's, except that he couldn't find his gloves. Somewhere along his travels, between Markham Estate and Brighton and Bath, it seemed he must have lost his good pair of gloves. It wasn't his valet's fault, for the way things had been hurried along at times, but Alex could not go present himself at White's without a decent set of gloves. It seemed such a little thing at this point, but he didn't want Mr. Grisham to find a single point of fault with him, so instead of setting out for the gentleman's club, he set out for Bond Street to buy himself a new pair.

Walking the distance would do him good, to clear his head and prepare him for the goal ahead. But the more he walked, the more he thought on the ridiculousness of his situation. His ultimate goal was noble, to secure a decent match for his sister. But the lengths he'd gone to for a secure reputation, to reestablish some semblance of honor to his family name after his father's death, what was the point of it all? To have someone in power pat him on the head and stroke his pride? He didn't need the approval of those in society, only those he cared about. Which, at this point, was a list of very few people. He didn't want false rumors spread about himself, but even then, Alex knew that he was not the person his father was, and his family knew that, which he was coming to realize was all that mattered.

Once the gloves were purchased and a delivery arranged for the following day, Alex made the trek back down the sunny street. But as he passed by the Duke of Norland's townhome on Grosvenor Square, it appeared they had returned. Two footmen were removing luggage from their traveling coach, and though Alex did not want to bother them if they had just arrived, he could at least confirm they were home.

Alex strode up to the townhouse, knocked on the door and waited. Their butler let him in and led him to the study, where Norland was seated at his desk with very tired

eyes.

“Good day, Your Grace,” Alex greeted him with a light bow .

“Welcome. What an unexpected surprise. I heard you were unwell?” the duke asked, extending his hand across the desk for him to sit.

Emily must have written to them. “I am much recovered, thanks to my wife.” Alex knew his chances of surviving would have been sparse without her.

“I am glad to hear it. What brings you in?”

“At first, I was only passing by, and thought to inquire if you had returned from your travels. Emily has been chomping at the bit to see you both, so at least I now know her limits of not to keep her away for too long.”

Norland smiled. “Yes, Isabel said the same thing. They are two peas in a pod, they are.”

“We had received an invitation to Lady Hartfield’s dinner party, and I wasn’t sure if the two of you would be back in time.”

“At the moment, I am uncertain. The duchess is under the weather, so I will not drag her back out into society just yet. I will be sure to send for Emily the moment my wife is recovered.”

Alex nodded. “Understood, I will let Emily know to calm her jealousy for a time.”

“Was there anything else?” Norland asked, and Alex pressed his lips together. It did not seem the time or place, but perhaps it would be his only opportunity.

“There was one thing, though I’m not certain if it should wait until Emily can be present as well.” He paused, swallowing his apprehension. “She told me the truth about her parentage, and how that connects to you.”

Norland blinked his tired eyes. “She did? The whole of it?”

Alex nodded.

The duke sat back in his chair with a sigh. “Please excuse my shock, only I did not expect... Emily had led me to believe she wanted some distance between the two of you.”

Ah yes, the notion of living separately. “I think we’ve overcome most of that. We did not have the smoothest start of things as you might have guessed, but I’m hopeful we’ll get to the point where that will be behind us and can focus on progressing together instead.”

“Do you mean...” the duke paused, shaking his head as if to clear the collecting cobwebs. “Are you saying that you care for each other?”

Looking down with a deep sigh, Alex confessed, “I cannot speak for her, but at least on my part, I care for her very much. Maddeningly, in fact.”

Norland began to laugh, but the sound was stifled in a way, making Alex look up. The duke had covered his mouth with his hand, only now there was a hard sheen in his blue eyes. Eyes that matched Emily’s.

The Duke of Norland was crying.

“You will forgive me,” he said, reaching for his handkerchief in his pocket. “I suppose I am weary from travel and concern for my wife, but that is not something I

was expecting to hear.” Alex remained silent as he wiped the tears from his face. “I have worried over Emily for many years, even in retrospect. And I agonized over insisting she marry you, questioning over and over again if I had done the right thing.” The duke lifted his glossy eyes to Alex. “It was my greatest wish that Emily could somehow find a way to be happy with you, and you have given me the greatest gift of relief.”

“You’re welcome, I suppose,” Alex said, humbled and grateful right along with him. “Only she still seems overwhelmingly concerned that the truth of her parentage will get out, and how that will possibly ruin everything. My family, your family. ”

The duke nodded. “She mentioned as much to me as well.”

“I think she also believed that I would be rid of her due to the impending scandal, but I would never do such a thing. My only concern is finding a match for my sister, and beyond that, I have no concerns for myself. I only want to ensure that Emily is happy, regardless of the outcome.”

“That is a great relief to hear,” Norland said. “Tell me what I can do to assist.”

Alex shrugged. “I hadn’t thought of seeking your help, but are you acquainted with Mr. William Grisham? It’s his son that my sister is fond of, but I don’t think his father will allow the match, seeing that he had a falling out with my father before the man died.” Alex sighed. “I’ve been trying for months to get on the man’s good side, but the last I saw of him was the night of... the night I first met Emily.”

“Good heavens.” The duke actually chuckled. “Well, we are not good friends, but I believe I was once introduced to the young Mr. Grisham. And though I do not seek to use my title and connections for influence beyond their formal use, when it comes to the heart of a young woman like your sister, I think I can make an exception.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Emily looked down at the teacup in her hand, the dark liquid swirling with the white as she mixed the splash of milk. It settled into a warm brown color that normally cheered her to the core, for Emily loved few things more than a good spot of tea. But even the satisfaction of a perfect cup did nothing to lift her mood. Today it was nothing more than the color of disappointment.

She had never felt more alone than she had in the last few days. With Alex constantly gone on business, she made certain not to let herself seek out the comfort of sleeping by his side. His absence since her confession was a clear message of his intentions, which had been a difficult truth to swallow. She had worried she would fall in love with the man, and so she did. She was concerned he would want nothing to do with her once he learned of her past, and he was proving that to be true as well.

So she sought out the company of her friends instead. They had not had time to visit in many weeks for all her travels, and Emily wanted to enjoy time with them while she could. If things continued as they were, it would not be long before Alex told her she was right. That the idea of living separate lives was the best option for the foreseeable future. But she would not return to Markham Estate, for that would only remind her of him. She would return to Wynnwood Park, just as she had originally planned. Only as soon as she could talk to the duke and duchess.

