



Truce (Neighbor from Hell 4)

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Prologue

Present day Massachusetts

“You’re not doing it right.”

He was going to strangle the son of a bitch with his bare hands, Jason decided as he ignored the bastard hovering over him. The party was in two hours and he wasn’t close to finishing Haley’s present. Four months of working on this damn thing first thing in the morning and last thing at night and it still wasn’t done.

Thank God his father had started bugging the shit out of him six months ago to get this done. At first he’d shrugged it off, deciding that it could wait until the last minute, but then his father, uncles and a few of his cousins started to share their horror stories with him until he decided that perhaps it would be better to just get it over with.

Four stitches, one citation for trespassing, two second degree burns, ten migraines, one wrecked pair of jeans, two-thousand miles on his car, more than a dozen sleepless nights later and he was cursing his great-great-great-great-great grandfather to hell and back for starting this bullshit tradition in the first place. Would it really have killed the inconsiderate bastard to go out and buy his wife a necklace for their fifth anniversary instead of making one and dooming all his descendants to this bullshit tradition? He really didn’t think so, especially since the man had supposedly been the brother of a very wealthy earl.

“What the hell is that supposed to be?” Trevor asked, taking a big bite out of-

“Those are my brownies, you bastard!” Jason snapped, snatching the half-eaten brownie out of his cousin’s hand.

With a roll of his eyes and a small, annoyed sigh, Trevor reached over and plucked the brownie out of Jason hand and shoved it into his mouth before Jason could steal his precious brownie back. Mangled necklace momentarily forgotten, he stood up and shoved his cousin out of the way so that he could make sure that the rest of his precious babies were okay. He felt his heart break as he neared the kitchen counter and saw what was left of the platter of brownies Haley had made him for his mid-morning snack.

“How could you?” Jason asked hollowly, picking up the empty plate and praying that his cousin had missed a delicious morsel or two, but there was no hope.

The bastard had most likely licked the plate clean.

“I was bored,” Trevor said with a shrug as he sat down at the kitchen table and leaned over to get a better look at the mangled necklace that Jason was desperately trying to finish in time for the party.

“If you’re bored, then help me,” Jason said, shooting a nervous glance up at the clock and trying not to wince at the amount of time he’d lost bitching over the loss of his precious treats.

“Can’t,” Trevor said with a shrug.

“Why the hell not?” Jason demanded, sitting down next to Trevor and picking up the small white stone bead that he’d made out of one of the rocks he’d managed to steal from the pool area of Haley’s old house.

He really wished that they hadn’t sold the house to that crabby old bastard. He’d

taken great joy out of refusing to give Jason a few rocks from the pool area so that he could make Haley a necklace for their fifth anniversary. Actually, he really wished that he'd brought a steak with him later that night when he'd been forced to jump the fence so that he could grab a couple of rocks. Then again, the steak probably wouldn't have saved him from the psychotic little dog with the pink bow that had taken his job as guard dog a little too seriously.

"Because you have to make the necklace by yourself from start to finish," Trevor pointed out, unnecessarily since all the Bradford boys knew the rules for this tradition by the time they were ten years old.

"The party is in less than two hours," Jason pointed out, hoping that his cousin ignored tradition and helped him. He didn't want to disappoint his wife and he sure as hell didn't want to break a tradition that the men in his family held sacred.

"Then I suggest that you stop bitching and get threading," Trevor said with a smug smile as he gestured for Jason to get working.

"Your fifth anniversary is coming up soon, ass**le, so I wouldn't get so damn cocky if I were you. You're going to need help," Jason said pointedly as he gestured to the thin silver chain.

"In three years," Trevor said in that same smug tone that was starting to piss him off.

"You'll need help then," Jason bit out tightly as he arranged the tiny plastic bags in order, or at least, what he hoped was the correct order.

"Unlike you, I didn't wait until the last minute. As soon as I realized that Zoe couldn't live without me, I started to work on her necklace," Trevor explained as he leaned back, making a show of relaxing.

“Didn’t you have to beg her to marry you?” Jason pointed out, simply to piss him off.

“I just let everyone think that.”

“Uh huh,” Jason said, switching the bag holding a small gray stone bead with the bag holding the small dark, almost black, stone bead. He’d made it from the stone he’d picked up from the bar’s parking lot where he’d carried Haley that fateful night when she’d released her adorable fists of fury for the first time.

“You’re still not done?” Jarred, his father, snorted in disgust as he walked past them on his way to the kitchen counter.

“Almost,” he said, hoping that it wasn’t a lie.

“Where the hell are my brownies?” his father demanded.

“Jason ate them,” Trevor said quickly, making sure to sound properly appalled as the rat bastard did his best to screw him over.

“You selfish bastard!” his father hissed in outrage, making him wish that he didn’t have to finish this necklace so that he could kick his cousin’s lying ass.

“Haley brought ten platters to the party,” Jason pointed out, hoping that his father and cousin would take the bait and get the hell out of here so that he could focus on the task at hand.

“Goddammit!” his father snapped, yanking a chair away from the table and sitting down in agitation. “There won’t be anything left by the time we get there,” his father bit out with a pout. With a muttered curse, Jason rolled his eyes at his father’s whining even as he frantically rearranged the order of the small bags.

“Party’s not for two hours,” Jason pointed out, not bothering to look up as he placed the handmade stone beads in what he prayed was the correct order. “If you leave now, Haley will probably let you have an entire platter to yourself to hold you over until the party starts,” he murmured absently.

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“Can’t leave yet,” his father grumbled.

“Why the hell not?” Jason demanded, chancing a look up at the clock and wincing when he realized that another ten minutes had gone by.

Shit !

“Tradition,” his father and cousin said in unison, making him frown in confusion.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jason asked, shooting the clock on the microwave one last anxious glance before looking back down at the bags of rock beads.

“As your father, it’s my job to tell you the story behind this tradition,” his father started to say, only to shoot Trevor a wink, “it will be my job to tell you the tale as well.”

“I’ve already heard the story,” Jason said, sighing heavily as he stared down at two gray stone beads that he couldn’t for the life of him remember which one was which.

“Well, you’re going to hear it again, so stop your bitching!” his father snapped before he grumbled, “I’m starving,” and making Jason chuckle.

“Besides,” his father continued in a calmer tone, “your Uncle Ethan is telling Haley the story even as we speak.”

“Tradition?” he asked with a smile as he looked up to find his father throwing the

empty brownie platter a wistful look, no doubt hoping that another batch of brownies would suddenly appear.

“Haley, left a small platter of finger rolls in the fridge in case I got hungry,” he said, taking pity on his father.

“Sit your ass back down!” his father snapped at Trevor when the greedy bastard shoved away from the table and took a step in the direction of the refrigerator.

“I’m starving!” Trevor bitched, but he did sit down.

“Too goddamn bad! I need sustenance if I’m going to tell this story,” his father said, sounding irritated as he stormed over to the refrigerator, grabbed the platter of sandwich rolls, leftover cherry pie and the gallon of chocolate milk.

“That’s the kids’ milk,” Jason pointed out, returning his attention back to making the necklace.

He heard his father grumble something as he shut the refrigerator door. When he looked up a few seconds later, he wasn’t surprised to see that his father had returned the milk and grabbed the gallon of ice tea instead. The man might be obsessed with food, but he would never willingly take food away from his grandchildren. No Bradford male would. Their children and wives came first and they made damn sure that they were well provided for.

“Those look good,” Trevor said, gesturing to the platter of sandwich rolls. “Can I have one of the-“

“No!” his father bit out, glaring as he shifted the large platter away from Trevor.

“I’m starving!” Trevor whined.

“Then starve!”

“You selfish bastard!”

“Can we get on with it?” Jason said, cutting off his father, who looked seconds away from taking Trevor to the ground in a chokehold.

“Fine,” his father said, throwing Trevor one last glare before he picked up a tuna salad roll and returned his attention to Jason. Clearing his throat, his father shifted in his seat before he started.

“Once upon a time...”

“Are you f**king kidding me?” Jason asked, shaking his head in disgust.

“What?” Jarred demanded, taking a bite from his sandwich roll.

“You’re really going to start it like that?” Jason demanded, sharing a look of disgust with Trevor, who was inching his hand toward the platter of sandwich rolls.

His father narrowed his eyes on him. “If I want to start this story off with ‘Once upon a time,’ then that’s how I’m going to damn well tell the story!”

Jason rubbed his hands down his face. He really didn’t have time for this shit. “Fine, tell your damn story,” he said, focusing his attention back on the necklace.

“I will,” his father said with a sniff followed by the sound of a hand being slapped.

“Ow!”

“Those are my sandwich rolls!”

“Dad,” Jason said, not bothering to look up as he prompted his father to get on with it.

“Oh, right,” his father said, pointedly clearing his throat. “Once upon a time.....”

Chapter 1

1809

London, England

Hyde Park....a little after 4 pm.

There he was, her prince, Elizabeth mused, sighing happily as she watched the man that she was going to marry. She smiled wistfully and moved around to the other side of the tree to get a better look at James, her James, before her governess could find her and drag her away.

Even though his family's London townhouse was close to theirs, she hadn't seen him since they'd arrived a week ago. Their townhouses weren't as close as their country estates were, but James rarely ever visited his family there. The only time she had the chance to see him anymore was when they came to London for the season and even then she hardly ever got the chance to see him as much as she would have liked. He was a very busy man about town after all. Knowing that it would probably be some time before she saw him again, she had to take another look at James and make it last.

Could any man be more perfect? No, she didn't think so. Only James, only her James was absolutely perfect. She bit her lip and watched as he bowed over her mother's hand. He pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her hand before releasing it. Elizabeth sighed happily when he stood back up, mostly because it granted her a better opportunity to stare at him. He wore a stunning black suit with a crisp white shirt. His

brown hair was cut short today, but she could still make out the small curls that she loved.

He was, in a word, marvelous.

At twenty-four years old, he was beyond perfect. He was handsome, educated, wealthy, smart, funny, and lovely. Everyone thought so. Men wanted to be him and women wanted to marry him. That last thought made her face squish up. No, Mama said that he was too young to marry. She said that most men of his station wouldn't marry until they were older and more established, whatever that meant. All she knew was that he was here and perfect. With that thought in mind, she released another dreamy sigh.

“Boo!” someone suddenly yelled just as she was shoved forward, making her jump and scream in terror. Heart pounding in her little chest, she turned around to see what monster had descended from the tree to attack her.

“You!” she mouthed the word perfectly, giving the little tyrant in front of her the coldest, haughtiest glare that she could muster. Thankfully, she had two older sisters who'd taught her well.

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The boy was momentarily dazed speechless by her reaction before he bent over with uncontrollable laughter. “Oh.....you....should.....see.....your....face!” he said through loud, rather annoying bouts of laughter.

Elizabeth ran her small hands over her pink gown and looked down her nose at him. Well, she tried to at least. It was rather difficult to look down on someone taller than her.

“You, Robert Bradford, are a beastly boy!” she said loudly, perhaps a little too loudly if the laughter erupting around them was any indication.

Robert’s face turned an interesting shade of red as Elizabeth narrowed her eyes on her nemesis and studied his face, hoping to find some proof that this boy was an imposter. It was simply impossible that such a crude, distasteful little boy could be related to her James. This boy had darker, almost black, hair, green eyes instead of James’ brown eyes and wasn’t in the least bit good looking. The boy was rather homely looking. Even her mother said so, so it had to be true.

“And you smell like the backside of a mule!” Robert shot back loud enough for everyone walking past them to hear.

Elizabeth felt her face flush hotly. She looked back in time to catch her sisters trying to hide their smiles from their overbearing mother. Their mother threw them one look of warning before turning her attention back to Elizabeth. The glare that she sent Elizabeth’s way was a clear warning to behave and not to make a scene.

The other children around them stopped playing to watch as they giggled and pointed

at Elizabeth and Robert. Lady Bradford looked horrified at her son's behavior or Elizabeth's, she wasn't exactly sure and she didn't care, because at this very moment James was laughing.

At her!

She turned away before he could see the tears streaming down her face.

"Are you crying?" Robert demanded, sounding horrified.

"Leave me alone."

She tried to push past him, but being only seven years old it was rather difficult to push past a towering twelve-year-old boy who'd planted himself firmly in her path.

"I know you fancy my brother. He laughs about it, you know. We all do," Robert said proudly.

She gasped loudly.

He knew?

He laughed?

Oh no, this was bad. This was very bad. Had she been that obvious? Her own family never said anything. They smiled at her when they knew they were going to see the Bradfords, but that was only because they liked the Bradfords, wasn't it?

Oh no, everyone knew, she realized with something close to panic. She had to get out of here, fast. She made another attempt to step around Robert only to have him move quickly to block her. "What's the rush? Running off to plan the wedding?" he asked

mockingly.

Slowly, Elizabeth turned around to see her parents, sisters, Lord and Lady Bradford, and James walking towards them. She wanted to cry all over again when she saw that her sister Heather was hanging on James' arm. She was eighteen and this was her first season. She was plain, boring and annoying, but at least she got to touch him. Elizabeth felt her little heart break.

"You know that you're the ugliest sister, don't you? And you're fat, too!" Robert added. He looked around, beaming at the chuckles the other boys were sending his way and clearly enjoying himself at her expense.

Elizabeth had baby fat, but she would grow out of it. Her governess and father had promised her that it was just a phase. She caught one of the boys making rude gestures with his hands, indicating a fat stomach before he pointed at her for his friends.

"Stop it!" she cried.

That only made them laugh louder and Robert grin hugely. She looked back, hoping Mary would come to her aide. Her sister was no longer smiling. She cared about Elizabeth, she truly did. Unfortunately, Mary was still a good ten yards away. Elizabeth could tell that her sister was upset, but she knew that Mary couldn't rush over and help her. Married woman or not, their mother would be devastated if any of them did anything improper that would bring the family embarrassment, especially since it was Heather's first season.

They didn't seem to be coming to her aide quickly at all. In fact, they appeared as though they were taking a relaxing stroll through the park. They actually stopped to talk to Lady Newman. Lady Newman! She was the biggest gossip of the ton ! Her annoying daughter Penelope was with her. She was just as mean as her mother. She

was also glaring down her too thin nose at Elizabeth.

“Come on, Beth, what’s the matter? Don’t you want to go over and give your betrothed a big fat kiss?”

“Enough, Robert,” James said, chuckling.

Elizabeth couldn’t look back. No, she wouldn’t do it. He was laughing at her, again. Her sweet, understanding James, who’d kissed her scraped elbow when she was five, was laughing at her.

That was it. She didn’t care if all the children of the ton laughed at her and made fun of her. She didn’t care if she was the fattest, ugliest girl in the world. She would not be forced to stand here and listen as James laughed at her.

This was all Robert’s fault.

At that moment, she decided to do something that her parents had specifically forbade her ever to do. In fact, after it was done she knew that her father would spank her soundly, but it would be worth it. Somehow she forced herself to stop crying and smiled sweetly up at Robert as she prepared herself for a month without pudding and a sore bottom.

* * *

His smile faltered as he looked down at her. Her pudgy little cheeks were pushed up by a smile that was rather unsettling. She looked....dangerous. He licked his lips nervously, wondering what was she up to.

“Robert, I don’t understand why you’re being so silly right now. You know how dangerous that can be,” she said, a little too loudly for his liking. All the children

watching them stepped closer, eager to see how this was going to end. Some of the adults also seemed quite amused with the afternoon's entertainment, but not him. He suddenly felt the overpowering need to get away from the little brat.

Robert tried to take a step back and get away from her, but Elizabeth took a step closer, refusing to grant his escape. She suddenly looked oddly dangerous in that light pink dress. Looking thoughtful, she tapped a finger to her chin. "If I recall correctly you've been told to be careful when you laugh, get too excited, nervous..." she started to explain.

Robert knew where she was going with this. The little witch was about to break the promise her parents had made to his. "Shut up!" he screamed as desperation and fear coiled in the pit of his stomach.

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She continued as if she hadn't heard him. "When you're anxious or upset, because," this is where she leaned in conspiratorially, but she didn't whisper, oh no, she didn't whisper it, she yelled it, "you will wet your pants, again! You know we still can't get the smell out of the parlor rug, but then again it was only last week that you wet your pants when my puppy jumped on you! In fact, I don't know what was worse, your crying or the smell!"

Loud hoots of laughter seemed to fill the park as he stood there, momentarily frozen in shock as the realization that his deepest, darkest secret was out hit him.

"Robert Lemonade!" she said in a singsong voice, further taunting him and making him hate her more than even he thought possible.

The boys were all pointing and laughing at him. Robert felt his lower lip tremble. These boys attended school with him. This wasn't happening, couldn't be happening. This was bad, very bad and even as he hoped beyond hope that this was a dream he knew that it wasn't. He also knew that his life was going to become intolerable now. Suddenly every boy around them pointed towards his pants and laughed louder. Many of them stumbled and fell to the ground, unable to curb their amusement.

Robert wasn't aware of the hot liquid running down his legs until that moment. He looked down, praying that it was just his imagination, but it wasn't. His brown trousers were soaked thoroughly around his crotch.

"Robert Lemonade!" the children chorused. "Robert Lemonade!"

He turned to glare at Elizabeth, who wore a pleased little smile on her face. This was

her fault! He shoved her soundly. She stumbled back, but didn't fall. Her eyebrows came together and she stepped up to him, looking determined. Robert was prepared to shove her again or pull her hair when he saw her small fist sail through the air towards him.

He stumbled backwards, tripped over a root and landed on his backside. New laughter erupted around them. Not only was he crying and wet his pants, but now a seven-year-old chubby girl had knocked him down in front of everyone!

"Better make sure to bring your nanny with you next semester, Robert Lemonade!" a boy yelled.

"Yeah, don't want any unseemly yellow stains on the mattress!"

"I'd hate to be his roommate. Can you imagine smelling vinegar all year?" the boys yelled, taunted and teased.

Robert dragged himself to his feet and glared at Elizabeth Stanton. One day....one day he would get back at her. He would have his revenge.

In front of everyone she turned her back on him just in time for her father to discreetly grab her and haul her off.

Robert stood there, his hands curled up into fists, ignoring his family's concerns, the laughter and jeers and focused on the receding image of Elizabeth as she left the park. One day soon.....

Chapter 2

1824

“This is for your own good, Elizabeth!”

“You said that last year,” she pointed out, not bothering to raise her voice or even look up from her book as she turned the page and settled back more comfortably in her chair.

“And it would have been if you’d accepted a proposal!” her father stubbornly argued. He continued trying to pry the library door open so that he could drag her off to London where she’d be forced to attend balls and dinners night after night all while her parents shoved every single man with a title to his name in her direction.

She didn’t wish to marry for a title, but they refused to listen to her so now she was forced to take matters into her own hands and barricade herself in the library. It wouldn’t stop them from dragging her off to London, nothing would, but at least it might buy her a little more time to relax before she was forced to endure the hustle and bustle of London. It would also probably get her father to-

“Okay,” he said, sounding out of breath, “let’s discuss the matter.”

Biting back a triumphant smile, she placed her book down, smoothed down her skirts and walked over to the door, but she didn’t open it. She wasn’t foolish after all. There was no doubt in her mind that her father now had at least two footmen standing with him on the other side of that door waiting to grab her and drag her off.

“I’m listening,” she said, leaning back against the wall as she waited to see what he was willing to offer in compensation if she willingly went through with another season.

There was a slight pause before he asked, “Aren’t you going to open the door?”

And make the same mistake that her two older sisters had made when they’d been

forced to take the same action? No, she really didn't think that would be wise. Besides, unlike her sisters she couldn't be bought and he knew it. She didn't care about dresses, silks, shoes, ribbons, jewelry, shopping or any number of things that the other females in her family loved and her father used against them when the need arose.

Not that she didn't appreciate pretty things, she did. She just didn't care enough about them to cave to her father's demands or justify spending a small fortune on them. Most people considered her to be odd and perhaps she was, but she truly didn't care.

"I'll get this door opened eventually," he said, sounding hopeful that it would be enough to scare her into unlocking the door and going to her doom quietly.

It wasn't.

"And then I'll just find another way to avoid going," she said, smiling when he let out the annoyed growl that usually worked on her sisters.

"What do you want?" he asked warily, no doubt expecting her to ask for something outrageous.

He knew her so well, she thought with a smile.

"I want my independence," she said, not terribly surprised when he let out another one of those vicious growls.

"This again? Really?" he demanded in exasperation.

"It's what I want," she said, wondering just how early she'd be able to talk him into letting her go to her north estate.

Technically, she was supposed to wait until her twenty-fourth birthday to accept control of her inheritance, but since her money and property was supposed to be under his care, he could allow her to go whenever he wanted. Unfortunately, he wasn't anxious to allow his youngest daughter to move away and live unsupervised, which was why he was dragging her off to London.

He was desperate to see her married and her inheritance in the hands of a capable man. Actually, at this point he would probably be happy to see her inheritance in the hands of any man that would have her. Right now he controlled her life and, in his mind, kept her safe, but that would all change in just a few short months and she couldn't wait.

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“I want you to have one last season before you do something foolish,” he bit out.

“And I don’t want to have to stay for the entire season.”

A long suffering sigh reached her ears and she knew that she’d just won.....sort of.