Emily shook her head and turned to listen earnestly as Georgiana informed them about the terrible daughters of her employer. They had agreed to meet at Mrs. Pembroke's home, for she could spare her companion for a short time while her children were in town, and she did not often occupy her back parlor. The

conversation with her friends flowed easily, and Emily could not have been more grateful for their consistency.

“Although Mrs. Pembroke has unfortunately taken ill with a cold,” Georgiana explained, “which means her daughters will not leave town just yet. I know they would wish to leave just as much as I wish they would. But hopefully she will recover in time for the ball.”

“Yes, indeed,” Emily mumbled. She did not like to hear her friend struggle, but it made her grateful that her own in-laws were so wonderful. At least for the time being. “Daphne, how fare the hellions?”

Daphne hemmed and hawed for a moment. “I did not say anything, for I did not want you to worry...”

Emily froze. “What’s happened? Is one of them ill, as well?” Had it been a season of illness all around?

“No, not at all. They’re as rambunctious as you can imagine.” Daphne flushed, giving a forced smile. “But their mother, Mrs. Partridge, has not taken a liking to me. She trusted me with her children, just not with her husband. She had even accused me of attempting to seduce him, which could not be further from the truth.”

“How dare she!” Georgiana stood and raised her voice, overreacting as she tended to do when upset. “Tell me where they live, and I’ll give her a piece of my mind to treat my friend so despicably.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Daphne said, pulling Georgiana back down. “Though that is not even the worst bit.”

“What could be worse?” Emily asked incredulously.

Daphne bit her lip. “She confronted me about my... standing, and I had to tell her the truth. She dismissed me that moment, saying she would not reveal my secret, but she could not give me a letter of recommendation.”

Emily’s heart sank. She knew the entirety of Daphne’s backstory, the difficulties she had faced, and what a cost it was to lose a letter of recommendation for a working girl.

“Oh, Daph, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Georgiana had no words, but her face was red with rage, nearly the same color as her hair.

“Don’t worry on it,” Daphne shook her head. “Something will come up. Maybe Mrs. Pembroke can take me on as a maid, even if it is just temporarily.”

“I will ask her the moment she wakes from her rest,” Georgiana said through gritted teeth, and Emily placed a hand over hers to calm her friend.

“We will find you something. We must.” Emily gave an emphatic nod. Surely there was someone in her vast circle of connections that would take on a sweet girl like Daphne, that would still trust Emily’s opinion. At least for now.

“Let’s speak of other things instead,” Daphne begged to change the subject. “Why don’t you tell us about your trip?”

“You mean trips?” Emily sighed. How did one know where to start? “It was all quite the ordeal.”

But tell them she did. These girls knew every detail of Emily’s life, so she filled in the gaps about the difficult start to her marriage, the compromise with Morgana, the

country estate that made Alex sick, the retreat to Brighton, the stop to Bath, and every possibly relevant moment in between. The sun was nearly going down by the time she was done.

“Good gracious. You have had quite the exciting time,” Daphne mused. “And more than just traveling to Timbuktu. Husband on death’s door, meeting his family, run in with the previous favored suitor...”

“And how many near kisses with the recovered husband?” Georgiana elbowed her.

“I almost regret telling you now,” Emily said with a reluctant smile.

“But was the real kiss worth it?” Daphne asked, leaning forward on her hands.

Emily bit her lip. “It was, but only because I’m glad there actually was a real one, instead of only the one on the balcony. If there won’t ever be any others, then—”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t there be any others?” Georgiana insisted. “Wouldn’t such a kiss signify your relationship has grown and progressed now?”

“Not exactly. The kiss came just before the confession, and there’s no denying that Alex is avoiding me now. Out of the house at all hours, and he hasn’t dined with me since we returned. It’s obvious. We can’t avoid the one issue forever, which is that we shouldn’t be together in the long run.”

“But I don’t understand. Why?” Daphne asked in sheer confusion.

Emily shook her head. “I told him long ago that we ought to live separately, but he thought that should be the last resort. So we tried his way. To save the marriage, to go to the country, which was a disaster. Going to Brighton and to Bath were only detours, but it was along the way we had to face the truth.” She felt tears welling in

her eyes, but she swallowed them back. “I don’t want to hurt him or his family, and he can’t seem to look me in the eye anymore now that he knows everything. I think he’s beginning to see wisdom in my suggestion, so I will likely need to go live at Wynnwood Park. For good.”

“Over my dead body,” Georgiana said, nearly slamming her teacup on the coffee table.

Emily laughed at the expression in spite of herself. “You know I would come back to visit you two, of course I would. But if you were to be seen with me—”

Daphne shook her head. “Association with you would not hurt our reputations in the least, for we have none to worry for. Besides, I don’t see the situation like that at all. When you told him the truth of it, did he actually say he wanted to separate?”

Emily thought back to that dreadful moment in Bath, just before she released his hand. “He said we needed time to consider everything.”

“Well, you’ve given him more than enough time to consider. Now you need to make the final decision together. Confront him with your final truth, that you love him and want to stay with him. Because you do, don’t you?”

That was an even more terrifying truth. Emily pursed her lips together and could not say the words aloud, but she nodded. She could admit such things to her friends, at least.

“Then he needs to know. You have no control of your origins, therefore you cannot be blamed. If he abandons you over such things, then he does not deserve your heart.”

Emily sighed. But she wanted him to, so desperately. “That is the terrifying part, being completely open and vulnerable with one person. Knowing there will be no

way out either way.”

“Make him do the same thing. You must be on equal ground if you are to give up on your dream entirely.”

When her friend’s words started making sense, Emily smirked. “When did you become so wise?”

“I always have been, you only haven’t been around to see it lately.”

They all shared a laugh, and Emily hugged them both around the neck. She adored these women and would do all she could to protect them. Not only that, but she had to apply their wisdom when she knew they were right.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Alex sat in the billiard room at White's, staring down the grandfather clock on the wall and listening to the general buzz around the room. A group of gentlemen had gathered to drink whiskey, port, or any other sort of alcoholic beverage while they commiserated about troubles with the women in their lives, but Alex participated in none of it. Firstly, that he had nothing to complain about the women in his life, and secondly, he'd much rather have a lovely lemonade to drink instead. It wouldn't seem completely out of place, considering how blasted hot it was in early July. It was just about time for Parliament to conclude, when all the titled and wealthy would retreat to the cooler weather of the countryside, but not yet.

So it was here Alex would remain until he could finally meet with Mr. Grisham. The man had been avoiding Alex it seemed, so it required the duke arranging the meeting. Norland had even agreed to accompany them to discuss the matter, which had been long awaited from months before. But it was now five to the hour, and neither of them had arrived yet. The other gentlemen in the room had invited him to join their round of billiards, but Alex declined, wanting to focus on the task at hand. This was not a conversation that could start with distractions.

The door opened to the billiard room, and Alex held his breath, hoping and dreading who might be entering, but instead of Mr. Grisham or even the duke, Alex's heart sank.

It was Mr. Evans.

Why the devil was this man everywhere Alex did not want him to be?

“Oh, Mr. Westcott. Good afternoon.”

Alex watched with his mouth hanging open as the gentleman closed the door behind him and scurried over to the chair opposite Alex, sitting stiffly and offering an awkward smile.

“Uh... how do you do, Mr. Evans?” Alex asked when he finally gathered his wits. He didn’t want to rudely dismiss the man, even though it probably would have felt justified after their last few interactions, but more than that, this was just the sort of distraction that Alex did not want.

“I’m quite all right, thank you,” Mr. Evans replied, though Alex had a hard time believing him. The man could not stop fidgeting in his seat, or repeatedly folding and unfolding his hands. Something was definitely not all right.

“And what brings you back to London?” Alex watched him cautiously.

“Oh, I’m sure you’re surprised to see me, aren’t you? Considering we just crossed paths in Bath, of course.” The man let out an unsteady laugh, which kept Alex even more on edge. “It’s actually a lucky thing that I found you here, because I have something I wanted to say to you.”

Alex blinked. “To me?”

Mr. Evans nodded, and the sweat accumulating on his brow in the warm room only accentuated his youthfulness. Alex was certain he was at least five years the man’s senior, which meant Mr. Evans certainly would have been a better suitor for Emily in all aspects. Closer in age could mean they might have more shared interests, but perhaps that was the extent of their compatibility. For with how much Alex had learned about his wife over the last few months, he was not certain that Mr. Evans could handle the woman that Emily was. Her strong personality and forthright

conversation, not to mention the recently revealed nature of her birth, it would certainly put this man in a conniption. Alex felt confident that Emily had married the right man, but now he just needed to make sure nothing would ever take them apart.

“I was in Bath, as you may recall,” Mr. Evans finally spoke again. “And after briefly meeting with you and your wife on the street, there seemed to be certain whispers developing.”

Whispers were never good, no matter what corner of the country they developed in. “And what did these whispers entail?”

Mr. Evans tugged on his cravat, which had been haphazardly tied at best. “For some reason, it has unfortunately been suggested that... your wife and I had recently been entangled in an affair.”

Alex let the words settle over him as he ground his jaw. “I see.” The anger in his chest had quickly started roiling. There was something about this man that always put him in the worst of moods, and which also tended to make him see red with rage. But Alex had made a determination long ago to not become the sort of man his father was, even though that seemed to be the very last thought when presented with such a notion about his wife. Still, he tried to remain civil as he asked, “And can you confirm there is no foundation for such treacherous whispers?”

“Oh certainly, Mr. Westcott.” The fool nearly fell out of his chair. “I can assure you, though I was fond of Miss Clay, I would never do something so dishonorable as to seek out a married woman. Nor have I dared to touch her the way you have.”

Such a declaration made Alex burst out in laughter, which eased his building tension. Still Mr. Evans went on about that balcony kiss, the one that made Alex the luckiest man alive in securing just the right woman for him.

“I understand. Thank you for making it clear before the rumors surge here in London.” Alex glanced at the grandfather clock. Three minutes before the hour. Still his guests had not come. “Was there something more you wished to discuss?”

“Um, yes, actually. Though you may think me too eager in my approach. I am concerned about keeping Miss Clay, that is, Mrs. Westcott’s reputation void of any scandal, along with my own as well. Is there some way that we might put these rumors to bed before it has a chance to properly grow?”

Alex wanted to laugh again at his choice of words, but he refrained, for at least Mr. Evans’ motive was admirable. “I am certainly willing to help. What did you have in mind?”

“Oh, I couldn’t know. Just some matter of business that we could conduct that would serve as the reason for our interactions the last few months. That would be the excuse given to society in order to protect Mrs. Westcott and myself.”

“I suppose that would be wise. Have you any particular interests that we might align on?”

“Well, I don’t know if you frequent the horse races, but perhaps we could say that we met in Newmarket or Ascot. My father has an exceptional interest in breeding horses, which is the reason for our most recent visit to the country estate, to oversee the birth of his newest foal.”

Alex wanted to give an eye of disdain, for his own father had special interest in horse racing and breeding as well, though nothing had ever come of it. And yet, that seemed to be the answer, the one thing they could connect on that would save the woman he loved.

“And are you in the market to purchase a stud horse, Mr. Evans?”

Chapter Forty

Emily watched in the mirror as her maid placed the final pin in her hair, hopefully securing the curls for the entirety of the evening. She wanted to ensure that nothing went wrong, that the night went as smoothly as possible. She still had not heard news of the Barrington's return, and this dinner party had been restricted to only finer society, so her friends would not be in attendance. Emily presumed she would be on her own, and she did not want to besmirch her former guardian, nor did she want to disappoint her husband. Everything had to be perfect.

She made her way down the staircase, but her breath caught in her chest when she spotted Alex waiting for her in the front foyer. How had she gone for days without seeing her own husband? Her heart constricted, a fierce reminder of her own real feelings, and how conflicted they were. Not just pure love and devotion, but also longing, and fear, and even a touch of anger still lingered. Where had he been? Why did he not confide in her?

But then she remembered Daphne's words. Why had she not confided in him, during this time when they likely needed each other more than ever?

Perhaps after the ball, they could finally clear the air and come to a conclusion one way or another.

Emily finished the walk down the stairwell, swallowing the lump in her throat. When she met him by the door, he took her hand and kissed it gently. "You look lovely tonight." His voice was low and husky, his dark eyes lingering on hers.

The words rang as genuine to Emily's ears, making her heart race. "Thank you." Then she arranged the shawl about her shoulders. "Shall we be off?"

Alex led her out the door to the carriage, and once they were settled in their seats, the carriage lurched forward.

"The duke and duchess have returned," Alex said casually.