“I expect your full cooperation. You will attend every single ball, dinner and musical that your mother can garner an invitation for. You will allow men to court you, but you will favor the men that we approve of with your time. You will not sabotage this in any way and in return, I will accompany you to your north estate two months early,” he said and she knew that it was probably the best offer that she was going to get, but still.....

“Three months early,” she said, hoping that he’d accept her counteroffer.

“I’m not that much of a pushover, my dear,” he said with a snort of amusement.

He really was, but she decided that right now was not the time to point that out to him. It probably also wasn’t the time to point out that he’d just agreed to let her leave when the season officially started, she decided as she unlocked the door and prepared herself for two months of pre-season hell.

* * *

2 Weeks Later.....

London, England

“Really, Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth ignored her mother as she smiled down at the young man shifting nervously in front of her. Young man might not be a fitting description for a ten-year-old boy, but he was certainly acting like one.

“I c-can carry your bags, m’lady.” the little boy said as he pushed his too-long hair back with dirty fingers.

Elizabeth leaned down to look the little boy in the eye. “That’s a very important job. Do you think you’re up to it?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically as he tried his best to bite back a smile.

“Hmm, I have a very busy day today. I’m going to need someone to wait outside the shops for me and bring my bags to my coach. That’s a hard job and it may take a few hours. Do you think that you can handle such a big job?” she asked in a serious tone, biting back her own smile.

“I can do it! Honest, I can!”

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Really, Elizabeth! This is beyond the pale!” her mother said in a huff. “Do hurry up with this nonsense. We have too much to do today to waste time on the likes of him.”

She waited until her mother left, noting the little boy’s crestfallen expression. “Your name?” Elizabeth asked softly.

“Toby, m’lady,” he said, looking down at the ground and sounding miserable.

“Well, if you still want the job I need a good man to help me today. Now, as you can see my first stop is here at this shop to make sure my gown fits just right. If you could be available in an hour I would truly appreciate that, Toby.”

Looking confused, he nodded slowly. “What do I do 'til then, m'lady?”

She pulled out five shillings and handed them to the boy. His face lit up. “M'lady, that's too much for carrying bags!”

“Hush, I want you to take that and go get yourself something to eat and stay warm.” She gestured to the two small boys trying to hide behind a carriage. “I suspect your brothers could use something to eat as well.”

Toby looked back at the boys. His face flushed with embarrassment. “They're not my brothers, m'lady. They belong to the family I am staying with.”

“Just be back in an hour and make sure you eat something healthy. Save the sweets for later,” she said, shoeing him away with a smile.

Toby nodded and took off running. Elizabeth watched as Toby gathered the boys who couldn't be older than four and five years old. It broke her heart to see children on the street.

She thanked the footman holding the door open for her and walked inside the shop, not surprised to find her mother and sister frowning at her.

“Really, Elizabeth, Papa does not give you an allowance to waste on the likes of them. He gives his alms every month. This is insulting him to say the least,” Heather sniffed as she tried to look down her pudgy nose at Elizabeth, but she didn't care.

“Don't bother asking your father for more money. If you chose to waste it, then that's

your problem,” her mother added.

“I never do,” she said softly as she prepared herself for the torture that she’d have to endure over the next hour.

Her family didn’t understand why she used her allowance to help the less fortunate instead of on new trinkets, ribbons and such. Well, that wasn’t true. Mary understood perfectly. She was the one who’d taught Elizabeth compassion. Just thinking about Mary made her smile. She was going to see her tonight.

Her parents were dragging her to every ball, dinner and social occasion they could find as per their agreement. They were acting a bit desperate even though she was currently being courted by several men. It wasn’t hard to guess why. She’d turned down fifty-five proposals in the last five years and her parents were becoming worried that they would have another spinster on their hands.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to marry. She just didn’t want to marry for anything less than love. Mary found love and she was determined to as well. There was one thing that she was sure of; she wasn’t going to find love at one of the ton’s parties with the same old dreary lot that she’d grown up with. She knew that she wasn’t going to find love in some dusty old ballroom or among the group she’d known all her life. When she found love, it would be somewhere unexpected, she knew that much at least.

“Now come along. We have a lot to do today. We need to be back before five so that we can be ready on time. I want to arrive in time for you to dance the first waltz.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at that comment. Why was her mother suddenly worried about her missing the first waltz? She usually liked to arrive late, everywhere. According to her mother, it made for a better entrance and left Elizabeth’s suitors nervous, which was the way a suitor should be left. Her mother expected her suitors

to pine over her and be in despair if she didn't arrive on time. Something was going on and she was afraid that she was going to find out too late to do anything about it.

An hour later, Elizabeth and her maid carried several large parcels out of the shop. She stopped in front of the store and looked around. Toby was nowhere to be found.

"I told you, Elizabeth. You're far too trusting," Heather said with a sniff as she walked past her carrying nothing. She walked arm in arm with their mother towards their next destination. A footman carried their large pile of parcels to the carriage.

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“I was sure he would remain, m’lady,” her maid said with a smile that said otherwise.

“I was too,” she said, sighing heavily as she held the parcels higher. “No use fussing over it. What’s done is done.”

In truth, she didn’t mind one bit. If he’d returned, she would have found a way to give him more money without insulting his pride, but if he needed to leave then that was fine. She had no doubt the boy would use the money to fill his tummy and that was all she cared about.

“M’lady!” a small voice called out, sounding anxious and out of breath.

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder to see Toby running towards her. His brown hair was windblown and his pale grey eyes were as round as saucers. “I’m so sorry, m’lady!”

She nodded and handed her packages over to the boy. “That’s fine. You’re here now,” she said, smiling down at the boy, pleased that he’d returned.

“I was so worried you’d find another lad. I swear that I tried to get back sooner, m’lady.”

“What took you so long?” her maid rudely asked.

Elizabeth threw her a look of warning. That seemed to work, but unfortunately not before Toby’s hopeful expression turned worried.

“I'm sorry. Timmy isn't used to a full stomach so I had to see him home,” he explained in a rush.

“That's fine, Toby. I quite understand. Shall we be off?” Elizabeth said with a smile, hoping to change the subject so that Toby would stop worrying about being replaced.

He nodded. “Which one is your carriage, m'lady?”

She gestured to the black carriage across the busy street that bore her family's seal. With a nod, Toby took off running across the street and nearly gave Elizabeth heart failure when he narrowly missed getting struck by a passing carriage. He quickly handed the packages over to the coachman, ran back to take her maid's packages and delivered them to the carriage. When he was done, he returned to Elizabeth's side and walked with her to the next shop.

For the next three hours Toby was at her beck and call. He never complained about the number of packages or the length of the wait. When they were done for the day Elizabeth turned her back on her mother while they got into the carriage. Toby stood in front of her, shifting nervously.

“I'm sorry I was late,” he said softly.

She gave him a reassuring smile. “It's okay. Do you know where Belford Manor is?”

He stood straight and nodded. “Well, if you can find Belford Manor tonight, go around the back to the kitchen and tell them Lady Elizabeth sent you. They shall have some very delicious treats for you,” she promised him, hoping the kitchen staff would do more than just give the boy some treats.

“Really?”

“Yes,” she smiled, “and I suspect if you were to offer some help, you’d earn some food to take home to your friends.”

“I will! I’ll work real hard!” he said excitedly.

She reached into her reticule and pulled out a pound note. She handed it to the boy. “This is for doing such a fine job, Toby. Next time I’m shopping I shall ask for you by name.”

His fingers shook as he reached out for the note. He looked as if he thought this might be some cruel joke. “Go on, take it,” she encouraged him. He did, slowly.

“Thank you, m’lady,” he said, looking up at her. Elizabeth had to bite her lip to stop herself from crying. Toby smiled shyly at her as if she were an angel.

“Go on now. Take care of yourself, Toby, and make sure to come by for some food.”

He nodded firmly. “I will, m’lady.”

He watched as she climbed into her carriage with the help of her coachman. He quickly hid the note in his shoe and walked away, smiling.

Chapter 3

“Oh, do stop pouting, Robert,” his mother said teasingly.

He glared at her from across the carriage. “I am not pouting,” he said firmly. “I just don’t understand why...no, let me fix that, how you managed to talk me into this.”

With a delicate shrug of her shoulders she explained, “While you’re in town you will spend some time with your family. Besides, you’re twenty-nine years old and should

really make an appearance or two in society if you ever plan on making a good match.”

He opened his mouth to once again point out that he had no plans of marrying unless he absolutely had to, but she wasn't done.

“It won't kill you to attend a few balls, dinners, and the theatre to help James find a new wife. It looks good for him to have a close family. It makes mothers feel more at ease to have their daughter's courted by suitors who come from a good family.”

James groaned next to him and he couldn't help but feel bad for his brother. Years ago their mother had hounded James incessantly until he'd finally married. Robert had a feeling that his brother had married simply to get their mother to stop harassing him. Hell, he would do the same if she ever started on him, but thankfully she felt that he was too young to make any woman a good husband.

Sadly for James, he'd married a woman he hadn't loved. Actually, Robert was pretty sure that he hadn't even liked the girl. He couldn't blame James if he hadn't. Miranda had been a vicious bitch. She'd prided herself on having the best of everything and shamelessly flaunted it in everyone's face. She did her best to go through her dowry as well as James' holdings before she died three years ago.

It had been an unfortunate accident. Well, Robert liked to think that fate had stepped in, dispensing a little poetic justice. The incident had been entirely preventable on her part. She saw a woman that she felt was inferior to her through the glass of a shop, speaking with a clerk while gesturing to a beautiful set of pearls. According to Miranda's footman, she muttered something about the woman not having a better set than her and stormed across the street, completely oblivious of the mail coach rushing down on her.

Since then, James had enjoyed a short reprieve from their mother, but now she was in

full force. James needed to get married, again. He was after all next in line for the title. It was his duty to marry and produce an heir. Robert cringed inwardly. If James didn't marry and produce an heir soon, their mother would start ranting about him being their last hope, again. That wouldn't do. Even if he had to knock James out and drag his body to the altar, James was getting married again. End of story.

“Did you hear what your mother said, Robert?” his father asked.

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“Huh?” Robert looked up to see twin looks of exasperation on his parents’ faces. “Er, sorry no, woolgathering,” he said, gesturing lazily to his head.

“I said that this whole nonsense you have about avoiding the Stantons needs to end. For heaven’s sake you’re no longer a child, Robert. I don’t even remember what the poor girl said or did that upset you so.”

Oh, so they were talking about the Stantons again. That could only mean that they expected the Stantons to attend the ball tonight. That was fine. He rather liked Lord Norwood and his wife...sort of, and he liked Mary, and he sort of liked Heather although she reminded him of her mother. They acted like twins. They made the same comments, dressed in the same style, basically they walked, talked, and acted alike. He would probably avoid those two as much as possible. Then there was Elizabeth.

Oh, he would definitely avoid her. He’d been doing it successfully for over a decade, so one more night shouldn’t be at all difficult.

“Robert Lemonade,” James happily supplied.

“Thanks so much,” he said dryly, hoping that his mother simply let it be.

James grinned hugely. “Think nothing of it.”

“That’s why you’ve avoided them like the plague? Over a name? Of all the ridiculous things. Son, you’re twenty-nine years old. It’s about time you acted like a man and got over this nonsense,” his father grumbled, sounding irritated as he usually did when he gave Robert this little talk.

“Well,” James drawled, “in Robert’s defense the two of them cannot be in the same room without causing a scene.” He held up his hand to stop his mother from speaking when it became obvious that she was dying to say something. “I realize that they haven’t been in the same room in over fourteen years, but you must understand that no one, and I mean no one, has forgotten his nickname or the circumstances around the name. It follows him everywhere.”

Catching Robert’s murderous glare, James shot him a wink and continued.

“But, I do agree with you. He needs to get over this, especially if he wants to escape that dreadful nickname. He doesn’t go out into polite society. He keeps to himself and his books and, when he’s not doing that, he’s out on his manor working. He’s far too serious.”

“You’re just jealous, because I’ve made my own way in the world,” Robert added, trying to irritate his brother enough to drop the conversation.

“I hardly think you making a fortune off your inheritance counts as making your own way in the world.”

“It does if it was my birthday sum when I turned eighteen. Unlike you, I didn’t spend it on cards and whor-“ his father pointedly cleared his throat to remind him that their mother was in the carriage, “er, entertainment. I took my money and invested it and reinvested it. Now I have my own fortune and land. I don’t need to marry for money or to wait for a title.” He shot a sheepish grin at his father when he realized how that sounded. “Sorry, father.”

His father waved it off. “I know that no one is wishing me ill to get their hands on my title. We are all very proud of your accomplishments, Robert.”

“Thank you, sir,” Robert muttered, embarrassed by the turn of conversation. He hated

talking about his small fortune, especially with his family. It was bad enough that the mothers of the ton were starting to eye him greedily, eagerly ignoring his reputation as a rake and a bastard in general in the hopes of having their daughters well settled. Little did they know that it would never happen.

His mother huffed.

“What is it, Danielle?” his father asked.

She gestured to Robert. “He’s done it again, Harold. He distracted us from this conversation, don’t you see?” She turned her attention back on Robert with a look of determination that actually sent chills down his spine.

“You will stay the entire four weeks that you promised me. I will not accept any sudden emergencies that come up over your estate or any notes from your solicitor. You will be on your best behavior and you will not make a scene. You will do your best to get along with Lady Elizabeth.” Her eyes narrowed on him. “ And you will promise not to fight at the ball.”

He ground his teeth together. His temper wasn’t that bad. He couldn’t think of any fight he’d gotten into that hadn’t been necessary. His mother just didn’t understand what it was like to be a man. Some things could not be ignored.

“I promise for your sake not to fight inside the ball.” He chose his wording carefully. No need to break a promise to his mother when he could get around the particulars.

She nodded. “Even so, I think I’ll keep an eye on you.”

“Is that why you didn’t allow me to bring my own carriage?” he asked, suddenly very certain that it was the reason why she’d browbeat him into accompanying her tonight. He knew this nonsense about missing him and wanting to enjoy his company during

the ride had been a bit much, even for her.

She ignored him as she continued. "If you do not behave and make the best of it so that your brother can find a new wife," she narrowed her eyes to slits, "I will personally make it my life's mission to find you a wife."

"Oh dear God in heaven," Robert gasped. It was just the sort of threat that would work. He didn't want a wife, not unless his brother failed to produce an heir and the job fell to him, leaving him with no other choice.

James chuckled beside him as their father tried his best not to laugh and was doing a fine job of it until he met James' eyes. He abruptly stopped laughing a moment later and cleared his throat when Danielle glared at him.

Two could play at this game. He narrowed his eyes and glared right back at her. "You're bluffing."

She smiled sweetly, too sweetly for his comfort. "Am I?"

He studied her for a long moment before he groaned in defeat. "This isn't fair," he complained.

"Too bad."

Four weeks of balls, dinners and the bullshit of the ton was not his idea of a good time, but if it meant that it would help get the smirking bastard sitting next to him married and save him from a similar fate, then perhaps he should consider remaining on his best behavior, he decided as he leaned his head back, closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

This was going to be a long four weeks.

Chapter 4

Elizabeth forced a smile for the young Earl who was trying to monopolize her attention. Things hadn't changed. He'd tried the same tactics last season. The moment he walked into the room, he'd given her what she was sure he believed was a devastating smile before he worked the room, avoiding her for the next hour. Every few minutes his attention would shift to her face to see if she was watching him. She wasn't. She only knew of his tactics because Mary kept her well informed.

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Mary was the perfect chaperone. She knew absolutely everything that went on around her and had all the latest gossip. Her husband, Anthony, whom Elizabeth absolutely adored as the big brother she never had, kept Mary informed of all the latest information about every eligible bachelor. He was determined to make sure that no rake or fortune hunter got his hands on Elizabeth. He was very protective of her, almost as protective as Mary was.

Now she had to make conversation with Jonathan, the Earl of...well, she had forgotten. He'd tried to court her for three months last year. Every time he visited, she politely declined his offers for walks, invitations to the theatre and every other excuse that he could find to spend time with her. They danced at almost every ball only because it was polite to do so. He offered, she accepted, because she didn't have a choice. It was that simple.

"I was wondering if you would care to take a stroll in the gardens with me?" Jonathan asked.

"Oh? Now?" she asked, trying not to sound alarmed. No honorable man would ask a woman to take a stroll in the gardens at this time of night and especially not in this frigid weather without having something nefarious in mind. A walk around the room would have been the appropriate and more honorable option.

"Yes," he murmured with a pleased smile, clearly intent on trying to use seduction to gain her hand in marriage since nothing else had worked. She fully planned on refusing him, but she had to do it without insulting him when she'd rather box his ears for the attempt.

Thankfully, Mary was on top of everything as usual. She'd already decided with Anthony's help last year that the Earl would not do. He was a reckless rake and kept mistresses until they became round with his child. They weren't exactly sure how many illegitimate children he had, but it was at least five.

Society looked down on illegitimate children as if it was somehow their fault. She didn't care if a man had an illegitimate child as long as he did right by the child and gave it his name and protection. The thing that disgusted her most about the situation was tossing a pregnant woman into the street like used goods. She could never be with a man like that.

Not that her parents had any idea of her plans. They didn't. They were pushing for her to make a match now more than ever. In four months she was going to gain control over her inheritance. Her godmother had been a crafty woman who'd buried three husbands, building her fortune and holdings with each man. She'd passed away five years ago, leaving everything to Elizabeth. Her parents wanted to see her holdings in the safe and capable hands of her husband as if Elizabeth would allow any man to control her or her inheritance. Didn't they know her at all?

"Elizabeth, Mother would like to speak with you."

She gave Jonathan the sweetest smile that she could manage without gagging. "If you'll excuse me, it seems that I am needed."

He bowed. "Of course." He took her hand before she could step away and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Until later, my lady," he murmured, pressing a second, lingering kiss to the back of her hand.

Elizabeth fought the urge to yank her hand away, forcing herself to wait for him to release it instead. She gave a curtsy and walked away, gripping Mary's arm tightly. "If you ever leave me alone with him again, I swear that I will tell Tommy and

Marcus every single prank that you and I ever pulled so that you will be walking on eggshells for the next five years with fear of what they'll do."

Mary laughed softly. "Oh, my dear, I am the mother of two rambunctious boys. Trust me, I already live in fear of what they'll do. Did I tell you that one of the little beasts put a dead fish in our bedchamber last week? It was so dreadful." She tried to sound haughty, but her amused smile gave her away. "Anthony swears he can still smell the fish in our room."

Elizabeth tried to give her an innocent smile. "I wonder where they could have gotten that idea from?" she asked, deciding that it was probably best not to mention that they hadn't found the fish that the boys had hidden behind Mary's dresser.

"You wouldn't know anything about that now, would you?" Mary asked casually. They walked along the wall, heading towards the courtyard doors where their mother was waiting for her.

"Me? Why ever would I do that to you?" She pressed her hand to her chest in feigned innocence, but Mary wasn't buying it.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps you felt that I was owed a little something for going along with Mother's scheme to make you spend more time with Lord Dumford."

"Hmm, you know, you could be right," she said thoughtfully. It was exactly the reason why she'd suggested the idea to her nephews. Her mother was desperately trying to make a match of her and Lord Dumford and Mary was helping. The man was near forty, balding and boring. The man was also a Marquee, which, in her mother's book, meant everything.

Mary was pushing the match for other reasons. The man would never hit her and would probably have very little to do with Elizabeth once she gave him an heir and a

spare. If Elizabeth couldn't marry for love, Mary would rather have her sister settled in a safe match.

Mary laughed. "I should have known. Anthony will be livid when he finds out."

"No, he won't. He adores me. He'll think it's good fun. We both know he'll do something to get back at me, probably by the end of the week."

Mary shrugged. "You're probably right," she said, clearly biting back a smile.

Elizabeth knew whatever they did to her that Mary would be behind it. Things were looking up. At least while she was forced to remain in London for the next two months she could have a little fun.

The sight that welcomed them was enough to sober her immediately. Their parents stood next to Lord Dumford, who was looking rather smug. Their mother's polite smile turned absolutely pleased when she spotted Elizabeth. "There you are, my dear."

Elizabeth forced herself to smile. Lord Dumford took her hand and bowed, pressing a chaste kiss against her knuckles that left her cold. "Good evening, Lady Elizabeth."

With a forced, barely-there smile, she curtsied. "Good evening, my Lord."

Her father cleared his throat. "Elizabeth, Lord Dumford has been telling us of his lands in the lake region. It's very interesting."

"That sounds lovely, my Lord," she said, trying not to cringe when she spotted several men walking towards them, probably hoping to steal her for a dance or a walk. Five of them were known fortune hunters and the others were known bores. She wasn't sure which was worse, but at the moment she was in no mood to find out.

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“If you would please excuse me, I believe that I could use some fresh air,” she said softly, relieved when her father gave her a small nod of approval.

“Should I accompany you, Lady Elizabeth?” Lord Dumford asked, looking expectant that she would agree.

She forced a polite smile. “No, thank you. I wouldn’t want to interrupt your evening, my Lord. I shall only be a moment.”

“Perhaps you’ll do me the honor of a dance when you return?”

Her father nodded slightly and she knew that her reprieve from this torture would only be short lived, but she would gladly take whatever she could get at the moment.