Emily turned toward him slowly, as if she'd not heard him correctly. "They have?"

"When I went to Bond Street for some gloves, I saw them unpacking on my way home. I stopped in only to confirm, and Norland said Isabel is under the weather, so they likely won't be present tonight."

"Oh." Dissatisfaction surged in her chest. How she longed for Isabel's gentle camaraderie, for James's brotherly wisdom. She wanted their counsel and direction regarding her own marriage, but how could they? Who would know better than herself how to handle this situation?

Alex reached over and patted her hand. "I told him you would be disappointed, that you were very anxious to see them both. And little Theodore as well. He said they will come to call as soon as she's recovered."

"I see. Thank you for telling me." Emily tried to sit a little straighter, and not focus on his hand claiming hers, but he gave it a little squeeze, drawing her eyes up again.

"And even though they won't be attending, you won't be facing tonight alone," Alex continued. "I know that my name does not carry the same weight as Norland's, but you are my wife now. I will not let anything happen to you."

Emily's heart skipped a beat. "Thank you." Then she let out a sigh, immediately

missing the touch of his hand when he withdrew.

How this man had such power and control over her heart was maddening. She could have kissed him in that moment, for he offered the one thing she'd always sought for, a kind companion. A good husband. Now she only needed a small reassurance that it would stay that way.

But she realized that perhaps she would never have that guarantee. The future could not be foreseen by him or her, and people were always changing. James was a prime example of that. He no longer desired to be known as the Undesirable Duke and fought hard to replace that image with something more. So even if Alex accepted Emily as she was, that was not a promise that all their problems would be solved, that they would never face societal backlash going forward, that they would never disagree again. She would have to confide in him, and trust that he would continue to be the good man she had seen evidence of so many times over. Even if putting her heart on the line was the scariest thing she'd ever faced.

They arrived at Lady Hartfield's home, a short ride that only required a carriage due to the formality of the event. They were immediately surrounded by a crush of other people, waiting in line to greet the hostess and be announced to the party.

"Do you suppose..." Alex whispered close to her ear, but then he pulled back.

"What is it?" Emily asked, immediately recognizing he was withholding something. "Tell me, please."

To her great surprise, her husband looked down at his boots and blushed. "I was thinking, perhaps we ought to inspect Lady Hartfield's balcony for old time's sake, but perhaps not."

Emily gasped, keeping her eyes ahead instead of meeting his very direct gaze. It had

not dawned on her that this was the location they had met that first night, when everything had gone perfectly wrong. And yet, thinking back on it now, her devastation from the events that night seemed so tiny and inconsequential now. Her chance at happiness had not been taken away from her as she had presumed; she had just taken an unexpected path to finding it.

Their turn arrived to greet Lady Hartfield, and Emily's skin started to crawl the moment the older woman's conniving eyes and wry smile fell on them. "Ahh, very good. I was hoping the two of you would be able to attend."

"Thank you so much for the invitation, Lady Hartfield," Alex said, and Emily prided herself in recognizing how false he was.

"I understand you've just returned from traveling the country?" Lady Hartfield asked with one raised eyebrow.

"Yes, rather unexpected at the time, but we are happy to be home again." Alex patted Emily's hand in the crook of his arm.

This action was not missed by Lady Hartfield. "Yes, well... I expect to hear the full account. I will come find you later this evening."

They all bowed and curtsied in parting, but Emily didn't miss the clench in his jaw. "And what makes her think she has any right to know the details of our travels? We're not obligated to tell her a damn thing."

Emily could not keep from grinning. "Indeed."

Together they moved through the corridor and into the ballroom, and though Emily felt for certain the whole room had their eyes fixed on her and her husband, she brushed off the notion. She was merely out of practice in London society, having

been alone with her husband for so long. It was surely just her imagination.

Alex led her to the refreshment table, and said, "Only lemonade for me tonight. I believe punch was my greatest enemy when we were here last, and I intend to keep my wits about me this time." He finished with a wink.

Emily was relieved they could share a laugh together as the guests trickled in. Perhaps the situation was not as dire as she'd led herself to believe.

It wasn't long until a bearded gentleman approached Alex with an extended hand.

"How do you do, Westcott?" the man said with a chipper smile.

"Very well, thank you." Alex then turned. "Have you met my wife, Mrs. Westcott?"

"Married? Oh yes, I had heard, but have not yet had the privilege. How do you do, Mrs. Westcott?"

Alex leaned in to explain, "This is a school friend of mine, Mr. Alfred Seymoure."

"Pleasure to meet you, sir." Emily bobbed in a curtsy.

"How did you two meet?" Mr. Seymoure asked.

Alex chuckled, reaching for Emily's hand. "At a party very much like this one."

"Are you married, Mr. Seymoure?" she asked.

"Yes, very happily. A fine institution. Unfortunately my wife is ill, so she could not make it this evening, but she sent me in search of connections. Our governess has recently gone off and gotten married herself, so I'm in need of a replacement."

“Oh, I know just the person!” Emily could not contain her excitement, though her enthusiasm had drawn the eyes of the crowd surrounding them. “A friend of mine is in search of a governess position, and she’s excellent with children. ”

“Ah, capital. I approve of your wife already, Westcott,” Mr. Seymoure said with a chuckle. “Does she have references?”

Emily cringed. “Unfortunately, she was dismissed very unjustly and refused a letter of recommendation, but I can certainly vouch for her capabilities and character.”

“Yes, of course.” He dug in his jacket pocket and pulled out his calling card. “Do send her my way, and I’ll be happy to hold an interview with her. Meet the children and all that.”

“You are very kind, Mr. Seymoure. I know she will be delighted with the opportunity.”

“Then I suppose I’m off for a celebratory drink. A pleasant evening to the both of you.”

Once they were alone again, Alex leaned closer. “You know, you’re quite charming when you want to be.”

Emily raised one eyebrow. “And I suppose I’m infuriating all the other times?”

Alex’s eyes traced her face, ending lingeringly on her lips. “Only when you want to be.”

They were approached again by someone else calling his name, and Emily could not help commenting, “I believe you are more popular than you originally let on, Mr. Westcott.”

“All thanks to my mother, I assure you,” he whispered back.

An elderly gentleman called for Alex with a woman on his arm. “How do you do, Mr. Grisham? Lovely to see you, Mrs. Grisham,” he greeted them.

Emily stiffened, ready to make the best impression. So here was the man Alex had intended to win over.