“That sounds lovely, my Lord. I look forward to it.” As she moved to leave, a few of the matchmaking mothers turned their attention on her and gestured for their sons to approach her. Realizing that she needed to leave immediately if she had any chance at all, she turned and walked slowly towards the terrace doors. Once she made it to the lawn and the safety of darkness she grabbed up her skirts and made a run for it, praying that no one would follow.

* * *

“Oh, Mr. Bradford, do come meet my daughters, Lady Penelope and Lady Emma,” a rather rotund woman said. Robert couldn’t for life of him remember her name, but he was positive that he’d seen her at one time or another speaking with his mother.

He pasted his most charming smile on his face. "It would be my pleasure." He kissed the hand of Lady Penelope and noted that she was rather fetching. He then greeted Lady Emma, who was unfortunately her mother's daughter. He was willing to bet the girl weighed two stones more than him and she was short, making the extra weight all the more tragic.

Lady Penelope fluttered her eyelashes at him in a very flirtatious manner. Even though he had no plans on marrying anytime soon, he wouldn't mind spending a little time with a beautiful woman. "Lady Penelope, would you care to take a turn about the room with me?"

She looked down shyly, an act he was sure. "That would be lovely, Mr. Bradford. Thank you."

Robert took her hand and placed it on his arm. He could barely feel her grip through his jacket. It was a shame that women of her class wore gloves everywhere. For once he would like to feel a woman's bare hand on his arm. A firmer grip wouldn't hurt either. Her touch felt cold and distant to him. He hated these games, but he would be willing to play them to make his mother happy, or if it meant that he could steal a kiss from a beautiful woman.

"Lady Penelope, have you been enjoying London?"

"Yes, the weather has been delightful," she answered. Her answer was short and proper and without a trace of an original thought. He'd been hoping to engage in an actual conversation to pass the time. No, perhaps he hadn't asked a good question. Maybe she wasn't like the rest of these mindless drones who cared about nothing except finding a husband with a title and a large purse.

He cleared his throat. "Have you been to the theatre lately?"

She smiled brightly at that. He enjoyed the theatre himself.

“Oh, I’ve really enjoyed going. Papa allowed me to purchase three new gowns just for the theatre. I have one in light pink, one in light green, and a pretty violet dress. Also, I bought new bonnets and gloves. It was so delightful!”

He could cry. He really could.

“What play did you attend?” he asked, hoping there was a way to salvage this conversation.

“Pardon me?” she asked, clearly confused.

“What play did you attend? When you wore your new dresses, what play did you attend?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed as if this was a new and unexpected line of questioning. “I didn’t wear my new dresses to the theatre. I wore my yellow dress, because it went better with the gold curtains in my family’s box.”

“The play, Lady Penelope, what was it?” Please let her know this. Damn him and his standards. He didn’t consort with whores, married women or innocents. Well, he didn’t take more than a few kisses from an innocent. The one universal problem he had, he couldn’t stomach the company of empty-headed women.

As much as he enjoyed sex, and he truly did, the prospect of it had never driven him wild or distracted him to the point that he could ignore his ridiculous standards and risk being with a woman with a penchant for drama. Then again, he’d never had much of a choice in the matter thanks to Elizabeth Stanton. It had only taken her a few minutes one sunny afternoon to guarantee him a life of misery.

In a matter of minutes she'd turned his pleasant existence into something of a nightmare. After she'd dubbed him Robert Lemonade, he'd lost all his friends, his reputation and his life had been turned into a living hell. He'd been teased, taunted and humiliated thanks to her. He'd become a primary target for the other boys at school.

For two whole years he'd been pushed around, beat up and taunted. They found great fun in humiliating him and made damn sure that he was humiliated on a daily basis. Without the protection of a title, the knowledge of how to fight, or friends who could have defended him, he'd been an easy target. They enjoyed themselves immensely at his expense until the day that he'd finally had enough and started to fight back.

At first he'd lost more fights than he'd won, but it was enough to make some of the other boys think twice about throwing lemons at him, knocking down his books, or sneaking into his room and drenching his bed and clothes with vinegar. His sudden growth spurt hadn't hurt either. While the other boys had grown slowly into manhood, it seemed as though he'd been shoved head first into it.

He'd grown into a man during the summer break of his fifteenth year just shortly after he'd finally had enough of Elizabeth Stanton's bullshit. He shot up at least a foot and gained a few stones in muscles while the other boys only gained a few inches and a healthy fear of him. Along with his size, his temper had grown and he no longer put up with jests at his expense. His temper and reputation followed him through the years, making men fear him and woman wary of his company.

If it hadn't been for his family connections and wealth, he had no doubt that the ton would have turned their back on him long ago. He would have gladly welcomed the exclusion and sought a different life for himself long before now. Life among the ton simply wasn't for him. For his parents and brother he'd tolerated this existence until a few months ago when he'd finally had enough.

Quite simply put, he hated everything about the ton and its mindless drones. He could care less about the latest gossip, the latest fashions and living his life by a set of ridiculous rules meant to exclude anyone with an ounce of originality. His feelings on the matter had been the basis for his rules about sex and women. He couldn't tolerate taking a woman without an original thought in her head to bed. He'd done it a few times and had detested the coy games that they'd enjoyed playing.

Chapter 5

“Mama says you bought a new estate. How many acres?”

He looked down at the woman on his arm. The new expression on her face was calculating.

Bloody hell.

“How many acres?” she repeated more firmly this time.

“A little over a hundred,” he said carefully, not caring one bit for the new gleam of interest in her eyes. He decided not to mention that he’d sold that estate almost immediately after buying it once he’d realized that the bullshit from his past had followed him. Nor did he mention that he’d already purchased a new estate in America and that he was leaving once he’d fulfilled his promise to his mother to help James.

“Hmmm.” She looked over his clothes as if she were taking inventory. He wore the latest fashion. He didn’t buy clothes often, but when he did, he went for quality. She seemed happy with what she saw if the little nod of approval was any indication.

He desperately wanted to change the subject before she inquired about his other holdings. “So, what play did you attend?”

Her face twisted up in disgust. “It was one of Shakespeare’s I’m afraid. I find them all a dreadful bore, but this one was most appalling. Mother insisted that we leave at

intermission and I wholeheartedly agreed.”

He stopped short. He rather enjoyed the Bard’s plays. He couldn’t think of anything in his plays that would be appalling. “What was wrong with the play?”

“A woman was dressed in men’s clothing! It was obscene!”

“Was the woman pretending to be her brother?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes! It was dreadful.”

“Was the play ‘As you like it’?”

“Yes.”

It was one of his favorite plays. That answered that.

“Lady Penelope, allow me to return you at once to your mother. I find that I need some fresh air.”

Her grip on his arm suddenly tightened. “Fresh air sounds lovely.” She licked her lips, invitingly. Christ almighty, the girl wanted to trap him. He practically dragged her back to her mother and without another word he made his way outside.

He avoided the garden and wooded areas. Those areas were for lovers if they were willing to brave this cold night for an affair. The orangery, softly illuminated by the glow of several lanterns, stood a hundred yards away from the house. It was the perfect spot for an escape on a night like this. In this cold he doubted any woman would willingly brave the weather to go there for a tryst. The orangery was the safest spot for him and it would be blessedly warm inside thanks to the fires that were kept

lit to stop the orange trees from dying.

He ran the last twenty yards to escape the frigid winds and nearly groaned with relief when he entered the warm orangery. He could easily spend the next four hours here, he decided as the smell of a burning fire and oranges teased him. He looked around the orange trees and nearly groaned in disappointment when he realized that this orangery had probably only been recently built. The trees were a bit small and held oranges far from being ripe.

It was really too bad he hadn't thought to bring a book or something to eat. He'd only eaten an hour ago and he was already starving. It was nothing new. He was always hungry. It was something that his family had never understood, but thankfully they'd stopped teasing him about it years ago. Four hours in the orangery with nothing to do or eat was not his idea of fun, but then again, neither was attending a ball.

Several lit oil lamps made it possible for him to at least see clearly enough. That was another reason lovers avoided this place, it was too bright. There would be nowhere for them to hide if they were interrupted.

A soft noise caught his attention. Curious, he slowly moved past several orange trees and froze on the spot at the sight that greeted him. A woman with beautiful brown hair that had to be made from the finest silk the way it reflected the light from the lanterns, sat on a padded bench, softly laughing as she read from a small book.

Her laughter was like a balm to his soul, instantly relaxing him even as his heart skipped a beat. It wasn't until she released a small sigh as she turned a page in her book that he realized that he'd moved closer to her. He had no business intruding. This woman obviously came here to be alone. Reluctantly, he took a step back. In his rush to escape unnoticed, he knocked over a bucket and disturbed the peace of the quiet orangery.

“Who’s there?” the young woman demanded as she placed her book down on the bench beside her and stood.

Robert’s breath caught in his throat at the first real view of her face. She was excruciatingly beautiful with pale baby blue eyes. Easily the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on and he wanted her. He gave his head a slight shake. He didn’t even know this woman. What in the hell was wrong with him?

* * *

“I can see you, so you might as well come out,” Elizabeth said, placing her small book on the cushion beside her.

She watched as a handsome man with vivid green eyes stepped forward. His black hair was cut short and styled differently than what was popular, but it looked good on him. His skin was tanned like hers. It was one of the many things that her mother complained about, but she loved the outdoors too much to care. She craved the warmth of the sun on her skin too much to be bothered with the fact that it darkened her skin and made it unattractive.

“I’m sorry, my Lady. I didn’t mean to bother you. I’ll leave,” he said in a deep voice that she found soothing as he bowed slightly before taking a step back to do just that.

“No, please. You don’t have to leave. I would be heartless if I sent you back into the cold night if you wished for a quiet escape. I believe this orangery is large enough for both of us to seek a quiet refuge,” she said with a smile, hating the idea of turning anyone out into the cold and forcing him to return back to a ball that she hadn’t been able to escape fast enough.

* * *

“How do you know that I was searching for solitude? Perhaps I was meeting a lover?” he said, regretting it before the last word left his lips.

What the hell was wrong with him? She would probably slap him or faint dead away at his lack of propriety.

He truly was an idiot.

She laughed instead, she actually laughed. It was soft, enchanting and real. It was nothing like the fake little laughs and giggles from women like Lady Penelope. Women like her faked everything in life just to be accepted by the ton and to catch a husband, who wanted nothing more than a warm body to produce an heir and didn't want the hassle of a woman with a brain.

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“What’s so amusing, my Lady? Are you suggesting that I couldn’t charm a woman to meet me for a tryst?” he drawled, wondering if she knew just how enchanting her laugh was.

With a sigh, she stopped laughing, but thankfully she was still smiling. “No, I’m sorry. I’m sure a man as handsome as you would have no difficulties finding a woman to share your time.”

Robert couldn’t stop the stupid full grin that curled up his lips. Of course he’d been called handsome before, but for some reason that he couldn’t comprehend at the moment, hearing her say it pleased him immensely. “Then what brought you to the conclusion that I was looking for privacy?”

She shrugged as she sat back down, leaning to the side so that she could focus her attention on him. “Well, there’s the fact that this particular orangery is far beyond the appropriate distance from the house. No man is going to come out here with a woman unless he’s looking to be trapped.” He couldn’t help but nod in agreement.

“Then there’s the weather. It’s quite cold out. A woman would probably complain about the distance from the house to the orangery. Then again, she would probably refuse the suggestion outright, knowing that it was too cold outside and that she would not be able to retrieve her shawl without drawing suspicion.”

Once again he nodded in agreement.

“Then of course there is the obvious.”

“Which is?” he asked, moving closer.

“A gentleman would not meet a woman here. He would escort her so that she didn’t have a chance to change her mind or accept another man’s invitation. It would also take both parties from the ball for far too long. If you were to arrive first, there would be the waiting period and then the actual time of your meeting not to mention the time one of you would need to remain behind so that it wouldn’t appear as though the two of you had gone off together.”

He couldn’t help grinning. The woman was smart as well as attractive. He looked around the large room as a thought occurred to him. “Hmm, you’ve given this some thought. Are you perhaps meeting someone here? Or did he already leave?” he asked, making sure to add a teasing note to his tone.

Her smile weakened a bit as she shook her head. “No, there have never been any meetings for me and there probably never will be,” she admitted with a small shrug and a wistful tone that he almost missed.

“Why not?”

“I don’t plan on marrying,” she explained with a small smile.

“Why don’t you wish to marry?” he asked, forcing himself to sound casual. He wasn’t offering. Oh, hell no. Marriage was not going to happen for him unless he was desperate for an heir for his family’s sake. He had no intentions on being tied down to one woman for the rest of his life, someone that was constantly underfoot and depended on him for her happiness.

She looked thoughtful for a moment before she spoke. “I don’t want to be any man’s property.”

“I thought that’s why these things,” he gestured back towards the ball, “were thrown so that young women could find themselves a husband. So, they could select an appropriate husband, someone to take care of them.”

She shrugged indifferently. “Yes, I dare say that many of the women are here for that reason and would find me utterly foolish, because I don’t wish to find a husband at one of these orchestrated events.”

“Then why did you come?” He took another step closer.

“Probably for the same reason that you did.”

“Which is?” he prompted. He didn’t want her to stop talking for fear that one of them would have to leave. He wanted to make this last, but more importantly, he wanted to see her smile and hear her laugh one more time before he had to do the right thing and walk away.

“Well,” she looked thoughtful, “in your case I would assume that either your mother or your father persuaded you to attend. If I had to guess, I would say that your mother was the one that expected your attendance.”

“Oh?”

She nodded firmly. “Your mother, definitely your mother. If it was your father you would have simply made an appearance, danced with a few women to make him think that you were looking for a wife and be done with it.”

He agreed. “If it was my mother? What reason would I have to attend then?”

“Most mothers wish for their sons to marry for a simple reason, grandchildren. You came here even though you clearly don’t want to be here. You came to make your

mother happy, because she requested your attendance and you obviously care a great deal for your mother. Instead of simply leaving, you searched for a place to hide.”

He arched an eyebrow at that. “Or it could be that I came here in her carriage and I am trapped here until she decides that it’s time to leave,” he drawled.

Her eyes slowly moved down his body in an assessing manner, but not in the same way that Penelope had looked him over. This woman’s gaze didn’t annoy him. Her gaze made him stand straighter as every muscle in his body flexed under her scrutiny, making him feel like an idiot even as he wondered if she liked what she saw.

“You’re obviously a man with means. You could have hired a hack and left. There’s always the card room for escape or you could have simply left with a friend.”

“Or walked,” he added.

She smiled. “I much prefer walks myself. Yes, you could have walked provided that your home was close enough.”

“Two miles.”

“That’s not too far away.”

“No, it’s not.” He rather enjoyed walks. He found himself taking walks every evening. Even in London he found that he enjoyed walking. The vulgar smells of the city and crowds didn’t seem to dampen his enjoyment enough for him to stop.

He eyed her carefully. Her skin was the color of light honey. She looked fit, but not too thin. Her breasts were good size, not too big, but perfect for his hands, and from what he recalled from when she stood, her hips were generous. He was willing to bet her legs were well defined, probably from hours of walking.

“So, you’re here because your parents want you to marry,” he surmised from what little he knew about her and what he knew about women of her station in general.

She gave him a dreamy smile that made his chest tighten. “When I was a little girl I wanted nothing more than to have a season. It all seemed so magical, balls, dancing, and being courted by handsome men,” she added the last with a teasing tone.

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He grinned. “Sounds like every girl’s dream to find Prince Charming. What happened to change that dream?” he asked, coming closer. He was now standing only a few feet away from her. His original thought that she was beautiful shattered. She was nothing less than a goddess.

She sighed heavily. “Anthony.”

He felt a tug of unease. Was it jealousy?

“So, you’re in love with this Anthony?”

Please God, no .

She laughed. “No. He’s my brother-in-law. My sister married for love. She didn’t care about a title or money. He made her happy, still does. They are the happiest couple that I know and their boys are extraordinary.”

“And you want that for yourself,” he surmised.

“It will most likely never happen for me,” she said with a careless shrug that tore at his heart and left him wondering why he cared so much.

Chapter 6

She was not going to tell this stranger that she was an heiress. If he turned out to be a fortune hunter she would be in trouble. He could easily sound the alarm and she would be compromised and forced to accept his hand. She wouldn’t be able to

survive being trapped in a loveless marriage.

“So, if you wish to marry for love, why don’t you enjoy evenings like this more?”

She waved her hand lazily in the air. “This? This is all orchestrated. People come here looking for the right connection, the right amount of money, and the best gossip. No one comes here looking for love. I knew before my coming out that I would never find love at a ball. It would just happen.....somehow, somewhere.”

He took another step forward. “But you came anyway.”

She looked wistful. “Until the day I marry, I belong to my father and then to my husband. I am considered nothing more than property. If I wish to have certain rights or benefits I must make the man in my life happy first. Then if he is generous I might be allowed to follow my own pursuits.” Of course that would all change with her inheritance.

Without a word, he moved to sit next to her on the padded bench. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Sounds unfair, but I don’t understand what type of pursuits a woman could have that a man would not allow. Surely your father would encourage you to embroider, watercolor, play the pianoforte.”

“I’m afraid that you would find me quite unusual then.”

“Try me.” He tilted his head to the side to watch her as she blew out a deep breath.

“If I don’t smile, look pretty, attend the right function, accept the attentions of the right gentlemen, my father will rule my life with an iron fist. I don’t like to embroider. I would rather sew quilts since it seems a better use of a skill to keep one warm than to make something look frivolous. I enjoy cooking, but I’m not supposed to. No woman in society is supposed to enjoy that. We’re supposed to enjoy ordering

other people to do that for us,” she said with a conspiratorial smile that he found utterly adorable.

“But not you,” he murmured, smiling. “I bet you make delicious biscuits,” he teased.

She grinned devilishly. “My brother-in-law and nephews swear by them.”

He took another look at her slender figure. “You don’t look like someone that enjoys cooking.”

She rolled her eyes in a rather fetching manner. “I like to cook, not to eat.”

“My apologies.” He couldn’t stop smiling near this woman. He was sure that he looked foolish, but at the moment he truly didn’t care. “So, tell me what other scandalous pursuits do you enjoy? Smuggling? Piracy?” he teased.

She laughed. “No, I’m not quite that shameful. I enjoy reading, attending the theatre, taking walks, gardening, shooting, and swimming.” His eyes widened in surprise at that. “I enjoy things that my father believes are best suited for men,” she explained with an impish smile

“I see.” He nodded, surprised by her list of pursuits. Most women would be outraged to hear another woman enjoying such things. He had to admit that most men would be shocked as well. He’d never understood that since they were all worthy pursuits.

“I’m sure that you do,” she mumbled. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone that. My father would be furious if he found out that I told you. Not that it matters anymore I suppose.”

“Why doesn’t it matter anymore?” he asked in a soft tone.

“It just doesn't," she said with a shrug.

He was willing to leave it alone for the moment, but he desperately needed her to continue talking. “Have you enjoyed being out in society?”

She nodded. “I’ve enjoyed spending more time with my sister. It’s been nice being seen as a friend and not just a little sister. She means the world to me. I’ve enjoyed the theatre, some of the dinners, and even being courted.” She could have sworn he frowned, but it was gone before she could be sure. “All the men that have courted me have turned into dear friends.”

“But you still don’t like being out in society,” he hedged.

She turned her head and met his gaze. Their faces were less than a foot apart. Robert fought the urge to lower his gaze to her lips.

“Do you?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t like the deceptions. I hate gossip. I don’t like being pursued for my position or money. I hate having women trying to trap me into marriage. I despise the game that I’m expected to play. I don’t want a simpering woman to bow to my every whim. It’s ridiculous.”

She nodded in agreement as she looked away. “Yes, it is.”

After a few moments of surprisingly comfortable silence he spoke. “May I ask why you’re here playing along if you don’t want to marry?”

When she looked back at him his eyes dropped to her lips, her full, deliciously pink lips. He raised his gaze back quickly before he did something that he would regret.

“A bargain, I suppose,” she said simply.

“A bargain? Are they trying to force you into marriage? Is your family in need of money?” Another thought occurred to him, one that made his stomach twist in dread.

“You weren’t caught...er...” Please don’t let her be carrying another man’s child.

She lightly swatted his shoulder and laughed. “No! Goodness no. The men my parents are pushing my way are tiresome men like Lord Dumford.”

He nearly choked on air.

Her smile disappeared, instantly replaced with a worried frown. “Oh no, he’s a friend of yours and I’ve just insulted him,” she said, sounding truly upset.

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He threw his head back and laughed. “Lord Dumford a friend? No! The man quotes bible verses for fun. I couldn’t imagine a fate worse than spending an hour in that man’s company.”

“Thanks. Your words have been really comforting,” she said dryly, earning another chuckle from him. He couldn’t remember the last time that he’d felt so relaxed in another person’s company. He normally kept his guard up, refusing to allow anyone to get the better of him.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured before asking, “Why then are you allowing him to court you?”

She sighed heavily. “I’m afraid my parents aren’t happy with my state of life. I’m twenty-three and while they feel that I should be married by now, I don’t. I’ve turned down every suitor who’s asked for my hand. They’re afraid they’ll end up with another spinster on their hands.” They also didn’t want her inheritance left in her control, but there was no need to tell him that .

“How many men have asked for you?” he asked. He knew that it wasn’t proper to ask, but he somehow knew that she wouldn’t mind. She didn’t seem the type. She seemed honest and forthright. It was a welcome change.

Her face scrunched up delightfully. “Fifty-five.”