“This must be the young woman you had been looking to dance with when last I saw you, Westcott,” the older gentleman commented.

Alex chuckled, and Emily noticed he did not correct him. “May I present my wife, Mrs. Emily Westcott. The Grishams are old friends of my family. ”

“How very lovely to meet you both,” Emily said, dipping in a flawless curtsy.

The woman gave Emily a critical look over before turning back to Alex. “How fares your family, Mr. Westcott? I believe one of your sisters had been previously called on by Baron Frampton before he married?”

“Yes, my sister Edwina returned to Bath with my mother for the time being.”

“Indeed. I believe she must have dodged the proverbial bullet as it were, considering the current gossip about him.”

“About Baron Frampton?” Emily asked. The couple she had met at Mrs. Lamb’s dinner?

Mrs. Grisham ignored Emily entirely, keeping her eyes on Alex. “Rumor has it his wife is said to be with child, but he claims it is not his. Whether from some affair before or after their marriage is unknown, but no one has seen her since the scandal

broke. It is believed he has banished her to the country, and may even seek divorce, the poor girl.”

Emily wanted to sink into the floorboards and disappear. Not only was it truly devastating for the Framptons, who had seemed so very in love, but this very conversation was Emily’s greatest fear. That someone should find out about her own family sins and talk about them as if their lives were created for entertainment’s sake alone, and that Alex might shun her completely.

“How terrible,” Emily whispered.

Again Mrs. Grisham shot Emily a critical eye. “Serves her right for lying to her husband. Though perhaps it should be more common practice to search out a woman’s true upbringing before agreeing to marry, wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Westcott?”

“Agatha,” Mr. Grisham censured his wife.

Emily swallowed, eyes widening as she turned to her husband in horror .

Alex still bore a smile, but his eyes were quizzical. “I’m afraid I don’t follow, Mrs. Grisham.”

“I only mean to say that it is not only the baron’s wife that has come up in recent gossip while you were away. Another affair had also been hinted at. And being the ward of a duke is not enough to protect one’s true identity anymore, I’m afraid.” The woman had intentionally raised her voice to draw the attention of anyone nearby.

Emily froze. No, no, no. This could not be happening. Just when she’d been starting to hope she could have some semblance of a normal life with her husband.

So she stood there, mouth gaping open, unable to say a single word in her own defense. The woman leering back at her was completely right. All Emily's boldness and stubbornness did no good here, for she was utterly deflated.

"And if you don't believe me, you can see what Lady Whetstone has to say about it all." Mrs. Grisham reached into her reticule and pulled out a folded pamphlet that bore the emblem of the infamous gossip columnist.

Unable to stop herself, Emily rudely snatched the pamphlet away and quickly skimmed over the contents, until she saw the name she recognized. Her brother's.

Though it is not only a baron's marriage who is in jeopardy. There is another member of society who might be following suit. A young woman, once under the care of the Undesirable Duke, had recently married a Mr. W. It was all very innocent, though sudden, to be sure, and perhaps now, we can all understand why. Since the hasty nuptials, the new bride has been seen with a Mr. E, not only on the doorstep of her husband's home in London, but also together on the streets of Bath. One would think that, if displeased with the selection of one's husband, then this young bride might take a little more discretion in securing times and places to meet with her lover.

Emily's hand flew to her mouth. How had the situation been so misconstrued? Nothing could be farther from the truth. But she kept reading.

But it is not just her choice in men that is drawing attention. It turns out that this young miss might also have questionable parentage. Born of a noblewoman's affair with another member of the peerage, while the two remained married to their spouses, is the most ghastly of circumstances. The elevation of her blood could not be more secure, but the lack of marital bounds certainly drags any of her legitimacy through the mud. One might even wonder on the authenticity of her marriage to Mr. W. This author would not blame him in the least if he sought more repercussions than the afore-mentioned baron.

Bile rose in Emily's throat. The room had suddenly become entirely too warm and stuffy, the walls of the room closing in around her. She did not feel her husband beside her anymore; she felt entirely abandoned and alone. She could not be here for a moment longer.

Dropping the pamphlet, Emily rushed through the crowd pushing her way into the corridor. But that was not far enough. She passed through the entrance where most people were coming in, and Lady Hartfield called after her, but Emily did not stop. That woman would not champion her in her time of need. She would no doubt exploit every detail about the situation for her own enjoyment and entertainment. Emily had to get away.

The short carriage ride be damned. She would run across all of London if she had to, in order to get away from horrible people like the Grishams.

Any hopes Emily had, any chance Edwina had in her marriage, had all been dashed now that Emily's secret had been outed in the most popular gossip sheet.

She would return to Alex's townhome, pack her belongings, and go to the Barrington's. They would undoubtedly welcome her with open arms, and help her escape to the country.

It was the only thing she could do now.

Chapter Forty-One

“Emily, wait!” Alex shouted after his wife, but she would not be stopped. The paper that fluttered to the floor in her wake caught his eye, and Alex leaned over to pick it up. He had never read a gossip paper before, but he was no stranger to them. He knew his mother loved things just like this, but perhaps she wouldn’t any longer if what it held destroyed her own family.

He skimmed the contents, his anger increasing with every passing second. He could not judge the baron and his wife, for he did not know their details and he did not need to. But he could not allow the damage that would be done to his family, to his wife, unjustly.

And whoever wielded the pen behind Lady Whetstone was a cruel mistress, indeed.

Alex wanted to crush the paper in his hand, but he inhaled deeply before turning to face the Grishams again.

“I am sorry you had to find out the truth like this, my dear,” Mrs. Grisham spoke in false sympathy. “Instead of enduring the rest of the night on her arm.”

“It sounds as if you’re inferring something, Mrs. Grisham, and if so, I would much prefer that you speak clearly,” Alex spoke through gritted teeth.

“There is no need to infer, Mr. Westcott, for the truth of the matter is printed right there in your hand.” She motioned toward the gossip sheet he held.

“This?” Alex held it up with barely held rage. “Mrs. Grisham, it is unfortunate to learn that you take gossip columns as solid truth, when they are obviously only partially perceived notions, published on a whim to entertain the weak-minded.”

Mrs. Grisham gasped. “You dare to be so rude to a family friend? Return my things to me at once. You let your woman mistreat the belongings of others without a care in the world.”

“And yet, you run your tongue without a care about whom you hurt or the damage you do.” Alex retorted, holding it out for her.

“I am not responsible for the damage that someone else reveals,” Mrs. Grisham spat, reaching for the pamphlet, but Alex could not help snatching it from her reach.

He would be unable to help his sister now. The connection was about to be lost forever because he could not be saddled with this villain of a woman as an in-law.

“You cannot claim to care about family connections, Mrs. Grisham, and then expect me to remain silent while you intentionally malign my wife.”

“She is the one who has done you wrong! I have protected you!” The woman was nearly shouting now.

Alex shook his head, taking a step toward the side table that held a candle. “Allow me to explain the real truth. Mrs. Westcott is not having an affair. We met with Mr. Evans on various occasions, which resulted in my selling him a stud horse for his family’s breeding plans. So you can see where Lady Whetstone is in the wrong on that count. Shall I continue? ”

Thankfully, Mrs. Grisham had no response, and her husband remained silent as well.

“As for my wife’s parentage, considering she was brought up in a boarding school with very little official documentation to the facts, perhaps the world will never know the truth of it, and anything this Lady Whetstone spouts can be counted as speculation. But that is none of your business or anyone else’s. My wife may very well be an illegitimate child, castoff and unwanted, whose parents may already be dead. But would you place shame on a woman who had no say in how she was brought into this world?” Alex turned his glare from Mrs. Grisham to the candle, where he held the pamphlet above it. “That you take joy in belittling and degrading people, both behind their backs and to their face, says more ill of you than it does of her.”

When the pamphlet finally caught a flame, Alex let it fall to the ground and shrivel on the carpet while Mrs. Grisham protested.

“You’re a terrible man to speak to me so! You are no different from your father.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “On the contrary. Of the two of us, it seems you are the one who is behaving similar to my father. I was ashamed of him, and now it seems fair that I am equally ashamed of you.”

“What goes on here, Mr. Westcott?” Lady Hartfield approached, standing between Alex and the Grishams. “Your wife rushed out the door, causing a fuss. And it appears now you are disturbing my guests.”

“Mr. Westcott is unable to accept the truth about his lowly-born wife, and has retaliated against me rather cruelly, my dear,” Mrs. Grisham pouted, determined to make herself the victim.

Alex shook his head. “I am taking my leave, Lady Hartfield, but one might question the quality of your friendships if you allow such a venomous viper into your midst.”

The accusation caused a stir amongst the nearby guests eavesdropping, and Lady Hartfield lifted her chin. “I will not support such flagrant display of disrespect in my own home, Mr. Westcott,” the elderly woman said with indignation in her eyes. “And you can be certain you will never receive such an invitation ever again.”

“Thank God,” Alex said through gritted teeth, then he turned toward the exit. He was sorry to lose this chance for his sister with the Grishams, but they would figure out something else, find someone else that would be a better match. And he would not miss the connection to Lady Hartfield, though he would have to apologize to his mother.

Once on the crowded street again, he had the carriage summoned, worried that he did not see Emily anywhere. He could only imagine where she had gone, but if she wasn’t at home, he would have to check the Barrington’s. He only prayed that he wasn’t too late.

The evening had slowly faded into the darkness of night, and he traveled in agitated silence with the light of streetlamps passing by every so often, as if counting the townhomes before finally reaching his own.

When the carriage stopped, he didn’t wait for the door to be opened. He rushed out, through the front door, and up the stairs to Emily’s bedroom.

Of course, the door would be locked.

Alex huffed a few heavy breaths before banging lightly on the door. “Emily? Please tell me you’re in there.”

He listened as three painful heartbeats went by. Then she graciously responded. “Go away, Alex.”

But her voice held the same agony he felt. He could tell she was hurt and scared. And he needed to fix it.

“Please let me in, Emily. ”

This time, she did not respond.

Suddenly, it was not anger that surged in Alex’s chest; it was concern for his wife. He had to get to her. Desperately.

So instead he went through his own bedchambers and faced the door that Emily swore she would never use.

Only she did. On multiple occasions. So he felt no guilt in using it himself this once.

And when he pulled the door open, he found Emily standing at the foot of her bed, her traveling trunk open and full of clothes. When she turned to face him, the sight broke his heart.

The pins in her hair had been removed, allowing the long blonde locks to collect around her shoulders. The ballgown had been removed, leaving her in her shift and petticoats, covered with a robe, but there was a traveling dress that had been prepared and laid across the bed. Her eyes narrowed at him, and he did not miss the streaks of tears on her cheeks.

“Would you care to explain yourself?” he asked through his teeth.

It seemed her jaw was also clenched as she tossed more clothes in her trunk. “My apologies if my reaction to having my life ruined disturbed your social standing.”

“What are you... you mean the ballroom? I don’t give a damn about that.” He dared

to step forward, motioning to her trunk and her bed. “I want to know what the hell is all this!”

Her shoulders sank, and Alex recognized the sign of defeat. He hadn’t seen Emily openly cry since the night of their wedding and seeing her weaken so might actually kill him. Her blue eyes had spilled over, and now tears were streaming down her cheeks. He pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket and held it out to her, which she took, but seemed unable to wipe her tears away, so the white fabric remained fisted in her grasp. She was also unable to release the teeth biting her lip, as if the one final dam keeping the words in .

“I’m leaving. I told you before this would never work. I told you that I would ruin everything. Now your family reputation will never recover, because of me. Your chances of winning over the Grishams have been destroyed, because of me. And likely your mother and sister will never forgive me, never want to see me again.” Her voice went higher into an octave where she had little control. “So I will go to Wynnwood Park, just like I planned. And we can live the rest of our lives as best we can apart.”

Alex shook his head. “No. I refuse to accept that is our only solution.”

“Just go, Alex! Please, let me be.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Where would I go? You are my wife. My place is with you.”

Emily marched passed him, moving toward their connecting door. But he would not let her retreat again.

She had her hand on the handle, but before she could escape, he slammed the door shut, resting his arms on either side of her.

“Damn it, Emily. Be reasonable for once. We cannot keep doing this.” His heart pounded inside his chest, the smell of her jasmine perfume now intoxicating as he stood so close to her. “Do not shut me out again. The problem will not be solved by avoiding each other. Talk to me, please.”

“We are done, Alex. That way we won’t hurt each other anymore.”

“I don’t care what society says or thinks. You will only hurt me by leaving.” Alex leaned down closer to her face, nearly seething, desperate for her to understand. “And I have done my damndest not to hurt you.”