“Fifty-five men have asked for your hand and you’re only twenty-three? Good lord!”

She shrugged indifferently. “I’m easy to get along with.”

He liked that. He liked that she didn't refer to the fact that she was incredibly beautiful or to a dowry that she might have, although he was sure that some of the men who'd asked were after both. If she had a decent dowry, she would be a well sought after target with her beauty.

"I believe it."

Her hand found his. She gave it a small squeeze before releasing it. "I'm sorry. You came out here looking for some solitude." She flicked her hand casually in the air. "I'll leave you." She reached down at her other side and picked up a small book with a well-worn leather cover.

"What are you reading?" he asked. It hadn't escaped his notice that she'd brought a book to a ball. "You sneak off a lot, don't you?"

She gave him a sheepish smile. "I'm afraid that I do have a tendency of making myself scarce."

He noticed the dance card on her wrist. It was full, which didn't surprise him.

"And the book?"

She held it up and shrugged. "It's one of my favorite plays. It helps me relax. I had a feeling that I would need it tonight by the way that my mother and sister were behaving."

He couldn't quite make out the words from the worn cover. "Which play?"

Her whole face lit up. She obviously took great joy from her book. "'As You Like It' by Shakespeare. It's my absolute favorite," she said dreamily.

Robert groaned. "I'm going to have to kiss you now."

Chapter 7

Elizabeth didn't have a chance to respond before his lips were touching hers. She couldn't think as he brushed his lips softly against hers, the gentle caress taking her by surprise. Her hands automatically went to his chest. She was prepared to shove him away so that she could leave before someone found them and she was forced into a marriage that she didn't want when something occurred to her.

What if this was her only chance to know what it was like to be with a man, a man that she actually wanted? She didn't want to live her life full of regrets. She didn't want to wonder what she'd missed out on by never marrying if that's what her future held. Right then she decided that if she was going to live her life as a spinster, then she was going to enjoy this moment with....whatever his name was and give into this overwhelming attraction that she felt for him. After a moment, she allowed herself to relax and to enjoy his kisses and the sensations that were teasing and tormenting her body as she lost herself to his touch.

He brushed his lips over hers once, twice and once again. Her mouth was soft and sweet, but it wasn't enough. He ran the tip of his tongue over her bottom lip. She gasped in surprise, opening her mouth ever so slightly, but it was enough for him. He tilted his head to the side and deepened the kiss.

Elizabeth didn't know what to think when his lips moved against hers except that somehow for some reason it felt right, perfect. His kisses weren't frantic or sloppy. They were sweet. When he teasingly slid his tongue inside her mouth she was too stunned at first to react to the invasion. Then slowly she began to melt in his arms. Her hands slid up his chest, enjoying the feel of hard muscle beneath his coat until they found his shoulders.

He groaned as he pulled her against him, enjoying himself until his damn conscience nagged at him. As wonderful as it felt to kiss her, he knew by the unpracticed strokes of her tongue and lips that she was innocent. He pulled back and looked into her eyes, praying that she wouldn't end this. This had to be her choice, because he sure as hell wasn't about to stop this if he had a choice in the matter.

For a moment, neither of them moved. They watched each other, panting slightly as they waited for the other to put a halt to this insanity. Slowly, he moved in, giving her a chance to stop this even as he prayed that she wouldn't. When his mouth touched hers again it was anything but timid. This kiss was hot, wild, and possessive. Words were beyond them. Robert pulled her closer until her breasts were pressed more firmly against his chest.

Elizabeth ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the soft feel of it. He moved his mouth away from hers, nibbling on her ear and neck. He slipped his fingers beneath the top of her gown and slowly pulled down the material, taking her shift down as well until her breasts were bared to him.

Still neither spoke.

He ran his tongue from her neck down to her breasts, leaving a wet trail behind that had her toes curling. Elizabeth moaned as she ran her hands down his back, encouraging him to continue when she should be pushing him away and running as fast as her legs could carry her back to the safety of the ball. He ran his tongue in a circular motion around one taut nipple before he pulled the hard pebble into his mouth, effectively killing any thoughts she might have had of ending this.

He reached up and cupped her other breast. He weighed it in his hand, squeezed it, and ran his thumb around the firm nipple. He held the breast up for his mouth and, after one last lick of the nipple he'd been worshipping, his mouth greedily accepted the offering. He licked and sucked the large breast until she was moaning louder and

digging her fingers into his shoulders, desperate for more.

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Elizabeth thought she was going to die from the pleasure he was giving her. It felt incredible. Better than she'd ever imagined, but something was missing. After a moment she realized what that something was. She needed to touch him, too. Deciding that she wasn't going to wait for an invitation, she worked his shirt off, desperate for the contact.

He was surprised when he felt her hands working the buttons of his coat, but immensely pleased nonetheless. Releasing her br**sts, he pulled his cravat off and shrugged off his outer garments, leaving only his shirt until that too was gone.

Elizabeth reached out with trembling hands and ran her fingers down his chest, enjoying the feel of his warm smooth skin over hard muscle. She ran her fingers tentatively over one flat nipple, making him groan. Her hands moved down to trace the muscles that made up his flat stomach. He groaned again, but didn't say or do anything to stop her.

She wanted to keep touching him, but her arms were effectively pinned to her sides by her dress, limiting her movements. She worried her bottom lip nervously as she pulled her arms out and pushed the dress and shift down around her waist. She watched as he ran hungry eyes over her. His response gave her the courage to continue. Pushing aside her nervousness, she leaned in and kissed him. Robert grabbed her waist and held her firmly as they kissed almost desperately.

Never breaking the kiss, he helped her to her feet until they were both standing. He reached behind her and undid the buttons of her disheveled dress. He slowly pushed it down and waited patiently until she stepped out of her dress, leaving her na**d except for her stockings and slippers. Only one person had seen her na**d before and

that had been her maid. She should be embarrassed, but oddly enough with him she didn't feel shy or self-conscious. She felt beautiful, wanted and cherished.

She watched as he kneeled down in front of her. He gently rolled her stockings down, taking her slippers off in the process. He pressed hot kisses to her skin as he made his way back to her mouth. She pulled him into her arms and kissed him hungrily, unable to get enough of him.

His hands roamed over her body, touching her arms, br**sts, stomach, back, bottom and legs. Every touch made her stomach tighten and the area between her legs ache. She wanted more, but didn't know what.

He seemed to know. He moved his mouth to her neck and suckled her skin on the way back to her br**sts. Once he found her nipple, his hand worked its way between her legs. He cupped her and ran his fingers through slick curls. She moaned loudly, unable to help herself.

When he slipped a finger inside her, he found her hot, wet, and ready. He groaned and moved his mouth back to hers while he worked a finger in and out of her. Soon she was moving against his finger, her body desperate for release. He couldn't wait. He couldn't even think of anything beyond getting inside her.

His other hand worked frantically at his pants. With a groan, he broke off the kiss and removed his hand from the honeyed heaven he couldn't wait to explore. He reached down, pushed his pants down and pulled his boots off until he was na**d as well.

His lips quickly made their way back to hers. It was a desperate need that he couldn't deny. He gasped and then moaned loudly into her mouth when he felt her fingers run curiously over his erection. Never in a million years had he thought that she would be this passionate, hadn't known that it was possible.

He reached between them and gently wrapped her hand around his length and moved it, showing her what he liked. She did it, making him pant and groan. He slid his hand back between her legs, sliding a second finger inside her until she was moaning and crying softly into his mouth. They stood there for several minutes as pleasure soared through their bodies.

It was too much for any sane man to take. He pulled his hand away and pushed her gently onto the long cushioned bench with his body brushing her hand away. He kissed her deeply as he positioned himself. Part of him was aware that he was very likely about to take her virginity, but he didn't care. She wasn't saying anything and neither was he. They were too far-gone at the moment to care about rules, propriety or the consequences that were most likely going to tear their lives apart.

Robert aimed himself and pushed in unable to wait any longer. He heard her gasp of pain and kissed her deeply, trying to distract her. The tip of his shaft came in contact with the proof of her innocence. When she didn't protest, scream, or demand that he get off her, he pulled back and thrust in until he was buried deep inside of her.

Somehow he was able to hold back when everything in him demanded that he move. One look at her beautiful face and he was knocked on his ass. She was heartbreakingly beautiful as she tried to give him a reassuring smile even as tears trailed down her face. He pressed tender kisses to her cheeks, kissing away her tears, wanting to reassure her that he would take care of her.

He moved his mouth back to hers and he kissed her slowly, trying to show her how much being with her meant to him. He'd never felt so much for another person in his entire life and for someone he didn't know it surprised him. He never allowed anyone to get close to him, didn't trust anyone. He couldn't understand how she consumed his every wish and desire. He wanted to hold her all night and keep her safe from harm, something that he'd never wanted to do with another woman.

Soon, she grew accustomed to the invasion and began to wiggle beneath him, testing his control. He slowly rolled his hips making sure that she was truly ready for him. He could feel her mouth curve into a smile beneath his and that's when he realized that he was smiling as well, making him chuckle. For the first time in a long time, he felt carefree. He kissed her deeply as he slowly thrust inside her, enjoying the feel of wet silken walls caressing his cock.

Elizabeth instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist, trying to hold him inside her. Robert cupped her breast, gently squeezing it as his thumb ran over her hard nipple. Moans, crackles of the fire, and the sounds of bodies gently slapping against each other echoed throughout the dimly lit orangery.

Robert could feel her body tighten like a vice around him. He groaned as he moved harder and faster, making her cry out in pleasure. Her fingernails dug into his back, but he didn't care. He opened his eyes and watched as her world exploded. He needed her to find her release before he could pull out. He was determined to make this good for her.

Her body began squeezing ruthlessly around his. As good as it felt to have her grip his c**k like this, it felt even better knowing that he'd been the one to give her this pleasure. Hell, he wanted to laugh and scream for joy that this beautiful minx found her moment with him. His minx .

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The reality of the moment hit him hard. She was still squeezing him and moaning. Her mouth found his neck and kissed it greedily, sucking and licking and driving him out of his goddamn mind. He couldn't hold back. He desperately needed to pull out. It was getting too close. Just one more thrust he told himself, just one more.

As his release rushed up on him, he gasped, trying to find the strength to pull out of her. Just as he somehow found the willpower to pull out she began squeezing him again, completely shattering his resistance. His head dropped back and he bit back a roar of pleasure as he found his own release. It was the most intense moment of his life. He continued to move until he was sure that she was done. When he felt her walls squeeze gently around him one last time, he fell on her, lazily kissing her neck, chin and mouth. Still neither spoke.

Robert was too weak to speak. It was the oddest way to take a woman's virginity, without any spoken words of promise or explanation. He'd always been a gentle lover, taking a woman slowly to prolong his release. He'd never even taxed himself before. Right now his body was exhausted and soaked. This was the most intense sexual experience of his life and he didn't even know her name.

Not that he ever made love to an innocent before, but surely something should have been said. Names should have been exchanged at the very least. It was without question the most passionate night of his life. He'd never been so moved by lust or need before to make him this desperate to make love to a woman.

He pulled back to look at her, expecting her to cry, scream or hit him. He'd been a cad taking her innocence. But instead of doing what he'd expected, what he deserved, she smiled sweetly up at him and pressed a tender kiss to his mouth. Robert turned

the kiss into a slow, deep display of appreciation, passion and need. He was still inside of her and surprised to discover that he was hardening again. He wanted her once more, desperately, but he couldn't do that to her.

He took a steadying breath and slowly began to pull out, however, her legs wrapped tightly around his waist and trapped him. He raised an eyebrow in question. Then she spoke for the first time since they'd started. "Can we do it again?" she asked shyly.

Chapter 8

Robert could only chuckle. He leaned down and kissed her. "Yes, minx, we can do it again." He punctuated every word with a slow thrust of his hardening shaft.

He took her slowly this time, enjoying every single thrust inside her body. She was passionate, very passionate. She wasn't content with lying there while he bedded her. She kissed his mouth, chin, and neck greedily while her hands ran through his hair, down his back, and finally cupped his ass. He could swear that she moaned with pleasure just from touching him.

He broke the kiss and pulled back just far enough away so that he could watch her face. She smiled shyly up at him. She was so damn beautiful. He slowed his rhythm and made his thrusts shallower, stressing each movement. She licked her lips hungrily.

"You like that, don't you, minx?"

"Y-yes, please don't stop."

He shook his head. "Never."

He gently took her hands and held them above her head, entwining their fingers as he

made love to her. The gesture made what they were doing feel more intense. Soon she was throwing her head back and whimpering.

Robert took her mouth, kissing her deeply as he quickened his thrusts inside her. She gripped his hands tightly. He felt her body tighten around him once again. There was no point in pulling out now. The damage was already done. They exploded in the same moment. He didn't bother trying to hide his pleasure this time. They were too far away from the loud ballroom for anyone to hear them. Even if they weren't there was no way to stop him now.

“ Oh God !” he roared.

He collapsed on top of her, sweaty and sated. He didn't know many women who appreciated a sweaty man on top of them, so he moved to roll off her when her small warm arms wrapped around his shoulders.

His minx pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. She pulled him closer while she ran her hands over his damp back in a soothing motion. He kissed her cheek and was surprised when she sighed with pleasure. He couldn't help but wonder how women could be so completely different.

Elizabeth moved her head back so that she could look into his eyes. “Thank you for tonight. I'll always remember it.” She looked and sounded so grateful. He couldn't imagine what he'd done for her besides take her innocence without asking. He shouldn't be thanked. He should be shot.

He sighed, shaking his head. “Minx,-”

“Shhh,” she pressed a finger to his mouth. “I don't want you to feel guilty about this. It was perfect. This will always be the most passionate night of my life and I will always treasure it. Please don't be mad. I'm not.”

“Minx,” he began again, “you should be mad...what we did....what I did was inexcusable. I-“

“No, no words, no apologies. Just let it remain this perfect moment between two strangers who found comfort with each other.”

Comfort? It was a hell of a lot more than comfort. It was intense, indescribable, and possibly the stupidest thing he’d ever done. He’d just got himself leg shackled to this beautiful stranger.

With real regret, he pulled away from her arms and started dressing. “Listen, we need to talk.”

“About what?” she asked, pulling on her stockings. He forced himself to think about their situation and ignore those very beautiful legs of hers.

He shook himself. “Minx, I just took your innocence. We need to marry now. I think at least proper introductions are in order. My name is-“

Her small hand quickly covered his mouth. “Please, don’t. I need you to understand. I have no plans on marrying.” When he pulled back to protest she cut him off again. “I have no wish to marry you. What you did for me tonight was a special gift. I will always be grateful for it. Please allow me to keep this beautiful memory.”

After a long pause, he reluctantly nodded. There was no sense in arguing with her. He would never force a woman to do anything that she didn’t want to do. He certainly wasn’t about to thank this woman for the most wonderful night of his life by robbing her of her freedom without justification.

“If that's what you wish, but I should give you my name in case,” his gaze dropped to her stomach, “you and I made a child tonight,” he finished quietly.

She gasped softly. She hadn't thought about that. A baby? She wanted children, desperately. Not that it would ever happen. Her mother told her that it was impossible to become pregnant the first time. It was unheard of. So there was nothing to fear.

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“There’s nothing to worry about,” she said as she finished her hair, trying to reassure him.

Her only hope was that she looked presentable. Not that it mattered. As soon as she returned to the ball, she was leaving with a headache. After such a wonderful time with him she didn’t want to ruin the memory with the insipid men she knew waited for her.

He finished dressing as well. “There’s nothing to worry about? Minx, if you’re carrying my child I will certainly worry about it. I will never stand by while any of my children are raised without me. I’m not that sort of man.”

No, she somehow knew that he wasn’t.

“Here,” he said suddenly as he searched his pockets. He pulled out a small pencil stub and a small piece of parchment from his jacket pocket and wrote his name on it, knowing that he’d probably be out of the country by then.

For a moment he thought about delaying his trip for a few months to make sure that she wasn’t pregnant, but he knew that it was impossible. If she looked for him, she’d be able to quickly discover who his family was and ask James for help. James would move heaven and earth to bring her to him so that they could marry immediately for the sake of the baby. He’d pull his brother aside later tonight after they left the ball to discuss the matter.

He folded the note several times before handing it to her. “Take this.”

“No.”

“I’m not trying to ruin this. If you should find yourself with child, open it and contact me or my brother, please.” When she didn’t take it, he continued. “If you don’t take it then I won’t be able to allow you to leave until I have your name.”

With a heavy sigh, she took the folded piece of parchment and placed it in her reticule. “Happy?”

He smiled. “Extremely.”

“How’s my hair?”

The smile took on a different meaning as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Perfect.”

“Shall I go first and make my excuses to leave?”

He respectfully nodded. “Thank you for a most wonderful evening, minx.”

“The pleasure was mine, sir,” she said, smiling shyly as she turned away and headed for the door.

Oh, no dear minx, it was definitely mine, he thought as he watched her walk away.

* * *

Elizabeth forced herself to smile pleasantly and walk at a slow pace through the crowded ballroom when all she wanted to do was run away from the crowd and find somewhere quiet where she could calm her racing heart. Somehow she managed to slip through the crowd without drawing attention from any of her many unwanted

suitors and, more importantly, her mother as she made her way to a retiring room. Without hesitation, she closed and locked the door behind her and sank down to the floor.

In only took a few seconds for reality sank in. Her heart felt as though it was racing in her chest. She'd just lost her virginity to a man that she didn't know at a crowded ball. As wonderful as it had been, she couldn't help but think of what could have happened if someone had found them or if he'd turned out to be a fortune hunter. She could at this very moment be forced to announce her engagement to a man that she didn't know.

Her entire future could have been ruined in a matter of minutes all because she allowed herself to be carried away in a moment of weakness. She'd been so foolish and so incredibly lucky.

How could she have done something so irrational? She had a plan for her life and it most certainly didn't involve making love to a man she didn't know in a well-lit orangery where anyone could have stumbled upon them. In a matter of months she was going to turn twenty-four and gain control over her inheritance. Then she would move to her north estate where she would live out the rest of her life away from the nonsense of the ton .

She'd been such a foolish woman tonight allowing herself to be swept away by a deep alluring voice, good looks, beautiful eyes and an overwhelming need to do the wrong thing. She'd been helpless to deny him. When his lips had touched hers, it felt like a fire had been lit in her body and she couldn't seem to get enough of him. Her cheeks burned with humiliation. What he must think of her!

The things they did!

The things she did!

A rather disturbing thought occurred to her. What if they ran into each other at another ball or a party? Would he expect a repeat of tonight? Would she allow it? It scared her how quickly she was able to answer that question.

Yes, she would.

If she was given another opportunity to be in his arms, she would not hesitate even for a minute. She'd risk everything for another moment with him. Knowing how weak she was when it came to the handsome stranger and what was at risk, she decided there was only one course of action left for her. She had to leave London sooner than she'd originally planned.

* * *

“There you are!” his mother said brightly, too damn brightly.

Robert glanced around the large ballroom, hoping to find his minx. True to her word she had left. Now he was left at this dreadful ball with memories of her. He could simply ask around about her, but then that would put them in an awkward position. People would want to know why he was interested and tongues would wag. Maybe if he continued to go with his mother out on the town for the next few weeks he would run into her. It was possible.

“Oh, Robert, Lord and Lady Norwood are waiting to see you. They’re so excited. They haven’t seen you since you were -”

“Fifteen,” he supplied on a bored sigh. That was when he finally put his foot down and refused to be anywhere near Elizabeth Stanton. That was also the year the little brat poured ink into his damn teacup in front of the beautiful Eleanor Tidsby, who screamed her bloody head off before she’d fainted dead away when she saw his black mouth. He’d almost killed the little brat then and there.

“That sounds about right. Come along,” she said, placing her hand on his sleeve. No one in this ballroom would suspect that she had his arm in a death grip that would no doubt leave a large bruise. Not that he minded. He would have other marks on his body from his minx. He barely stopped himself from grinning like an idiot. She truly was wonderful, he thought just before he spotted Lady Stanton standing next to a few young women, making his smile disappear instantly.

“She’s not waiting with her mother, is she?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Elizabeth Stanton,” he said tightly, in absolutely no mood for any of his mother’s games, not tonight.

She patted his arm. “No, my dear. She is somewhere around. It’s too bad. You’re both so much alike.”

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“Take that that back or you will never have any grandchildren by me,” he threatened, insulted that his mother would say something so horrible about him.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. I won’t mention her again. So touchy,” she said quietly as they reached Lord and Lady Norwood.

“Robert, my boy,” Lord Norwood said with a warm smile as he reached out and took Robert's hand firmly into his own. The man was graying, but still an impressive sight.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, my Lord.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lady Norwood whisper something into Heather’s ear. He couldn’t believe how huge the woman was. Maybe the little brat was too. If only, he thought with an inward sigh. Heather shot her mother an annoyed look before she curtsied and walked away, clearly displeased with whatever her mother said. His father and brother walked over and joined them a moment later.

One glance at his mother’s pleased expression and he knew that she was up to something. She kept looking around the large crowd expectantly and then back at James before she looked at his father, who nodded slightly as if to answer a silent question. Oh hell, poor James. Their parents, it seemed, were playing matchmaker. He knew that expression on his mother’s face and actually feared the day when it was focused on him, which was another reason why he was leaving.

“Robert my boy, your father was telling me about your new estate. Congratulations,” Lord Norwood said with a warm smile that was nothing like the fake smile his wife currently had plastered to her face.

“Thank you, my Lord,” he said, not bothering to mention that he no longer owned that estate.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lord and Lady Norwood part. A second later a young woman was practically shoved between them. He saw James gasp and his eyes widen. His mother looked very pleased, as did his father. Robert turned around to see what they were looking at and smiled.

His minx.

“James, Robert, you remember our youngest daughter, Elizabeth?” Lady Norwood said proudly.

Oh, hell.

Chapter 9

Elizabeth ran her eyes over the man standing in front of her. She was not going to faint or scream, she decided as she tried to remain calm. She shoved her hand inside her reticule and pulled out the small piece of paper and opened it while keeping her eyes focused on the small group in front of her, smiling charmingly as she prayed that this was all a mistake. As discreetly as possible, she looked down at the piece of parchment in her hand. She groaned inwardly. On the paper clearly written was the name of Robert Bradford.

This could not be happening.....

Robert’s smile disappeared only to be replaced by a sharp scowl in her direction. She was about to say a few choice words to him when James stepped forward. Good lord, the man was still a sight to behold.

“Lady Elizabeth.” He took her hand and bowed over it. “You’ve grown into a lovely young woman.” She curtsied even as her eyes shot back to Robert. Her face burned with embarrassment just thinking about what they'd done. His scowl intensified when he noted her blush.

“They’re about to begin the supper waltz,” her mother said none-too-subtly, intensifying her mortification when she really hadn’t thought it was possible.

* * *

“Ah, Lady Elizabeth!”

Robert looked back and almost laughed. Lord Dumford was coming to claim her. Good. There wasn’t anyone who deserved it more than this woman . It surprised him how quickly she went from being his minx to this horrid woman in his mind. All those memories came flooding back to him. God, he hated her. It didn’t matter that he still wanted her. He hated her and that was all that mattered.

“May I have the pleasure of the supper waltz and then perhaps escort you to supper?” Lord Dumford asked with that damn pompous tone that grated in the worst way.

“I’m sorry, my Lord. I’ve already promised another gentleman to dance and dine with him tonight,” she said sweetly, very kindly actually.

“Who?” Lord Dumford asked rather rudely.

“Me,” James said firmly.

Damn it!

James held out his hand. “I believe this is our dance, Lady Elizabeth,” James said

smoothly. Their parents were practically giddy. This was planned! They wanted James and Elizabeth together.

The hell that was going to happen!

He would not stand for it.

* * *

Elizabeth had no choice but to accept his offer. Although she wouldn't mind fulfilling a childhood fantasy by dancing with James, she needed to speak with Robert and get their stories straight. Once that was done, she would happily beat him upside the head with her book, she thought with a smile.

"I believe you're correct, my Lord," she said as she took his offered arm, leaving Robert behind to glare after them.

They took their place among the other couples on the dance floor. James smiled down at her. "I must say, Elizabeth, you look nothing like the child I remember."

"Fourteen years will do that, my Lord," she said coolly, making him visibly wince.

"Ouch. I suppose I should now apologize for my absence. I did not do it to be cruel, my dear. I had to support my brother and all that."

"I thought as much. You were always close to my family. I assumed your absence was in support of your brother."

"Well, you couldn't blame the boy. You were clearly driving him on the path to Bedlam," he said with a grin.

She took pride in that. She really shouldn't, but she did. "He wasn't such an angel if I recall," she pointed out just as the waltz began.

He chuckled. "No, he certainly wasn't. I do recall an incident where he cut off your hair."

"Yes, I believe someone put tar or some sticky substance on his saddle," she said innocently.

James laughed heartedly. "Yes, I believe I remember that. He was forced to leave his breeches behind and run to the house, wrapped in an itchy horse blanket."

She shrugged delicately as they turned. "I still don't see how he blamed me for someone's careless placement of such a sticky item."

His eyes twinkled with merriment. "How ever did he get to you? If my memory is correct, you were both so wary around each other and constantly on guard."

"I was walking beneath a tree with Mary when he reached down and grabbed my braid. The silly oaf was hanging upside down from a branch. He held on tightly, ignoring Mary's slaps while he cut my braid off with a dull pocket knife."

He cringed. “That must have hurt.”

She smiled sweetly. “Not as much as that spanking your father gave Robert later.”

“I bet.” He laughed. “You two were awful.”

“I was worse,” she said with a gleam in her eye. He chuckled as he led her around the dance floor.

When the dance ended he led her off the floor towards the supper room. He walked with her to a table by the far wall and held a chair out for her.

“There you are,” Robert said, taking one of the extra seats at their table. He placed a plate overflowing with food and a glass of punch on the table.

“Please do join us,” James said dryly.

“Thank you, I believe I shall,” Robert said cheerfully.

“I’ll get us something to eat,” James said pleasantly to her before he sent a brief glare in Robert’s direction.

Elizabeth watched nervously as James walked away. “Never going to happen,” Robert said around a bite of biscuit.

* * *

“What?”

“You and my brother. James will always think of you as the fat little pain in the ass that used to follow him around.”

“And you’ll always be the annoying little boy who used to leave more puddles around the house than my dog.”

His temper flared. “Why you little-”

“Ah, Lady Elizabeth, may I join you?” a man with an eager expression that annoyed Robert, asked.

"No, go away," Robert said, glaring at the man.

The man opened his mouth, but quickly shut it as he scurried away.

"That was rude!" Elizabeth hissed softly.

He merely shrugged as he dug into his food.

“Here you are.” James placed a small plate of food and a glass of punch in front of her.

“Thank you, my Lord.”

“James. Please call me James. Our families are old friends, after all.”

“James, thank you,” she said pleasantly.

Robert rolled his eyes and looked back down at his plate. Damn those biscuits were

actually warm and pretty good. Not the norm for ball food. He reached over and snagged the biscuit off her plate. “Thanks,” he muttered.

Elizabeth simply rolled her eyes.

“Robert,” James hissed.

“Oh, very well.” He reached over and snagged his brother’s biscuit as well, couldn’t have improprieties after all.

“Are you enjoying yourself this season, Elizabeth?” James asked, pointedly ignoring him now.

Her eyes shot to Robert. There was that blush again. He rather liked that blush on her.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Have you had a chance to see the sights?” James asked.

They both knew that she’d been coming to London every year of her life. James really needed to work on his dinner conversation, Robert decided.

“Not yet,” she said with a polite smile.

“You should really check out the orangeries. They’re very interesting,” Robert said before he could stop himself. Ah, well at least she blushed again.

“What?” James asked, sounding confused as he shifted his gaze between the two of them.

“Nothing,” he mumbled. This woman was his enemy. If he kept saying stupid things, they would be found out and then he would be stuck with her for eternity. He

shuddered at the thought. For the rest of the meal he remained quiet, limiting himself to refilling his plate five times instead of his customary ten so that he could keep an eye on her. When they were finished with their meal they met up with their parents. Plans for the rest of the night were quickly made. It was decided that both families were going to his father's house for a game of cards and a drink.

Robert waited until their parents and James were ahead of them before he grabbed Elizabeth by the arm and dragged her towards the small hallway behind the grand staircase. It was dark and, most importantly, private.

"Get your hands off me!" she demanded.

"We need to talk," he said through clenched teeth.

"We have nothing to talk about."

"I beg to differ." He forced himself to ignore her soft warm body pressed up against his. She tried to push past him, but he wasn't having that. He gently pushed her back against the wall.

"Robert, let me go! They'll notice our absence."

"Too bad. I want to know why you tricked me."

"No one tricked anyone. It was just a mistake, one better off forgotten."

A mistake? The most passionate night of his life was a mistake? Her first time and that's what she thought. That grated on him in the worst way. "Is that what you think, Beth?"

"Don't call me that."

“Why, Beth ?”

“You know I hate that name.”

“Oh, so sorry, Beth . I do apologize, Beth .” He was being petty and he knew it, but he didn’t give a damn. She’d always brought out the very worst in him.

She reached up and twisted his ear. “Ow!”

“Out of my way, Robert Lemonade,” she said casually, pissing him off in the worst way.

She released his ear just as she stepped back into the foyer after making sure that it was empty. “Good seeing you again, Robert.”

Chapter 10

He absently rubbed his ear as they rode through the city. His mother and father couldn’t say enough nice things about Elizabeth. He wanted to hurl. James seemed to agree with them. He nodded quite often and smiled. Dear God, the man was smitten with the little minx.

James and Elizabeth, the idea was horrifying. Having her as a sister-in-law would drive him to drink. Poor James, the bloody bastard would be stuck with her day and night. Night. The idea of James experiencing his minx was not comforting. His minx? She wasn’t his anything. That didn’t mean that he wanted her to join the family, because he didn’t and she wouldn’t be. He wasn’t going to put a stop to it over jealousy. He had future generations of Bradfords to worry about after all. Just because the idea of her with another man made his blood boil did not mean that he was jealous. Just the opposite in fact. He didn’t want to see any man tied down with such a horrible woman.

“What’s going on?” James suddenly asked, making him realize that he’d been glaring at his brother since they’d left the ball.

“Fire!” their coachman yelled as the coach came to an abrupt stop, jolting them all.

“Harold, it’s our house!” Danielle cried.

“Nonsense,” Harold huffed as he leaned over to look out the small square window.

“It is!”

Robert was already jumping out of the carriage and running before the last word was out of his father’s mouth. Ahead of him Lord Norwood and, damn it all to hell, Elizabeth were also running towards the large blaze.

Elizabeth stopped in front of the crying maids. “Johnny’s in there!”

“Who’s Johnny?” Elizabeth asked, getting the attention of the maid closest to her.

“He’s the cook’s grandson. He’s visiting. Oh, he’s so small!” the maid cried, her horrified gaze fixed on the townhouse slowly being consumed by flames.

She grabbed the maid’s shoulders, ignoring the smoke and blaze for a moment. “Where is he?”

“In the back! In the servant’s quarters!”

“Elizabeth, get back!” her father yelled from the line of men handling the buckets of water.

“You’re sure he didn’t make it out?” she asked the maid, ignoring her father's demands.

“Yes! He was crying when they dragged me out!”

“Okay, the back you say?”

“Yes!”

Elizabeth grabbed a passing bucket of water and poured it on herself. “My Lady?” the maid asked, stunned by the odd behavior, but Elizabeth was already off and running into the smoke filled house.

“Elizabeth!”

“Beth!”

She ignored the shouts and pressed her wet shawl to her mouth so that she could breathe through the thick smoke. She ducked low and moved forward. Her eyes were already stinging by the time she made it to the front step. She had no idea where the fire had started, but she had a good idea that it had started on the second floor since she didn't see any hint of flame through the thick smoke. Old houses like this went up quickly once the flame took hold so she knew there wasn't much time to guess. She moved to the back of the house, jumping over rubble and avoiding the crumbling ceiling along the way as she prayed that she was headed in the right direction.

“Johnny!” she screamed, coughing as she made her way through the smoky kitchen to the back rooms. She hadn't been in this house in over ten years, but she was able to get her bearings, she knew it as well as her own.

“Johnny!” she yelled again when she reached the servants' quarters. She remembered the cook had the room at the end of the small hallway and kept walking, praying that nothing had changed since she'd last been here.

Halfway down the small hallway a hand wrapped around her arm and pulled her to a stop. “What the hell do you think you're doing?” Robert demanded, yelling so that he could be heard over the loud crackling of fire and the sounds of timber crashing close by.

Desperate to find the little boy, she pushed at his arm until he let her go and practically ran to the cook's room. She threw the door open. Through the smoke she could just barely make out a small bed made up on one side and a small pallet on the floor on the other side of the room. This was the room. It had to be.

"Johnny!"

"Here," a small voice said, sounding terrified.

"Under the bed!" Robert yelled.

They both quickly dropped to their knees. Elizabeth leaned down and peered under the bed and nearly wept with relief when she spotted the small boy curled up beneath the bed.

"Come here, sweetheart," Elizabeth said softly around a cough as smoke threatened to suffocate her.

The little boy shook his head. "Come here, you're worrying your grandmother. You don't want to do that, do you?"

"No," Johnny said, shaking his head. "I'm scared."

"I am, too. I need you to come out here, Johnny, and help me," she said firmly, hoping the demand would be enough to convince him to come out.

The boy thought it over before reluctantly nodding. Hesitantly, he reached out and took her hand. When a loud crack echoed throughout the room a few seconds later, the frightened boy tried to pull back, but Robert grabbed his arm and yanked the boy out the rest of the way before he could move back. Johnny shrieked in surprise.

“Good, let’s go,” Robert said, reaching back and taking her arm. He pulled her towards the kitchen where they both froze in horror. The way they’d come was now engulfed in flames.

“Out the back!” Elizabeth yelled. She tugged on his hand and pulled him towards the door that led to the small garden. She managed to yank the door open and fled the house with Robert in tow.

“I want my Grandma!” Johnny sobbed.

Robert nodded sympathetically. “We’ll take you right to her.” He looked back at the house. Thankfully the house was made of thick stone. It would help slow the spread of flames to other houses and give the men a chance to put out the fire. They could hear the men shouting orders for more water while others screamed in fear.

“We’ll have to go around the alley,” Elizabeth said, her voice raw from the smoke.

“Let’s go,” he said in agreement.

Johnny wrapped his small arms around his neck while they charged through the thick smoke that poured into the alley. Water thrown on the neighboring roofs to prevent the fire from spreading dripped down on them. The cool water felt good on their overheated, ash covered skin.

Elizabeth squeezed his hand, afraid she’d lose them in the smoke. She tugged none-too-gently to get them onto the street where they both collapsed in coughing fits. Their lungs cramped under the demand for fresh air.

“Over here!” a man yelled.

Strong hands suddenly clasped Elizabeth by her arms and hauled her up. In seconds

she was cradled in someone's strong arms. She looked up expecting to see her father. Instead she was looking at Robert's soot covered face. She watched a muscle pulse in his jaw as he stared down at her.

"Come on, we need to get you out of here," he said hoarsely.

"Where's Johnny?" she asked, close to panicking when she didn't spot the little boy. Had they lost the boy in the smoke?

"Calm down. He's okay. His grandmother tore him from my arms before I hit the cobblestone."

"We need more men! More men!" someone screamed.

They looked over to see wide gaps in the water bucket line. Without a word, she squirmed out of his arms and ran to fill the gap at the front of the line. "Elizabeth!"

She ignored him. As soon as she found a spot she jumped into the rhythm of passing the water buckets to the first man on the ladder and taking the empty buckets out of his hand and passing them back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Robert jump into the line. He worked hard and fast, but kept his eyes on her. Her father and James were further down in the line, already soaked to the bone. The women in their party were gone along with her family's carriage. It was for the best. They were completely useless standing around swooning.

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Several women, maids mostly, from other households, joined the line upon seeing her. Soon the water was moving faster. Her arms and back were suffering under the constant strain, but she pushed on. She never asked anyone to relieve her and never slowed down. The houses were mostly made of stone and a good distance apart, but if they didn't get this fire out, there would be nothing to stop the fire from spreading from rooftop to rooftop until it found a wooden building. Then there would be big trouble.

Seven hours later the fire had consumed everything that it could. Men were forming lines into the house and putting out smaller fires. They were very fortunate that the fire hadn't spread. The house was in complete ruins, but other than a few burns, no one was seriously injured.

Elizabeth and the four men completely covered from head to toe in wet soot traveled by Lord Bradford's carriage to Bethany House, her family's London seat. No one was surprised to find the parlor full of curious women. They nodded politely, but didn't answer any questions. They were hungry, tired and sore. All Robert wanted at that moment was a hot bath, a warm bed and perhaps a warm body to hold. His gaze shot to Elizabeth the same time that hers shot to his. They held the gaze until one of the men cleared his throat.

"I've had rooms set up for you and hot baths should be awaiting all of us," Lord Norwood said, his voice was as scratchy as theirs. "I'll have meals brought up. Get some rest and then later we'll sit down and figure out some things." His attention shifted to Elizabeth. She swallowed nervously and stepped back into James, who steadied her by cupping her elbow with his hand.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

She nodded.

“Thank you for your help, Elizabeth. I don’t think we would have put the fire out as quickly or would have been this fortunate not to lose anyone in the fire if the women hadn’t joined,” James said sincerely.

“Y-you’re welcome,” she said, a bit embarrassed by all the attention.

“I would have to agree. Thank you, my dear,” Lord Bradford said, bowing to her.

Robert didn’t speak. His eyes dropped to where James held her elbow before he turned around and gestured for a footman to show him to his room.

Her father looked both proud and upset. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Don’t ever scare me like that again. It’s not good for an old man’s heart to see his youngest daughter run into a burning building.”

“Sorry, Papa,” she mumbled as he kissed her forehead.

“Run along and get cleaned up.”

“Yes, Papa.” She forced a smile and made her way upstairs. A nice warm bed sounded so good. A nice warm strong body to curl up with sounded better. She looked towards the guest wing and sighed. That would have been very nice indeed.

Chapter 11

“Good morning, Lady Elizabeth,” he heard a footman say in greeting to the woman that hadn’t left his thoughts since the moment he’d laid eyes on her in the orangery.

He paused mid-chew, wondering if he should do them both a favor and sneak out the servants' door and leave for the day, but the maid carrying in a fresh platter of eggs took the decision out of his hands.

With a putout sigh, he got to his feet and picked up two of his empty plates and headed for the sideboard. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Elizabeth enter the breakfast room, come to an abrupt halt when she spotted him, take an anxious step back before a look of determination took over her features and she forced herself to walk into the room. So, she wasn't a coward, he thought with a spark of admiration, that was good to know.

Because he just couldn't help himself, he took his time loading both plates with food. He ignored the rather adorable homicidal glare that she was sending his way as she stood to the side of him, holding an empty plate as she waited for him to get the hell out of the way. When she started to tap her foot impatiently, he decided that perhaps he should add a third plate now, to save time later and to annoy the little brat. He took his time making his selections, wondering just how far he would be able to push her before she started screaming at him or threw her plate at his head, but to his surprise she didn't say a word while he made her wait.

Feeling slightly disappointed, he picked up his plates, careful not to drop a single delicious morsel, and carried them back to his seat at the table. As he ate, he watched her make her selections, wondering if she was going to leave the room entirely or sit at the far end of the table to get away from him. She did neither, surprising him once again.

"Couldn't stand to be away from me?" he asked when she sat down across from him, because apparently he was an idiot. He should be avoiding this woman and figuring out a way to convince his mother that he needed to leave before he did something foolish like throttle the woman sitting across from him or bend her over the table, lift up the skirts of her light pink dress and relieve the ache between his legs that was

now making itself known.

Instead of answering him, she simply sat there eating quietly as she pretended as though she hadn't heard him. He wasn't sure why that pissed him off, but it did. Given their history it would probably be for the best if they ignored each other, but he really wanted to get a reaction out of her. He really loved it when she reacted, he thought, remembering last night when she'd been beneath him, fingernails digging into his back as he slid in and out of her incredibly tight sheath.

With a muttered curse, he focused his attention back on his food as he shifted in his chair to try and adjust his already too tight pants. Lusting after the pain in the ass wasn't going to help him. She'd ruined his life and he'd be smart to remember that, no matter how good she'd felt in his arms.

"Good morning, Elizabeth," his brother said as he walked into the room, sounding genuinely pleased and drawing Robert's glare.

The betraying bastard, he thought, as he watched his brother walk over to Elizabeth, who was smiling up at the bastard, and press a kiss to the back of her hand.

"Good morning, James," she said, smiling and not pissing him off.

Not. At. All.

When his brother reluctantly stepped away from Elizabeth to fill a plate at the sideboard, Robert's eyes narrowed on him, taking in the well-fitted jacket and pants that fit him to perfection and then down to the borrowed clothes that he now wore and hated. They were too small, too tight and, unfortunately, too short. He looked ridiculous while his brother looked every inch the lord that he was.

All of their clothes had been ruined in the fire and the clothes that they'd worn last

night had been unsalvageable. This morning he had been faced with the choice of wearing the borrowed clothes from God only knew or staying in his room wearing his drawers until some new clothes could be made and delivered to him. He should have stayed in his room, he realized with an annoyed grunt as he returned his attention back to his food.

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“What are your plans for this morning?” James asked.

“Work,” he grunted, not bothering to look up from his food as he answered the bastard.

“I was talking to Elizabeth,” his brother drawled, reminding Robert that the dumb bastard was infatuated with the little pain in the ass.

Elizabeth cleared her throat before she answered. “I thought I’d go for a walk in the park since it’s such a beautiful day.”

“It’s far too cold for a walk,” his brother explained with a light chastising tone. “Why don’t I take you for a ride this afternoon in my carriage instead?”

Ah, so the courting was already beginning, Robert realized with dread, his appetite suddenly gone. Somehow he forced himself to sit there and shovel another forkful of food into his mouth as he waited for her answer.

“That sounds lovely, James. Thank you,” Elizabeth said politely, sounding pleased and forcing him to abruptly stand, knocking his chair to the floor in the process, and walk out of the room before he did something that he might truly regret.

* * *

“It’s very cold, m’lady,” Jane complained once again through chattering teeth.

“It will feel warmer after a few minutes,” Elizabeth said absently, sending her maid a

reassuring smile as she quickened her pace, needing the fresh air and peace that walking provided her.