Her eyes were dancing hot like a blue flame. “Didn’t you say you would never fall in love with me? That hurt me, Alex. That is why I have to leave. I cannot live married to a man who does not love me. That is why— ”

Alex silenced her with a kiss, hand capturing her at the back of her neck. She melted under his scathing pressure, and in the next moment, she returned his every gesture. There was no gentle ease or building crescendo. The both of them snapped from barely restrained tension for far too long. Too many near incidents, too many mornings waking with her by his side, but still not close enough.

Emily reached her arm around him, pulling him closer and losing her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck. Alex tightened his grip around her waist, needing to eliminate any amount of space that separated them. As he ravaged her mouth, his other hand traveled from her neck and down her arm, then the length of her torso, and he hoped she understood the reality of what she was facing. A man wildly and hopelessly in love with her.

He wrenched his face away, unable to go a moment longer without confirming the truth.

“I told you I regretted those words, didn’t I?” he breathed. “I never should have said them, because the only thing I care about is you.”

Her hardened breaths escaped through parted lips, pink from his attentions. Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against hers. “Can we put down our armor, please? No more swords and shields, no more war of words, just honesty. Please.”

She did not answer, she did not move. She closed her mouth and took steady breaths through her nose, but she did not say anything. Her stubbornness had never left her, but her brow eased, which gave him leave to reach up and let his fingers caress the side of her face. Her devastating blue eyes lifted to his, searching in desperation.

“You truly are the most infuriating woman I have ever met,” he said in a sigh, watching as the reaction trickled across her face. “And I love you, Emily. ”

Her lips parted in a gasp.

“I know our beginning was not everything you hoped it would be, and we took a long road getting here, but I don’t want to live separate lives. All I want is you.”

With every word he spoke, she seemed to soften in his arms, and the corners of her lips curved into a siren’s smile. “Truly?”

Alex nodded. “I know the prospect of us seemed impossible from the beginning, wasn’t it? The worst possible match we could imagine. But I cannot give you up now. We will figure everything out together, and I promise that I will do all I can to make you happy for the rest of my life.”

She placed her palm on the side of his face. “Do you really mean it, Alex?”

“I do. You might think that you don’t belong anywhere, but I will tell you that you belong with me. You will never have to wonder such things again because you are my wife.”

His arm tightened around her waist, pressing her firmly against the door.

“You are mine,” he whispered fiercely, and he burned with satisfaction when she nodded. He pulled her hand up and placed it flat on his chest. “And I am yours. This heart is utterly and completely yours.”

When his mouth sought hers again, Alex no longer held the concerns he’d harbored for so long. His lips sealed over hers in slow, languid kisses that a woman like his wife deserved. She ought to be adored and worshiped the rest of her life after all the doubt and mistreatment she’d suffered, albeit some of which was by his hand. But he would be making it up to her forever, his solemn vow as her husband.

He conquered her mouth over and over again, slanting for further access, which she readily gave. When he deepened the kiss, she whimpered in a way that put him in mind of the couple they discovered on the beach. He found his hands fisted in the fabric of her robe, which he pulled from her arms, and instinctively helped her shed it to the floor. She pressed her hands against his chest, and he pulled back for breath, but only long enough for his lips to travel down the curve of her neck. No secrets lingered between them, and no distance need ever separate them again.

“All of me is yours, Alex,” Emily said breathlessly. She reached blindly behind her to find the handle of the door, the one she said she would never use, then tugged on his cravat to pull him in.

Instantly she returned to his embrace, and his mouth found hers again, repeatedly, craving and desperate. They stumbled back toward his bed, until they both descended into a euphoria, a love, that they had both been longing for their entire lives.

Chapter Forty-Two

Emily could not look in a mirror, nor would she be able to look any servant in the eye. She could only imagine her appearance—hair tousled, body covered in love bites, and the entire bedroom askew. She never would have thought waking in such a scenario would ever be permissible, but she found she had little to complain for. The painful anticipation that had accompanied her for weeks was gone, and in its place, she woke in her husband's bed with him sleeping peacefully beside her. And she could not have been happier with the exchange.

She turned over to face the man beside her, her heart fluttering at the sight of him. She had never known such love that Alex showed her, and he promised she would have it for the rest of her life. She lamented all her bitterness at the start of her marriage now, because she didn't know then that the man who had accidentally kissed her on a balcony would someday become the everything she had ever wanted. He was a dream come true for her romantic childhood desires.

She reached out, gently brushing his locks of dark hair away from his face so she could continue admiring him, the way she knew he had done to her for many of their mornings leading up to that day.

"You can't keep pawing at me like that unless you're asking for more," he mumbled with closed eyes.

Emily laughed. "I require a hearty breakfast, sir. We'll need to see to that immediately."

His arm blindly snaked around her waist, pulling her flush against him. “And what shall we eat?” he growled with a grin.

“Contain yourself!” she said, softly swatting at his arm. “I must ring for the maid, so you must be somewhat decent.”

He released her with a huff, and when he did not move from his spot, Emily continued pulling back the hair from his face.

“Are you certain everything will be all right?” she asked. “With your family? With mine?”

Alex opened his eyes, fully soft and affectionate. “What still worries you?”

“The truth of my origin is out now. There is no bringing it back, so the damage is done. Your family will suffer. You will suffer.”

“Will you suffer?” he returned gently, brushing his knuckles against her cheek and making her shiver.

“I will bear it as I always have.”

“Only now you will not do so alone. You have a husband who will protect you from those vipers, Mrs. Grisham and Lady Hartfield.”

Emily’s eyes went wide. “Oh no, what did you do?”

Alex shrugged. “I merely explained that the Lady Whetstone they subscribe to is misleading and without evidence to actual fact, and that they were fools to follow such nonsense.”

“Alex, you didn’t!” Emily gasped, her hands rushing to her mouth. “But what about your sister?”

“My family is no stranger to being on the opposite side of popularity, so this will be nothing new to them. But if the young Mr. Grisham is anything like his mother, then Edwina will be much better off with someone else. Her heart might be broken for a time, but he is not the only young man in all the kingdom. We will help find her a good match, and I think both you and I can tell her a little something about overcoming broken hearts.”

Emily sighed, resting her head against her husband’s bare arm. What a good man he was and with such clarity to help assuage her fears.