In truth, it was quite a bit colder than it had been yesterday. It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining, there wasn't a cloud in the sky, but unfortunately it was also cold enough to form icicles on pretty much everything. When she'd stepped outside ten minutes ago and was hit with a blast of cold air, she'd considered going inside and spending the day by the fire with a good book, but after seeing Robert this morning, she needed to clear her head.

This morning she'd forced herself to get dressed after a restless night spent pacing her bedroom despite her exhaustion and went downstairs, hoping to use the late night to her advantage and break her fast alone before she secluded herself in the library for the day. She would have never left the safety of her room if she had known what waited for her in the breakfast room.

When she saw him standing there, filling his plate with an insane amount of food, wearing a ridiculous suit that was too small for him, she'd felt her heart skip a beat and had an overwhelming urge to walk up to him, wrap her arms around his neck and pull him down for a kiss. Knowing that he wouldn't welcome her touch had felt a thousand times worse than when James had stepped out of her life and broken her young heart.

She'd wanted nothing more than to run up to her room, throw something and perhaps cry into her pillow as she bemoaned the unfairness of her situation, but she'd forced herself to walk into that room and pretend that her heart wasn't breaking. After reminding herself that she was dealing with Robert Bradford, the horrid boy that had once filled her bureau drawers with snakes, she was able to act like his presence didn't bother her.

But it did.

She was torn between kicking him or kissing him, neither one a very good option if she wanted to convince her father to allow her to leave London on her own.

“M’lady?” Jane said through clattering teeth.

“I’m sorry, Jane,” she said, forcing her thoughts away from Robert. “Here,” she said, removing her shawl from around her shoulders and holding it out to her maid.

Jane eyed the shawl with longing, but her training kept her from accepting even though her lips were starting to turn an interesting shade of purple. “No, thank you, m’lady,” she mumbled, forcing herself to look away.

With a muttered curse about the ridiculousness of propriety, Elizabeth stepped behind the trembling woman and wrapped the shawl around her shoulders before she stepped away and continued walking at a quick pace, needing the exercise.

“Thank you, m’lady,” Jane mumbled, gripping the shawl tightly around her shoulders as she did her best to keep up with Elizabeth.

“You’re welcome,” Elizabeth said, looking over her shoulder to give the other woman an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry that you had to come out with me in this cold.”

“It’s no trouble, m’lady,” Jane dutifully said when they both knew that the woman would rather be doing just about anything else.

Jane hated going for walks, which was why Elizabeth never asked for her company when they resided in the country. Out there the protection of a servant wasn’t needed. She could spend her days walking her father’s land freely without worry, but in London she was required to have a servant with her anytime she ventured away from the house without the protection of a relative. It was a ridiculous rule, one she’d

argued about with her father every season, but one that she couldn't seem to get out of.

Five minutes later she was regretting giving up her warm shawl as the cold finally managed to seep into her bones, making it painful to walk or breathe for that matter. Oh, why hadn't she stayed home and waited for James to take her for a ride later? Because, she was stubborn and foolish, she decided as a violent shiver tore through her body, making her grind her teeth against the cold assault.

"What the hell are you doing out in this cold?" Robert snapped, startling her just as something rather warm was wrapped around her shoulders.

She looked down to find herself wrapped in a thick wool coat. Before she could argue, which she desperately wanted to do on principle alone, Robert was standing in front of her, giving her no choice but to stop walking as he finished pulling the coat around her and fastened the buttons.

"I'm perfectly fine," she lied even as she gripped the inside of the coat to pull it more tightly around herself.

"Then why are your lips blue?" he asked softly as he gazed down at her.

"They're not blue," she argued, feeling herself tremble from something other than the cold as he reached up and gently pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Why didn't you wait for my brother?" he asked as he gently rubbed the back of his knuckles along her cheek.

Because she didn't want to be courted by James, but she wasn't about to admit that to him. Instead she thanked him for the use of his jacket and moved to step around him, but he wasn't having that. He-

“Put me down!” she gasped as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, turned around and started walking back the way they’d came.

“Just as soon as we reach your house so that your father can spank some sense into you,” he said, wrapping a rather large arm around her legs when she tried to kick her way to freedom.

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“Put me down this instant, Robert!” she snapped, punching his bottom to emphasize her demand.

“I really shouldn’t be surprised,” he mused to himself, clearly uncaring that she was currently trying to fight her way to freedom.

“Sir?” Jane said, sounding unsure.

“Help get me down!” Elizabeth pleaded as she shifted so that she could send the maid an imploring look that was promptly ignored as the maid took in Robert’s size and determination. Noticeably swallowing, Jane shook her head, faltered back a step and focused all of her attention on the ground ahead of her.

“Traitor,” she muttered although she couldn’t really blame the woman.

“To be honest,” Robert went on, “I thought by now that your father would have you locked up.”

“I hate you!” she snapped, punching his bottom. If her attack hurt, it didn’t show.

“Hopefully, your husband will have more sense and will keep you locked up. Maybe in a convent where the sisters could beat some sense into you.”

“Robert Bradford, you put me down this instant!” she demanded, glad that the park was practically empty and other than a few street vendors trying to sell their wares, there was no one to witness her humiliation.

“Sure thing,” he said, quickening his pace, but he didn’t put her down. Instead, he forced her to grab onto the back of the thin lawn shirt that he wore to stop herself from bouncing all over the place.

A few minutes later, she was forced to tighten her hold on his shirt as he jogged up the stone steps to her father’s house. When she saw the freshly polished foyer floor, she sighed with relief, but it was short lived.

“You said that you’d put me down as soon as we reached the house,” she reminded him as she tried to wiggle out of his grip.

“I was planning on it until a thought occurred to me,” he said, sounding amused and instantly putting her on guard.

She was almost too afraid to ask, “What are you talking about?”

“Since your father is probably still in bed, you’ll have to wait until later for that spanking that you desperately need,” he said, walking down what appeared to be the back hallway. “Since we can’t have you running around and catching your death, I’m afraid that I have no choice but to lock you up for your own good,” he said on a long suffering sigh that didn’t exactly match his tone.

“Don’t. You. Dare,” she bit out, trying not to panic and failing miserably.

“I wish that I had a choice, Beth. Truly I do, but I’m afraid that you’ve left me with no choice,” he said, chuckling as her ears registered the sounds of the click of a lock and a door opening.

“I’m not kidding, Robert!”

“Now, you just sit in here for a while and I’m sure that someone will eventually let

you out,” he said as he quickly placed her on her unsteady legs.

Before she could push past him or demand her release, he leaned down and pressed a kiss against her stunned lips. It took her a few seconds before she realized that he’d shut the door, leaving her standing there looking foolish. The click of the lock brought her to her senses. She grabbed for the doorknob and tried to turn it, but it was good and locked.

A moment later, she realized that he’d locked her in the old music room. It was located in the back of the house and hadn’t been used in years since no one in the house played an instrument. It was also far enough away from the rest of the house that no one would be able to hear her cries for help, she realized with a growl.

“You bastard!” she yelled, uncaring that the declaration was unladylike as she kicked the door. “You’ll pay for this!”

Chapter 12

“Any idea how the fire started?” Lord Norwood asked as he poured four glasses of port.

The three Bradford men were clean and wearing freshly tailored clothes thanks to Edmondson’s, their family’s tailor, two days later. When Edmondson heard of the fire, he took it upon himself to start on all the men’s new wardrobes. He already had their sizes on file so it hadn’t taken him long. No Bradford man went anywhere else for his clothes, not since their great-great-grandfather.

“My man thinks it started on the second floor in the hallway. They believe a candle toppled over or was put down too close to the wall and set the silk on fire,” Harold explained.

The men took their port and sipped. Robert adjusted himself on the uncomfortable chair. Lord Norwood's study was too damn feminine. The chairs were too small and dainty. Everything from the silk on the walls to the upholstery and rugs was designed with images of flowers. It was obvious who ruled the roost here, or at least made all the household decisions. His old study at the estate he'd sold in Fairford had been without question his domain.

It was easily the opposite of this room. A large mahogany desk with a large comfortable chair had taken up one end of the room. The walls had been plain. The furniture had been large, solid and comfortable and there had been books lining every shelf. Unlike this room where there were only a few books scattered about the room. He had a feeling that the books in this room were for decoration only.

Lord Norwood sat down on a rather ridiculous looking chair covered in roses and lace and sipped his drink. "I realize that you're planning on finding a place to rent so that you can remain in town while you rebuild, but I think it would be best for you and your family to remain here."

"That's very generous of you, Richard. We don't want to be a bother," Harold said.

Richard waved it off. "Please, Harold, we're as close as brothers. It makes absolutely no sense to do otherwise. Besides, Danielle and Margaret would enjoy each other's company. You'd be doing us a favor really. Heather is leaving very shortly to go provide companionship for a great aunt and your wife's company would help Margaret get over the loss."

Harold cleared his throat. "She decided not to marry? Poor lass."

"I know. I had such high hopes for her. Thank God I won't have to worry about Elizabeth."

James leaned forward as did their father. Robert couldn't move. "She's found someone then?" Harold asked.

Lord Norwood waved it off. "No, I have no worries about that. She'll marry soon I'm sure. She's never been short of courtiers. No, her godmother left her a....a small estate." His eyes shifted to the left as he spoke. Robert knew then and there that he was hiding something, but what? "So, even if she doesn't marry, she'll have a home and income of her own."

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“Doesn’t she need a man to handle her estate? Are you handling it for her?” James asked, not bothering to hide his interest.

Richard and Harold laughed. “No, my dear boy. I don’t even handle my own affairs. I have a man for that. No, she handles her estate affairs from her study.”

“She has a study?” Robert heard himself asking. It was probably more feminine than this one if that was even physically possible.

“Yes, the library is hers. No one ever goes in there but her so it just made sense to let her have it. I offered to hire a secretary to help her, but she refuses help. I want nothing to do with it, but it would be nice to see the reins of her estate go to a man though. I’d feel more comfortable knowing that she was well taken care of.” His eyes drifted to James as he spoke. He didn’t even glance Robert’s way. Interesting. Not unexpected though after his past history with Elizabeth and all.

“We may need to be in London for the rest of the season, Richard. Are you sure we won’t be in the way?” Harold asked, bringing the conversation back to the matter of their stay.

He smiled. “Of course I’m sure. It will be good for the women and help you relax. You have enough to handle without the addition of another house to manage. No, you will all stay here and that’s final.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Robert and James said in unison.

He nodded and continued to sip his port, happy that was done. A scratch at the door

before it opened let them know they had company. Alexander stepped inside the office.

“A Mr. Jenkins for Mr. Bradford, my Lord,” the butler said with a respectful bow.

Robert stood. “That would be my secretary. Is there a room I could use? I’m afraid that I have a few things to go over with him since I’m going to have to stay in London longer than I had originally planned.”

Richard waved it off. “Of course, use Elizabeth’s study while you’re here. She won’t mind.” Robert wouldn’t bet on that. He was sure that it would irritate Elizabeth to no end to share a study with him. A slow smile spread over his face at the thought of annoying the little pain in the ass.

“Thank you, my Lord. That is very generous. If you’re sure it won’t bother her?” he asked congenially although he hoped it would bother the hell out of her.

Her father chuckled. “Go on. It’s still my house after all.” The other men laughed as well, knowing Elizabeth wouldn’t like it one bit.

After the other night when Elizabeth had finally managed to escape the old music room, and he was still curious about that, she’d marched into the dining room where he’d been eating with the rest of their family. He’d been minding his own business when she’d snatched a glass of red wine from her mother as she stormed past her and proceeded to pour it over his head. That hadn’t bothered him as much as when the little brat reached over and snatched up his plate filled with apple tarts and turned around to storm off with his precious treats.

When he made a move to rescue his delicious morsels, his father, brother, Lord Norwood and every available footman in the house tackled him to the ground, probably thinking that he meant to kill the little brat over the wine. He could have

cared less about the wine, but he very much cared about the fact that she'd stopped in the doorway to shoot him a smug look as she ate one of his apple tarts while he'd been helpless to stop her.

At that moment he didn't care if he had to work on a desk covered in pink lace. He would use that room just to annoy her. It was a sick pleasure, but a pleasure nonetheless to aggravate her.

Alexander led him to an ordinary white door. Robert opened the door and had to bite back a gasp of surprise. The room was very masculine and very similar to his old office. The desk was actually bigger than his. The books looked well read and there was nothing dainty in this room. Actually, everything looked rather new. Elizabeth decorated this room? Impossible.

Gregory, his man of affairs, was already seated at a small desk in the corner, working. He stood upon seeing Robert enter the room. "I was sorry to hear about your family's misfortune, sir."

Robert was still looking around the room. "It's no matter. My family will rebuild, but I'm afraid that we'll also stay here for the remainder of the season, Gregory."

"You're staying, sir? I thought you were to sail for America in three weeks."

"Change of plans. Do you think that you'll be able to manage?" he asked Gregory.

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Let's get to work." He moved behind the desk. It was clean and well organized. He pulled back the chair, sat down, and sighed loudly. It was the most comfortable chair he'd ever sat in. He leaned back. It was perfect. He was going to have to find the maker and have one made for himself or steal this one, he decided.

He looked up to find Gregory watching him with a bit of a frown.

“Good chair,” he simply said. Gregory nodded knowingly and returned his attention to the ledgers.

Robert stretched his legs out before him. The space was deep and wide. He ducked his head to have a look beneath the desk. It was also covered, probably a good idea for a woman so that no one sitting across from her could see her ankles. He rather liked it.

“Comfortable?”

Robert looked up and grinned at a very irritated Elizabeth. “Very much so. Thank you.”

Gregory immediately jumped to his feet and gave an awkward bow. “My Lady,” he mumbled nervously.

She smiled pleasantly in his direction and scowled in Robert’s. He chuckled freely, earning a haughty glare that she couldn’t quite pull off. She practically marched around the desk until she stood in front of him. He leaned back rather comfortably.

“Yes?” he drawled, amused by her expression.

Elizabeth sighed. “You’re in my chair.”

He looked pointedly around him. “Hmm, I don’t see your name on it.”

She groaned. “You know bloo-darn well that’s my chair. Now, are you going to move?”

“Hmm....no.”

“Move.”

“No.”

“You’re annoying!”

“Yes.” He chuckled. “You’ll just have to get used to it.”

“Why?” she asked cautiously.

His lips tugged up slowly into a huge grin. “Because your father has decided to take us in until our house is fixed.”

“W-what?” she asked, unable to hide her surprise.

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“Looks like we’ll be sharing an office,” he said with a wink before he pointedly looked down at his papers. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do,” he said, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

She rolled her eyes and turned to face Gregory, giving him a rather nice view of her backside. He had trouble swallowing. He remembered all too well how that particular part of her body felt in his hands. Did she know what she was doing to him?

“You, sir, have my deepest sympathies,” she said to Gregory.

“F-for what, my lady?” Gregory nervously asked. The man always had problems talking to women, even his own wife. A beautiful woman would damn near kill the man with sputtering. He pitied the man for surely any attention from his minx would send him to an early grave.

“For being saddled with the likes of this man.”

Gregory swallowed loudly, not sure how to respond. He didn’t want to upset Elizabeth, but he definitely did not want to offend his employer. “Mr. Bradford is an excellent employer, my Lady.”

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder at Robert with a hint of mischief in her eyes. What was she about? he wondered as she turned back to Gregory and gave him another view of that beautiful bottom that he desperately want to touch again.

“What is your name, sir?”

“Mr. Gregory Jenkins, my Lady.”

She nodded and smiled as though the name pleased her. “Mr. Jenkins, I find myself in need of a man in your position. What do you say to coming to work for me for let’s say an additional two pounds a month?”

Robert jumped to his feet. Trying to steal away a good employee was considered rude, but to do it in front of the current employer was a slap in the face. “What the hell?” Robert snapped, not caring that he was swearing in a woman’s presence or that Gregory was leaving his service in a matter of weeks anyway.

Gregory looked nervously between the two of them. “M-my Lady, I...”

“Five additional pounds a month. I assure you, sir, this is a real offer.”

“But you know nothing of me, my Lady,” he said, shifting nervously.

“Ten pounds,” Elizabeth said without batting an eye.

Robert stepped in front of her. He knew with an offer like that Gregory would have to be a fool to refuse, especially since he had a child on the way. Gregory looked at him pleadingly. He didn’t know what to do, but Robert saw that he was tempted. Damn it, he was not about to lose the best employee he’d ever had to her .

“I’ll match the offer,” he said, giving Gregory a meaningful look to let him know that he’d make sure that his father, who he was pretty sure would hire Gregory, would match the offer once he left for America. Ah hell, the man was worth it. He’d already planned on giving him a good size raise soon anyway because of the baby.

“I’ll give you that plus one week off a year with pay,” Elizabeth said in a bored tone.

“I’ll match that and add a week,” Robert said almost desperately. He was not going to lose, damn it! Gregory’s face reddened. “But you have to agree right now not to leave my service and especially not to her .”

“I accept, sir. Thank you, sir,” Gregory said, struggling not to smile.

“Good. Then there will be no more of this nonsense.”

“No, sir.”

“Good,” he said rather smugly as he turned around to rub it in Elizabeth’s face, but she was no longer standing behind him.

She was sitting in his seat with a smug smile of her own. “Looks like I just got my chair back,” she said with a grin, shooting Gregory a wink.

The little minx winked!

It hit him then what she'd done. She'd never planned on stealing Gregory from him. In one swift move she took her chair back, humiliated him, and cost him an extra ten pounds a month, at least for the next month or two. He looked over his shoulder to find Gregory smiling in Elizabeth’s direction. The damn man had figured it out as well.

Elizabeth turned around, sighing happily, in her chair and pushed aside his papers. “If you don’t mind, Robert, you’re in my light and probably in Mr. Jenkins’s light as well. If you want the poor man to be able to work, then you should really move.”

When he didn’t respond she got nervous. She looked up slowly to see him practically shaking with rage. She gulped. Giving him a tentative smile she asked, “Too far?”

Slowly, he nodded.

Chapter 13

“Oh dear.” She jumped to her feet and ducked just as he reached for her. For some reason she always went too far where he was concerned. It really couldn’t be helped though, it was simply too much fun to pass up.

She hiked up her skirts and ran as though her life depended upon it. With one look over her shoulder she realized that it just might. He was chasing after her. She shrieked, but didn’t stop. Her father stepped out into the hall in front of her, flanked by James and Lord Bradford.

“Elizabeth?” he asked, looking stunned.

“Too far!” she said as if those two words would explain why a grown man was chasing his daughter. Evidently they did, because all three men laughed and nodded knowingly. She didn’t stick around to see if her father was going to help her. There was a madman chasing her after all.

“Beth!” Robert roared.

She yelped as she ran through the kitchen. “Stop him!” she pleaded to the servants. One look at Robert had them all stepping back.

Cowards.

She was out of breath and admittedly frightened. Robert as a boy was a formidable opponent. Robert as a man was deadly. She scooted around the long oak table, hoping to keep him on the other side.

“Leave us,” he ordered in a cold voice.

“No, don’t!” Elizabeth pleaded.

They weren’t stupid. They fled. She would have too if he’d given her the option. Hmm, perhaps he was. She ducked and tried to join the fleeing servants. His hand came down on her shoulder just when she thought that she might be able to sneak away.

“Oh, not you, Elizabeth.”

She laughed nervously. “Well, you weren’t specific.” She ducked away from him.

“You went too far, Elizabeth.”

“I-I know,” she stammered as she went back around the table. He followed at a predatory pace. This man was frightening. Why hadn’t she noticed that in the orangery?

He stopped suddenly and looked to his left. “Oh look, it’s laundry day,” he noted in a deceptively bored tone.

She didn’t want to move her gaze away from him, but her eyes wouldn’t listen to her. Of their own accord they followed his gaze to the large laundry tub full of water, clothes and soap.

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Before she knew what was happening he had her scooped up in his arms. She tried to squirm her way out of his hold, but there was no give. “Let me go!”

“Of course, my Lady. Your wish is my command,” he said pleasantly before he released her.

“Robert, you-”

Her words were cut off by an intake of cold soapy water. She gasped as she pulled herself up. She was suddenly soaked to the bone and freezing. The large fire several feet behind her did nothing to chase away the chill.

Robert’s smile slowly faded as his eyes narrowed on her dress. She looked down to discover that her light blue gown was now sticking to her and was see through! Her ni**les were hard from the cold and were poking against the wet material. She watched as Robert hungrily licked his lips.

She scrambled to get out of the tub and away from that hungry look. She grabbed a dry, crumpled sheet from the pile near the tub and wrapped it firmly around herself, tucking it in above her br**sts. He stepped forward almost as if he couldn't stop himself and just as she prepared herself for the worst, his mouth came down on hers.

* * *

She tasted of soapy water and minx. Instead of slapping him like he’d expected, she pulled him closer and kissed him back. Their mouths moved in a perfect dance. His tongue traced her lower lip requesting entrance and she gave it.

Afraid the servants might return at any moment, he opened his eyes to make sure that they were still alone as she turned them around. He still couldn't believe that she was kissing him after what he'd done to her.

"Anyone coming?" she mumbled.

"No, no one," he murmured against her lips.

"Good." She ran her hands down his chest to his waist where she began to undo his trousers. Alarm and joy shot through him. "Minx?" he asked breathlessly as she deepened the kiss. Good God, they were going to make love in the kitchen, he realized with a possessive growl as he took over the kiss.

He felt his pants drop down around his boots the same moment that he felt something hard bump against the back of his legs. She pulled back, smiling seductively up at him. Her hands traced back up to his chest where they flattened.

"I think you need to cool off," she said as she shoved him.

"Wh-"

Thanks to his pants around his ankles and the edge of the barrel behind him, he lost his balance. He landed in the ice-cold tub of water with his pants around his ankles, making it difficult to climb out.

"I believe now, sir, that we are even," she said with a curtsy.

"You brat!" he roared.

She stepped back, biting her lip nervously. Perhaps just dumping him in the water would have made them even. Dropping his pants might have been too much. After a

short struggle, he managed to climb out of the tub and yank his wet clothes up with great effort. He quickly fastened his pants just in time too since their fathers stormed into the kitchen seconds later. They took one look at the both of them and started laughing.

“Run,” he said in a harsh, cold voice.

“Exactly my thoughts on the matter,” Elizabeth said as she turned and bolted past her father.

“Too far?” her father asked, laughing.

“Yes!” she squeaked.

Robert watched her leave. If he took one step after her, he was sure that he was going to kill her with sex. Even after an ice cold bath his excitement for her wouldn’t diminish. God, she was wonderful and he was going to enjoy getting back at her, he decided.

“I don’t like that smile, Robert. Just promise me that you won’t kill her,” Richard demanded, still looking amused.

“I promise, my Lord,” he said. That was the only promise anyone would get from him where Elizabeth was concerned.

His father slapped Lord Norwood on the shoulder. “At least our time here won’t be boring.”

Richard laughed in agreement as they left the room, leaving Robert to plan his revenge.

* * *

“That’s lovely, my Lady,” Jane, her maid, said.

Elizabeth looked her dress over. The neckline was low, but not too low to cause a scandal. She liked the color, light green. It reminded her of Robert’s eyes, which was not the reason she chose to wear this dress, not at all. She hated the man after all.

It was his fault that she’d been forced to hide in her room for the last week, pretending to be sick. She would have stayed longer if her father hadn’t put his foot down and called her a coward. She was not a coward. She just wasn’t foolish enough to come out and face a madman waiting to kill her. Self-preservation was at fault here.

She had to go out tonight anyway. It was the Blackward’s annual ball and her mother would never forgive her if she missed it. It was one of the more popular balls, and only the elite were invited. No one dared miss it, or they risked being snubbed next year.

At least for tonight she was guaranteed a Robert-free night. Earlier, Jane told her the gentlemen were all going to their clubs tonight, saying something about a card game. Good. That meant she would be able to enjoy a few hours without living in fear.

For the past week she’d thoroughly inspected all her food for anything nasty that he might have added before she ate it. She also checked her bath water to ensure there wasn’t any dye waiting to turn her blue. The man was devious after all.

She quickly made her way downstairs while keeping an eye out for traps. Her nerves were frayed. Damn that man. As soon as she was downstairs and she was positive that he wasn’t waiting for her, she went straight to the protective bosom of her mother and Lady Bradford, who were waiting patiently in the foyer. Heather was already

gone. She was now officially a spinster. It was a shame and, although it was her future as well, she would never be anyone's companion. She would be her own master.

"Shall we go?" she asked with a forced smile as she rushed them out the door.

"You're certainly excited tonight," her mother noted approvingly. Normally it was like pulling teeth to get Elizabeth out of the house for one of these affairs, but tonight she welcomed the safety that a ball offered. In fact, she fully planned on staying until they kicked her out.

She waited anxiously as her mother and Lady Bradford climbed into the dark carriage with the help of a footman. Her job, in her mind at least, was to keep a lookout for Robert. He was sneaky after all.

"Lady Elizabeth?" the footman said, waiting patiently for her to climb in as well.

"Thank you, Anderson," she said, accepting his help. Once inside the dark carriage she immediately saw the other two women sharing the bench riding forward. With an inward sigh, she sat down on something rather firm and warm that definitely didn't feel like a bench.

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“I believe this seat is taken, Lady Elizabeth,” Robert drawled, startling her and making her jump off his lap. Somehow she tripped over her skirts in the process and would have landed on her mother and Lady Bradford if he hadn’t reached out and grabbed her by the waist. Before she could swat his hands away, he planted her on the seat beside him.

“What are you doing here?” she rudely asked, not really caring if she offended him.

“Elizabeth!” her mother hissed while Lady Bradford was trying her best to hide a smile.

“I’m here to escort two very beautiful women to the ball,” he said, winking across the carriage and making the other women giggle. He slid a sideways look her way and grinned.

She was beyond annoyed, but the other women didn’t seem to notice or care. That was fine. She could sit here and ignore his very warm body and the way he made her body tingle with anticipation of his touch. Once she was at the ball, she would avoid him all together.

Well, it would have been easy to ignore him if he hadn’t started to use his weight to push her against the wall. “Stop it!” she hissed.

“Stop what?” he asked innocently.

“You’re pushing me.”

“You must be imagining things. I haven’t moved.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. We’re almost there anyway.” He pushed her again. She ground her jaw and accepted it. If this was his idea of revenge, then it was pathetic. She’d let him have it. It was simply childish. He’d certainly lost his touch over the years.

“We’re here!” Lady Bradford said cheerfully. Good. The faster she was able to get away from him the better.

Robert jumped out to help the other women out of the carriage first. When it was her turn, he held his hand out for her and she reluctantly took it. Once down she straightened her skirts and froze. Was there a draft?

Chapter 14

“Elizabeth! Back in the carriage at once!” her mother hissed.

“What?” she mumbled as her mother and Lady Bradford practically shoved her inside. She fell back on the seat. When she looked down she couldn’t help but gasp in shock. There was a long tear down her skirt right on the side where Robert had sat, showing her leg in all its glory. Her eyes shot up to his. He looked very amused and a bit smug.

“We’ll have to go home and change,” Lady Bradford said, sounding disappointed.

Elizabeth held up her hand. “No, please. I refuse to wreck everyone’s night over my carelessness. I must have caught the dress on a nail, a very sharp one from the looks of it.” Her gaze shot to Robert, who looked oddly triumphant. “I apologize,” she said tightly.

“Are you sure?” her mother asked, looking torn between going with her and enjoying the ball of the year.

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Please go on. I’ll return as quickly as possible,” she said quietly. She was upset, but she didn’t want Robert to know. This was her favorite dress. Well, it hadn’t been a week ago, but that was not the point. He was going to pay for this.

Robert was the last one to move back. “Enjoy your evening.” He winked before turning to leave. Oh, she would enjoy it all right. She started plotting her revenge as soon as the carriage rolled away.

She was just formulating the perfect plan for revenge when the carriage came to an abrupt halt, sending her flying forward into the opposite seat. “Henry?” she called to the driver, worried that something had happened to the kind man that she’d know since she was a child. A gunshot rang out followed by another. “Henry!”

Seconds later the door jerked open, drawing her attention to the man standing there smiling at her. “Good evening, my dear, pleasant night for an elopement, isn’t it?”

Oh no, not him. She thought she’d rid herself of him last year when he’d been chased out of London by debt collectors. This was very bad. He was the worst sort of fortune hunter there was. He was also cruel and known to do whatever it took to get what he wanted and right now he wanted to force her into marriage. She was left with no other recourse but to pull back her fist and let it fly and that’s exactly what she did.

* * *

Robert couldn’t keep the satisfied grin off his face as he paced the ballroom. He ignored the eager widows sending him inviting glances, eager to share his bed, the bored wives sending him similar looks, the husband hunting school girls willing to do anything to be settled and kept an eye on the entrance, anticipating Elizabeth’s

arrival.

He couldn't wait. He was so damn giddy. This was going to be priceless. He almost wished that he could have seen her face when she realized that her wardrobe had been completely cleaned out except for a brand new gaudy looking gown that was hideously puke orange. She'd have no choice but to wear it and make his night. Life was good.

As he walked past the entrance steps to the ballroom a commotion in the foyer broke out. Footmen came running as they yelled for more guns. Robert didn't think, he just ran. Something in his gut told him to move his ass and he did.

"Get them in the study and place a man at the door!" Lord Blackward ordered. "Get every man armed and call the magistrate. Someone go to Whites and get Lord Norwood immediately!"

"Get a surgeon!" a man yelled from the study.

Dread filled him. He ran past the footmen and a stunned Lord Blackward and followed the trail of blood soaking the expensive rug into the study. He saw her bloodied light green skirts almost immediately.

"Oh please, God, no," he mumbled as he rushed inside

* * *

"Henry, relax!" he heard Elizabeth say.

"Are you okay, my Lady?" Henry asked, trying to sit up on the dainty couch.

"Yes, you did a very good job," Elizabeth said, giving the servant a warm reassuring

smile as she fussed over him.

As soon as he was close enough, Robert grabbed her by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet so that he could look her over. The front of her dress was covered in blood, but he couldn't see any obvious wounds.

“Where are you hurt?” he demanded. When she didn't answer him fast enough he shook her and yelled it. He hadn't realized his hands were trembling until he saw her shaking.

“M-my hand hurts, that's all,” she promised. She showed him the back of her hand. It was already swollen. His eyes moved to her messy hair, a few cuts on her bare shoulder and to where her dress was ripped, exposing too much cle**age for his sanity. He removed his jacket and placed it on her shoulders.

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“What happened?” he demanded.

She dropped back to her knees, pushing her arms through the sleeves so she could tend to Henry. “I’m so sorry, Lady Elizabeth. I didn’t know what they was about until it was too late.”

“Shh , nonsense. You did a fine job, Henry. A fine job. Now you just relax and let us help you.”

He closed his eyes and nodded. Robert could tell the man was in a great deal of pain, but didn't want to distress Elizabeth any further. “Get him some brandy,” he barked out at a footman. He looked back at Elizabeth. “I. Want. A. Name,” he bit out each word evenly.

“Edward Thompson, he’s been after m’lady for a while he has. Tried to take her tonight. She put up a fight, she did,” Henry said proudly, answering him before Elizabeth got a chance.

He knew the bastard. They'd attended school together. He was also a dead man. No one touched his minx and lived. He grabbed a gun from a passing footman and extra shot. “Lord Blackward, would you happen to have a good horse that I could borrow?”

“Robert, what are you doing?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’m going to kill Edward Thompson, of course.”

* * *

“Are you sure this is where he is?” Lord Blackward whispered over his shoulder.

Robert nodded to the older man. “You heard the landlady. He’s here.”

“How do you want to handle this?” Lord Blackward asked. He was practically on top of Robert. He had to shift again and step aside just for some breathing room.

“Have your men block the front and back doors. We’ll go in with a few men and grab him.”

“You weren’t serious about killing him, were you?” Lord Blackward asked, shifting nervously.

Robert double-checked his gun, making sure that it was loaded and ready. “If he tries to flee, I’ll shoot him dead before he can so much as take a step outside. Otherwise, I’m sure Lord Norwood would like to handle the matter personally. The man did try to abduct his daughter after all.”

“Right, right. Let’s go.” Lord Blackward nudged him. Robert led the way into the small rooming house.

“This way, sir,” the landlady said, gesturing for the men to follow her to the second floor.

“Knock on the door,” Robert ordered softly.

A loud whimper was the answer. After a slight pause, Robert opened the door. Holding his candle high along with his pistol, he walked into the room. The smell of fresh vomit and sweat reached his nose, nearly making him gag.

The whimpering continued. He looked at the cot only to find it empty. More light

filled the room as men entered behind him, making the room nearly as bright as day.

“Good lord!” Lord Blackward gasped.

Edward Thompson lay on the floor, curled up into a ball with both hands clutching his groin. “She...wouldn’t...stop.....kicking.....” He vomited again. Every man in the room shifted and absently covered his own groin at the announcement.

Robert couldn’t believe his minx had taken this large man out. Worse, he couldn’t believe she was capable of this type of retaliation. Even after all the years of bullshit that he’d put her through, she’d never once went to kick him in the bullocks. Thank God for that!

The man was openly weeping now.

“What should we do?” Lord Blackward asked, shifting anxiously.

“Haul him in. Normally I would say that he’s suffered enough, but if she’s made him into a eunuch he’s going to want to kill her. Better leave this to her father and the magistrate to handle.”

“He’s crying,” Lord Blackward said in disgust.

“I know.” Robert bent over Edward, keeping his back to the rest of the men. “Edward, you tried to kidnap Lady Elizabeth?” he asked with barely restrained fury.

Edward nodded frantically. “I’ll admit it! Please just get a surgeon. I don’t want to lose my balls!”

Robert rolled him over. “This is for Elizabeth,” he whispered before he punched the man squarely in the jaw, breaking it with an audible crack and knocking the man out

cold.

“What was that for?” Lord Blackward demanded.

“He was crying,” Robert said with a careless shrug as he headed for the door before he decided to kill the bastard.

* * *

Elizabeth was pacing the foyer when Robert strolled into the house along with her father, Lord Bradford and James. When she spotted them she stopped pacing at once. “Well?”

The men looked her over. She was wearing a long white cotton nightgown and a wrapper. Her father and Lord Bradford looked disapproving. James looked amused. Robert looked hungry, causing her to shift nervously.

“Go to bed, dear. It’s handled,” her father said as he kissed her forehead.

“Please tell me that he’s still alive.”

“He wishes he wasn’t,” James said with a chuckle.

“A little bit of an overkill, wouldn’t you say?” Robert asked. His eyes never left hers as he watched her possessively.

“I-I had to make sure he wasn’t getting back up.”

The rest of the men laughed louder at this while Robert continued to watch her. “Oh, believe me, my dear, he’ll never get up again,” Lord Bradford said.

Her face colored. She wasn't exactly sure what they were talking about, but she had an idea thanks to that night in the orangery. She had kicked him pretty hard.

Repeatedly.

"From now on, you do not go anywhere without an extra man to watch you. Now go on up to bed and have Jane fetch you some tea."

"I sent her to bed hours ago. I'll just go to bed." She threw one last look at the men. Obviously the man was alive. That was all she cared about. That and Robert was safe, but she didn't want to look too deeply into that.

* * *

Robert waited an hour until the rest of the men were relaxed and deep in their card game before he excused himself for the night. He made his way upstairs. After a quick glance around the upstairs hallway, he went to the family quarters.

He already knew which room belonged to Elizabeth. Thanks to all the times he'd snuck into her room to place something gross or dead in her bed he knew the way by heart. He listened at the door before slowly opening it. His ears were met with light snores. Cute little snores, he thought.

The door shut quietly enough. After a slight pause he decided to take his boots off. He didn't want to wake her as he crept over to her bed. The only light in the room came from the fireplace, making it hard to see where he was going. He threw on another log and went to the bed.

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Elizabeth was curled up on her side. She looked like an angel, his angel. His minx. He had to hold her. Now. He raised the covers and crawled beneath them. He curled up against her body and gently pulled her against him, careful not to wake her and not really caring if he did. Finally he released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. She was safe. She was here safely in his arms. With that thought repeating in his mind, he fell asleep.

Chapter 15

"That look isn't going to work on me, my dear. Ask your mother," Richard said without looking up from his newssheet. "You are not going."

Elizabeth stopped pouting immediately. It usually worked. Well, only if her mother hadn't already used the same tactic. Her mother must have asked to redecorate the pink sitting room this morning. That was fine since her backup plan never failed.

"You're right, of course, Papa," Elizabeth said.

Her father huffed his agreement. She picked up a plate and headed to the side table and filled the plate to the rim with meats, cheese, sweets and bread, noting that the servants had started putting out a spread large enough to feed a small army since the Bradfords came to stay with them.

It was at least three times more food than was necessary, but she knew that not a crumb would be wasted, not with Robert staying here. She remembered that he'd always had a rather large appetite, something that she'd teased him about when they were children. The amount of food that he went through in a day was rather

frightening. Even his family seemed to be troubled by his eating habits. She couldn't help but wonder how he wasn't fat by now, but that was a thought for another time. Right now she had a mission to accomplish.

When she placed the plate down at the spot next to her father, she made sure the plate clattered loud enough to catch his attention. As she turned around to return to the side table for another plate, she saw her father peer around his paper to look at her plate. His eyes widened considerably. She turned her head quickly to hide her smile and filled a second plate with pudding, muffins left over from breakfast and a few scones and the rest of the raspberry jam. She placed the second plate near the first and sat down. Her father shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Elizabeth ignored him as she made a big show of spreading butter on a piece of brown bread. She brought the slice of bread halfway to her mouth, gave a little shake of her head and added more butter to it before bringing it towards her lips once again.

Her father spoke up before she managed to take a single bite. "Isn't that a bit much, my dear?" he tried to ask casually, but failed miserably and for good reason. This was exactly how Heather started her road to spinsterhood. She went from having a figure other women envied to being rather plump all in a relatively short period of time.

He wasn't worried that she would be pushed into the life of a companion. She was financially well off and wouldn't have to worry about money a day in her life. Her father was genuinely concerned about her. He wanted to see her well cared for and he craved more grandchildren.

She sighed heavily. This was a trick she could only use every few weeks. If she did it too often, it lost its affect.

"Isn't there something you would like to do instead, my dear?" he asked nervously, glancing towards the large plates of food.

“Well, yes,” she said only to shake her head and sigh heavily. “No, you said I couldn’t go without you or mother.” She gave her father a sweet smile. “It’s okay, Papa. I can manage to get those things done some other way.” She looked back at her plates. “The scones look delicious...hmm, I wonder if there’s extra cake.”

He put down his paper and cleared his throat. “Sweetling, let’s not be hasty. The man is in jail and, with an extra footman, you should be more than safe.” He eyed the plates in front of her anxiously. “Give me a few weeks to clear my schedule or come up with a better alternative. I’m sure we can figure out a way for you to go visit your estate up north.”

Her hand stilled halfway to her mouth once again. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes I think you should go out. I’m sure you have plenty to do.” He gently pulled the plate full of sweets away from her, afraid she’d eat it before she made a decision.

She exhaled slowly and put the bread down. “I suppose I could go out.”

“That’s the spirit, my dear,” he said cheerfully.

“Well,” she pushed away from the table, “If I’m going to get my errands completed, I should go now.”

Her father rubbed the back of his neck, looking as if he’d just averted a disaster. She bent down and kissed his cheek. He mumbled something before sending her off.

She had to hide her smile as she left. In a few weeks she would be free of Robert and start her new independent life early. Things were going very well indeed.

* * *

"That smile can only mean one thing," James mused as he held the front door open for her and stepped to the side as she stepped out onto the front stoop.

"Oh? And what's that?" Elizabeth asked as she accepted his escort. She placed her hand on his bicep as he took the large basket from her and walked with her to the waiting carriage.

"You've eliminated my brother once and for all and even found the perfect spot to dispose of the body," James said with a wink as he helped her into the carriage and placed the basket on one of the benches.

She sighed heavily as she shook her head, still smiling, "I'm afraid not."

James chuckled as he climbed into the carriage and sat across from her. Once she was settled and a maid joined them, he knocked on the wall twice, indicating for the driver to go.

"You don't mind if I invite myself along, do you?" he asked with that charming smile that used to make her little heart skip a beat, but now just made her smile.

It was funny how childhood infatuation worked. One day he was all she could think about, wanted and wished for and the next.....the next she'd moved on without realizing it. When exactly had she gotten over her silly crush on him? Most likely when he'd stepped out of her life for Robert's sake.

She was just thankful that she did eventually get over him. She'd hate to be that obsessed over a man ever again. Actually, thinking back on how she used to act around him was quite embarrassing. Thankfully he'd always been too kind to tease her about it, unlike Robert, she thought with an inward sigh.

Once Robert figured it out, and now that she thought back on it she probably hadn't

been as discreet as she'd thought, he'd tormented her with the knowledge. After that horrible day in the park, he seemed to go out of his way to humiliate her. He wrote insipid love letters to James and signed them from her, making sure to leave them where anyone could find them. He made kissing sounds whenever James was around and tried to make it seem as though she was the one making those noises. He openly taunted her about it until it became so bad that she refused to be in the same room as James and Robert.

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Robert's antics probably softened the blow of having James suddenly withdraw from her life. It had been difficult and she remembered crying more than once, but it probably would have been worse if she'd been free to secretly adore him. In a way, Robert had actually helped her, not that that had been his intention. Thanks to him she could sit here across from the devastatingly handsome man in front of her and not have to worry about being nervous or saying something foolish. When she looked at James, all she saw was a good friend in the making. She certainly didn't want to kiss him like she did Ro-

Well, it really didn't matter who she wanted to kiss. She was leaving soon and didn't want any complications. She certainly didn't want any more toe curling kisses from Robert. Since she didn't like him in the least, she didn't want or crave his touch.

She didn't.

"Where exactly are we going?" James asked, thankfully pulling her away from her rather disturbing thoughts about being in Robert's arms and how good it felt to have his lips touch hers.

"I'm taking a basket to a friend," she said distractedly as she once again wondered why, out of every man that she knew, Robert was the one that made her nervous, made her want to smile and made her ache to touch him. It was ridiculous. She didn't even like the man, but she couldn't help the way her body reacted to him.

It was utter madness!

"And who exactly is this friend?" James asked

She opened her mouth to tell him that Robert wasn't her friend when she remembered what they were talking about. Why in the world was she daydreaming about a man that she couldn't stand, she wondered not for the first time since he came back into her life.