“As for you, Mrs. Westcott,” he continued, his arm slipping underneath her to pull her close. “I married you in an attempt to save you from scandal, but it seems that scandal will find you no matter what we do. So it is my great privilege and responsibility to stand by your side regardless, and do whatever it takes to prove my loyalty to you.”

Again her heart melted, and Emily couldn’t help leaning forward to brush her nose against his. “You know, there is something more I was not able to say yesterday.”

He lifted his chin. “What is it?”

“I wanted to apologize for all the terrible things I said to you when we were first married. You did not deserve it, for I didn’t know then that you would end up being everything I could have ever wanted, the very love of my life.”

His morning eyes turned fierce, his hand reaching up for hers by his face. “You love me?”

“Did I not say so before? I thought as much was obvious.” She flushed, thinking back on everything that had been said and done the night before. Then she looked into his dark eyes and felt entirely safe to speak her mind. “I love you, Alex Westcott. With everything that I am. And I will endeavor to make you just as happy as you make me.”

She had expected him to smile, to kiss her, or even say thank you, but instead he took her hand from his cheek, intertwined their fingers and rested it at his chest.

“I love you, Emily. And I don’t know what tomorrow will bring,” he said. “I don’t know what people will say about you and the duke, and I don’t know how you may have to fight society going forward, but you will never be alone, for there is little that could take me from your side.”

“Even if that little something is of my own doing?”

He chuckled. “You and I may disagree over certain things, as we tend to do, but you will never have to fight for my love. That I will give freely and without hesitation, without expectation.”

Emily would have swooned were she not already secured in this bed, in his arms. “And you will have all my kisses for the rest of my life.”

Alex shrugged, lowering his head down for a kiss. “As you wish.”

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The warm September sun bore down as Emily stepped into the grand front foyer of their new estate, Saltdean Manor. A youthful giddiness had taken root in her chest, and she bit her lower lip as her eyes explored the unfamiliar surroundings. “I love it all.”

“And you haven’t even seen the best of it yet,” Alex whispered, taking her by the hand. “Come this way.”

He pulled her up the circular staircase, passing multiple doorways and corridors that remained untouched. Until finally they arrived in a spacious library, where Alex tugged aside the curtains covering the tall windows to reveal the expansive view.

Emily gasped, pressing her fingers up to the glass. “Incredible.” Beach and blue water for miles in almost every direction.

“Now these are not the cliffs in Brighton where we walked before,” Alex explained from behind, wrapping his arms around her waist, “for we are just a little farther east. And to the north of us the perfect amount of open land for Morgana.”

She turned in his arms, glancing up at him over her shoulder. “And you’re sure this is what you want?”

He nodded. “Selling Markham Estate may have been your idea, but I have not been able to stop thinking about it since then. And this place is the perfect solution.”

Emily grinned, snuggling back against him and placing her hand on the side of his face. She felt the same. Even though the gossip in London had eventually been

replaced with the newest scandal from Lady Whetstone, Emily knew things could never be the same. Their pasts would always be there, lingering in the background. Society had not dared disrespect the duke and duchess, but Emily and her husband were not bound by the same rules. It was better that they get away for good.

They watched the hypnotizing waves crash along the beach below, and Emily realized what it would mean. To live away from London for good.

“We could always have the duke and duchess come visit, can’t we?” Emily asked, her voice smaller than she’d anticipated.

“Of course, as soon as Isabel finishes her confinement. Then they can bring Theodore and the new child that comes along.”

Emily turned again in his arms. “And what of your mother and sisters?”

“Do not fret,” Alex said, giving her a light squeeze. “Here, we will have plenty of space for all of them to come whenever they like. And between the two of us, we have more than enough money to live comfortably for the rest of our days wherever we go.”

Yet her concerns continued. “But what about my friends? I will not be able to do my part in finding them wealthy husbands out here by the sea. And I cannot just abandon them in their current positions. I know your friend Mr. Seymoure means well taking on Daphne without references, and Mrs. Pembroke has been nothing but decent to Georgiana, but the old woman may die soon, and they deserve more—”

Alex placed a finger over his wife’s mouth. “We will not abandon them, I promise. Though we can only take on one thing at a time. Gracious, your mind races faster than I can keep up sometimes,” he said with a chuckle.

“You are right.” Emily nodded, taking a deep breath to calm her thoughts. “What

about the staff from Markham Estate?”

“They can be here just as soon as I sign all the necessary transaction paperwork. And I’ll have them bring Morgana as well.”

It really would be perfect here, and her heart felt near to bursting to have the opportunity... but she couldn’t help teasing her husband. “And you’re certain this is not just your last attempt to hide your scandalous wife away from society?”

Alex wiggled his finger in her side, making her squirm.

“Damn it, woman. This is my last attempt to protect you from the rest of the world.” He pulled her back and placed his hands on her shoulders. “We won’t have to worry about what everyone thinks about us here. I know you say it doesn’t matter, that it will pass with time, but I see how it weighs on you. And you shouldn’t have to bear the burden of how terrible society can be.”

Emily sighed. How well her husband knew her.

“They only say such things because they do not know you, the real you. But I love you as you are, no matter what anyone says, and I do not wish for you to change. I may call you an infuriating woman at times, but I love how bold and stubborn you are. And I want you to always be straightforward with me. Tell me when I’m stepping out of line or being an ass, and I’ll tell you when you’re being unreasonable and intolerable. ”

She laughed. “I suppose there really could be no one else for either of us.” She thought on poor Mr. Evans, and she knew for certain that she could never have been this happy with him. He was a good man, and she wished him the best, but Emily belonged with Alex Westcott instead. He was her home, the place she truly belonged.

“Then we are in agreement? This will be our home?” Alex asked.

Emily nodded. “Yes. The rest of our lives will begin at Saltdean Manor. It will keep you healthy and well and both of us safe from the gossip in London. We’ll raise our family here and be all the better for it. We’ll collect seashells from the beach with the children, and have them on display in the house, along with the bottles on the wall.”

Alex laughed. “I believe bottles of wine and rum are not meant for children.”

She swatted at him playfully. “I only meant the ships in bottles. You will have to teach me, and then we can teach our children.” Emily reached up, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck. “Together we can teach them that even when some difficult things might appear impossible at first, with a little patience and effort, the outcome can still be glorious and beautiful.”

A rare mistiness caught her husband’s eyes as he pulled her close against his chest. Alex nodded firmly as his gaze dropped to her mouth, and he said, “Yes, we’ll do just that.”