"It's for one of the maid's nieces that's been ill," her maid answered with a sniff.

"A maid's niece?" James asked, looking confused as Elizabeth sent her maid a glare for her big mouth. Jane gave her an apologetic smile even as she noticeably winced. No one was supposed to know what she was up to. Annabel, Heather's old maid and now a housemaid, was worried sick about her niece and for good reason from what she'd been told, but her father refused to give the woman the day off to check on her without an explanation.

"She helps me from time to time," she lied, shooting Jane a warning.

Annabel's niece had recently been tossed into the streets by her employer, Jonathan, the Earl of....well, she still couldn't quite remember his title and she didn't care. The only thing that she cared about was that the bastard had used the girl until it became obvious that she was carrying his child. Without a thought or a penny for the child, he'd thrown her out into the street. She was now living in a rundown rooming house in a section of town that was a bit dangerous. When Elizabeth had discovered the situation this morning, she'd decided to take the girl a basket herself and make sure that the girl had everything that she needed.

James frowned. "Then why not send a servant to bring her the basket? Or at the very least bring an extra man or two. You really shouldn't be making deliveries to servants, Elizabeth. It's not seemly."

"I have other errands to run and I thought I would handle the matter myself," she said with a warm smile, hoping he'd just let the matter go, but of course he didn't.

For a moment he didn't say anything as he considered her words, but finally with a shake of his head and a heavy sigh he said, "One of the men will handle the girl while I aid you with the rest of your errands."

As much as she wanted to argue, she couldn't. If she was stubborn about this, he would no doubt alert her parents and that was the very last thing she needed at the moment.

So it was with a heavy heart that she nodded and thanked James. She would just have to trust whoever James selected for the chore to make sure that the girl had everything that she needed.

* * *

"Isn't that your brother with Lady Elizabeth?" Jenkins asked.

Robert looked up from the parchment his solicitor had given him at the end of their meeting and barely held back a string of curses that would have sent the genteel ladies walking along the shops gasping before they fainted dead away.

"She's at it again," he said through clenched teeth as he shoved the parchment into Jenkins' hands and headed across the busy street.

"At what, sir?" Jenkins called after him.

"Wrapping my brother around her little finger," he said, not caring if Jenkins heard him or not as he watched his brother smile down at Elizabeth while they walked past a bookshop. His gaze dropped down to his brother's arm and he felt his jaw clench so tightly that he was honestly surprised that his teeth didn't crack under the pressure.

She was touching James, again. In the back of his mind he knew there was nothing

inappropriate about his brother offering his arm to Elizabeth, but that didn't stop him from seeing red as he moved towards them.

"Would you like a bit of chocolate, Elizabeth?" he heard his brother ask as they neared a sweet shop.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Robert said brightly as Elizabeth opened her mouth, probably to accept. He moved past the two large goons and the unhappy looking maid that was following them and moved to Elizabeth's right, making sure of course to brush against her. He nearly groaned when he saw that beautiful blush crawl up her neck and burn her cheeks.

"Are you alright?" his brother asked when he too noted the deep blush painting her cheeks.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thank you," she said, forcing a smile for James as she pointedly ignored Robert.

Now that would never do, he thought with an inward sigh. He also didn't appreciate the fact that she was moving away from him and closer to James. No, that wouldn't do either, but of course that was easily fixed.

"What are you doing here, Robert?" James asked, giving him a pointed look over Elizabeth's head to get lost. If his brother had been with any other woman, he might have taken the hint and left them alone, but this was Elizabeth, his minx, and it would be a cold day in hell when he allowed her to marry his brother.

"I had a craving for chocolate," he said, pausing at the door of the sweet shop and gesturing for Elizabeth to precede him.

After throwing him a cautious look that he really couldn't blame her for, she released

James' arm and walked into the shop. When his brother moved to join her, Robert cut him off and smoothly moved to Elizabeth's side, offering his arm and knowing damn well that she couldn't refuse him.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously on him as she reached up and took his offered arm. He sent her a wink as they stepped into the line. When she dug her nails into his arm he could only chuckle, which seemed to irritate her more judging by the way she dug her nails even deeper into his arm. That was more than fine with him, because she wasn't wearing gloves and he was in heaven. He couldn't even begin to describe how good it felt to have his minx holding onto him tightly.

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When his scowling brother joined them, Robert pointedly ignored the man. He was doing his brother a favor after all by making sure that he didn't end up married to Elizabeth, which would just be pure misery for the man. He honestly couldn't imagine anything worse than being married to Elizabeth. Having to deal with her every day and night after night where he would take his time to explore her beautiful body with his mouth and hands before he-

"Get out of here and don't come back!" the shopkeeper's wife yelled, drawing his attention to two children being chased out of the shop with a broomstick.

"We just wanted some lemon drops," the little boy, whose clothing looked like it was being kept together by all the dirt covering it, said as he held up a silver piece.

The little girl with him, whose clothes were in worse condition if that were at all humanly possible, tripped when she moved to dart out of the path of the broom and fell against Elizabeth's legs, leaving a large dark smudge against Elizabeth's light blue skirts.

"Look what ya did to m'lady!" the shopkeeper's wife screeched as she raised the broom and brought it down towards the cowering child.

Even as he reached out to grab the broom, he prepared himself for Elizabeth's outburst. Her dress was completely ruined and he'd seen women go into hysterics over less. He really didn't want to deal with it, but maybe it would be for the best if she showed James exactly what he was in for, he thought as he caught the broom in his hand before it slammed into....

Elizabeth's back?

He'd been so focused on the shopkeeper's wife and the broom that he hadn't seen Elizabeth drop to the ground to cover the crying child with her body. As he ripped the broom away from the woman's grasp, he forced himself not to soften at the sight of the woman he once thought as a selfish brat protecting a helpless child. This changed nothing, he reminded himself, except that now for some reason he would rather die than see her married to James and it had nothing to do with hating her.

As James moved to have a very loud word with the shopkeeper and his wife, Robert helped Elizabeth to her feet, forcing himself to ignore the urge to pull her into his arms.

"Thank you," she murmured as she reached down to help the crying child to her feet, but he simply moved Elizabeth aside and picked up the small child. He headed for the door, pausing only long enough to grab the little boy by the scruff of his neck as he went to box the woman's ears for threatening his sister.

"Hey! Let me go!" the boy demanded as he tried to twist and turn out of his grasp.

"Be good," Robert said, sighing heavily as Elizabeth joined them and took the little boy's hand into hers.

"Let's go see if we can find something more filling than lemon drops for your stomach, shall we?" she asked with a cheerful smile as she headed down the street with the little boy running to keep up and probably expecting him to follow like some lap dog, he thought with disgust as he did just that.

"Why are you smiling?" the little girl in his arms asked, sounding both wary and curious.

"No reason, pet," he said even as he cursed himself for quickening his step to catch up with the overly cheerful woman that he hated, but couldn't stand to be away from.

Chapter 16

This was getting creepy, very creepy indeed. For the past three weeks in a row she'd woken up feeling alone. That was odd considering that she went to bed alone, so of course she should feel alone when she woke up in the morning. This was different. It felt like at some point during the night that she hadn't been alone. It was the oddest sensation. Of course it might just be her nerves.

For the past month her father had been putting off her requests to leave and doing everything he could to keep her home. It wasn't exactly difficult to figure out the reason. They were hoping to marry her off before her birthday and were doing everything they could to make sure that it happened, including keeping her home and available for suitors when they called.

His decision probably also had something to do with the fact that he'd found out about her attempts to go visit Annabel's niece without his permission. Finding out that she'd been planning on visiting a section of town that was strictly prohibited to her hadn't exactly warmed him to the idea of allowing her to go to her estate on her own. It probably wouldn't have been so bad if her mother hadn't caught wind of her plans to bring food and clothing to a servant, who was carrying her old employer's bastard, and gone into hysterics over Elizabeth embarrassing them by consorting with servants.

Then Jane, whom she was ninety-nine percent sure had been informing on her to her parents for some time now, decided to share the tale of the sweet shop and how Elizabeth had taken the two children to an inn for a hot meal. The maid had of course embellished the tale by stressing how everyone who was anyone saw the entire thing. After that rather eventful day, her father had announced that she was restricted to the

house and grounds until further notice.

Now it seemed as though everyone but her had something to do. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She had plenty to do, but she was being kept in the house against her protests. She spent most of her time trying not to be bored. Thankfully, James spent time with her during the day, reading with her and taking her for walks in the rose garden, which was lovely. A few years ago she would have blushed and probably hyperventilated under his attention. Now it was just nice to have another friend.

It was funny after all these years that feelings she thought she felt so deeply as a child, love, was nothing more than infatuation. She had no doubt that he would make a fine husband. He was kind, funny and easy to talk with. If she had met him before that night in the orangery, she would have undoubtedly fallen in love with him in truth.

Unfortunately that wasn't how things occurred. Even though she had no plans on marrying, she'd never planned to live her life by taking lovers. Every time she thought back on that night, she was filled with humiliation now instead of the precious gift she once thought it was. She'd only kissed one man in her life before that night and that had been a quick peck on the lips and she'd known who she'd been kissing at the time. Not only had she kissed a man that she hadn't known, but she'd also given her innocence to him, freely.

The fact that it turned out to be Robert, who'd been the boy she hated more than anything on earth, only made it worse. She tried not to dwell on what he must think of her or what he would do with that piece of knowledge if she pushed him too far. Did he think that she did that often?

No matter what she did or said, she did care what he thought. That time they spoke as strangers was one of the most enjoyable times in her life. She'd never felt so relaxed or comfortable with another living soul as she had with him that night. They

connected, really connected that night and she wasn't thinking about when she'd made love with him, that had been very pleasurable, but the way he spoke to her, smiled, and listened had melted her heart.

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She didn't want to like him or crave his touch. This was Robert after all. He was the little boy who once placed honey on her pillow and pushed her into a muddy pond when they were children. In spite of everything, she longed to be with him, near him. She often found herself pacing the upstairs landing late at night in the hopes of hearing his deep voice. She was pathetic, utterly pathetic.

At least she fought her feelings, she reassured herself. She purposely avoided him whenever he was in the house, which was not very often. It seemed that he was only here to sleep. She often wondered where he went. Was he at a club? Visiting friends? A woman? She pushed the last thought out of her mind. She did not like to think of him with other women even though she most certainly did not want him for herself. Not at all. It was this silly "ghost" that was putting her on edge.

She checked the pillow next to hers. It looked slept on. The only explanation that she could come up with was that she'd rolled over onto that side sometime during the night, because the bedclothes on that side were also wrinkled. It was the only thing that made sense.

Something caught her eye as she pulled the sheets back. Frowning, she picked it up and examined the pocketknife. Her breath caught in her throat and her stomach churned. Desperate to ease her stomach, she reached out for the tepid tea Jane had left her and took a small sip. That small sip triggered something unholy in her stomach. She dropped the cup and all but ran for the chamber pot.

After several minutes she was able to sit up straight. Her stomach twisted with worry. She was late. Three weeks late to be exact. For the first week she'd thought it was the stress of her situation. It had happened before, but never for this long. Now she was

sick in the mornings and sometimes during the day. She did her best to hide it, but soon someone was going to notice. Then her life would change forever.

“I’m fine,” Elizabeth mumbled to herself in the hopes that by saying it that it would somehow make it true. Her father had been putting off allowing her to visit her north estate, but no longer. He was going to let her go in a few days. He’d promised and this time she was going to hold him to his word. Until then she had to hold it together.

She walked back to the bed, hoping she could lie down for a few minutes so that her stomach would have a chance to settle down. Before she could lie down, the odor of the spilled tea hit her hard once again. She ran back in time to the pot and finished emptying her stomach. She was fine. Everything would be fine. Things would be fine, she told herself not really believing it for one second.

* * *

Robert pulled open one of the drawers on his side of the desk. He and Elizabeth had come to an unspoken understanding about sharing the library. They each had their own side of the desk and no one peeked. It was rather comfortable. She was just as neat as he was so he didn’t mind sharing the space.

He stared at the ledger in front of him without really seeing it. His body felt ripped in half. He desperately wanted to go back upstairs and crawl back in bed with Elizabeth. Four weeks and he was addicted to her. He couldn’t fall asleep in his own bed. He’d tried several times and each time he failed miserably. As if to prove his point, he would fall asleep almost immediately when his hand rested upon her hip.

This was bad. This was very bad. He needed her too much. His body yearned for her in every possible way. He enjoyed her quick wit and sharp tongue. She could be funny and he knew that she was kind. This was beyond horrible. He hated the woman. She was his enemy.

His enemy.

He was such an ass. This situation was intolerable. He couldn't take it anymore. Every day he had to fight back the urge to punch the suitors that came calling. He had to sit back and watch James attempt to woo her. It killed him. Sometimes he would disappear all day and night only to come back to her like a sailor to a siren and curl up with her. He needed her more than his next breath, and he hated her for it. He hated this power she had over him. He was going to leave and soon for his own sanity.

The library door suddenly slammed shut. "Are you crazy?"

He looked up to see Elizabeth holding his pocketknife. His gaze quickly shifted to the closed door as he stood up to go open it. Being found with her in a closed room could end with a trip to the church and he wasn't having that, not with a woman who hated him.

"Are you? What's wrong with you shutting that door?" He made it to the front of the desk when she stormed up to him, holding up his knife.

"Guess where I found this?"

He shrugged. "I haven't a clue," he said as he reached for it, but before he could take it, she dropped it in her gown pocket.

"For the past three weeks I've been haunted by a ghost," she announced.

Hmm, she couldn't be talking about him, because he'd been crawling into her bed for the past four weeks. Of course she might not realize that he'd been doing it for that long. It was probably best not to correct her on the time frame, he decided.

“Oh?” he asked in a bored tone.

“Mmhmm, seems I have a ghost crawling into bed with me. Odd, isn’t it?”

“I would say so. You would think the ghost would have better options.”

She slapped him somewhat hard on his shoulder. “Ow!”

“Good! Now explain to me why you’ve been coming to my room!”

A knock at the door was their only warning that they were about to be caught.

“Hide!” he hissed.

She threw him a furious look before she scrambled to do just that since being found alone with him in a closed room was not an option. Throwing him one last glare, she quickly moved around the desk and ducked beneath it before he could stop her.

“Not there!” he hissed.

Elizabeth ignored him and crawled under the desk. With an irritated groan he sat down in the chair and moved his legs beneath the desk. This desk really was large, he mused. He was a tall man and his legs were situated comfortably beneath the desk and he could barely feel her. He knew that she was there of course. He could practically feel the rage pouring off her. She was effectively trapped now, he thought with a small grin, liking his advantage probably more than he should.

“Come in,” he said, pretending to be working.

James walked in. “I thought I’d find you here.”

“What can I do for you? Come to learn how to run an estate?” he joked, chuckling at

his brother's horrified expression.

It always amused him that his brother, who was the heir, lived the life of a second son. He didn't take anything seriously, had absolutely no interests in learning how to run the estate that he would one day inherit and he spent all of his time with women, cards and living with absolutely no purpose. James was living the life that Robert should be pursuing, but it just wasn't in him. He liked running his own estate, working up a sweat and creating things with his hands. He'd never fit in with society or in his family. He didn't act like the son of an Earl and probably never would. He liked being his own man. He just wished that it wasn't so damn lonely sometimes.

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James paled. “Good lord no! I’ll hire someone for that.” The way James said that like he would need an estate manager soon caught Robert’s attention.

“What’s going on?” he asked cautiously.

James sat in the chair in front of the desk, throwing an ankle across his knee. “I’m getting married.”

“Oh?” Dread filled him instantly. “Who?”

“Who do you think?”

“Just tell me.”

“Lady Elizabeth, you dolt. Who else have I been courting for the past month?”

Chapter 17

Elizabeth shifted and moved closer to the opening to listen. The desk was so thick that it muffled some of the sounds. She pushed between Robert’s legs and waited. He spread his legs for her automatically so that she could sit comfortably.

“Did you ask Elizabeth yet?” Robert asked. She could feel the tension in his body.

James chuckled. “No, I’ve asked her father and he approved. All that’s left is to ask the lady herself.”

“Do you love her?” Robert asked. He had to know.

James laughed harder at that. “No! Can you imagine? I don’t even love my mistress!”

Robert had to stop himself from wincing. She was digging her nails into his legs. He reached down and gently pushed her hands off his legs quickly, hoping that James hadn’t noticed the movement.

“If she says yes, are you going quit your mistress?” he asked, more for her sake than his.

James chuckled. “Very funny. Give up Andrea? You’re crazy. I had to wait out three other men to get her. No, I’ll keep her on the side.”

“What about Elizabeth?” Robert asked. Elizabeth was wondering that as well. Not that she was going through with it. She wasn’t. James was like a brother to her now. It would simply be too disturbing to marry him.

He shrugged. “I’ll get her with an heir and spare, of course. I don’t mind having her warm my bed when the mood strikes. You have to admit that she is quite beautiful.”

“Not really,” Robert muttered. “Ow!”

“Are you okay?” James asked.

Robert put his finger in his mouth. “Paper cut,” he muttered. His knee was throbbing. Damn, she was a strong little thing.

“I hate those,” James said with distaste.

“So do I,” he said acidly.

“I still don’t understand why you would settle on her,” he said in a disgusted tone. He needed James to bury himself in front of Elizabeth. It would save him a lot of legwork later. He was not going to simply sit around and allow James to marry his minx.

* * *

Oh, she was going to maim the man. He actually had the audacity to talk about her like this? James she didn’t care about, but for Robert to act like she was nothing irritated her. She looked around the small space. Damn it, there was nothing she could do to him here. Well, not true, she did have the knife, but that was a bit much. She looked back at him and smiled. There was something that she could do to make him lose that pompous attitude that he was using at her expense.

* * *

Every muscle in his body froze. “What are you doing?” he demanded tightly, admittedly terrified of the minx hiding beneath the desk.

James looked back from the small sideboard. “Getting a drink. Do you want one?”

“Please!” he said more to Elizabeth than to James. She had his pants undone and his manhood pulled out. He closed his eyes for a few seconds and sent a silent prayer to God, vowing to turn his life around for good if she didn’t use his knife to unman him. His eyes flew open when she stroked him.

“Are you okay?” James asked as he placed a glass of whiskey in front of him.

“Very good, thank you.” He picked the glass up and gulped it. Nothing in life could have prepared him for this turn of events. He had to keep James in here talking, otherwise his minx might stop and he definitely did not want that.

“I-I don’t understand, if you find Elizabeth beautiful, why do you need Andrea?”
Was it always this hard to talk? He couldn’t remember.

James laughed knowingly. “I guess you wouldn’t know since you live like a monk up at that estate of yours. I’ll explain with four little words, she uses her mouth.” He winked and sat back.

“Really? I’ve never had that done.” Until now. His hands gripped the desk as Elizabeth decided the idea had merit enough to test it out. Her hot, wet mouth enclosed over the tip of his erection. If he died at this moment, he could honestly say that he’d lived a happy and fulfilling life.

* * *

This was different and very exciting. She would never have thought to do this if James hadn’t mentioned it. It was easier than using her hand, which she still used since it was helpful. She decided to make this into a game and see how far she could take it into her mouth to drive him crazy. This should teach him. She hoped he was embarrassing himself at the moment. Unfortunately it was also stirring up that same need that had left her desperate for him that night in the orangery. Robert’s hand came down and gently cupped her cheek, urging her to continue.

* * *

James needed to keep talking or he would kill him. “Your wife would probably do that as well,” he said, hoping James would go off on a long explanation while he enjoyed Elizabeth’s ministrations.

He snorted. “Good luck with that. Women like Elizabeth are frigid in bed. No man wants to remain faithful to that. Can you imagine spending the rest of your life bedding a woman that refuses to remove her nightgown or even move? God it’s

boring. She just lies there waiting for you to finish and go to your room. No thanks. I'll keep my mistresses, whores and lovers."

With great effort he spoke. "So again, why marry Elizabeth? I know she has a small estate, but there are other heiresses out there with more money and land."

James shook his head. "No, I like her. She's a good girl. She's beautiful, but I don't think I have to worry about her cuckolding me. She's too nice. Plus, I think that story about the small estate is nonsense."

"You don't think she has any money?" he asked while he caressed her cheek. He lowered himself in the chair to make it easier for her.

She was wonderful.

"No, I think quite the opposite in fact. Are you okay?" James asked suddenly.

His head was resting on one hand while the other was touching her. He looked slumped. "A little headache, why?"

"You're sweating and panting a bit," James said, gesturing to him offhandedly.

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He was getting so close, so unbelievably close. There was no way he would be able to hold back the sounds of his pleasure with James in the room.

“Have you talked to father? You should go do that. He’d have more information.” The words rushed out of his mouth. James needed to leave. Now.

James jumped to his feet. “That’s a good idea.” He walked to the door. “Get some sleep, man. You look like hell.” With that he left.

Robert pushed back from the desk, bringing his minx with him. He had to see, needed to see it. His eyes widened as he took in the sight of Elizabeth in a beautiful pearl dress, taking him into her mouth. He dropped his head back, never taking his eyes off her and groaned loudly.

She needed him so badly. She started whimpering and shifting in front of him. The place between her legs was aching for him.

“Enough!” He pulled out from her mouth.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked as he pulled her up. With one arm, he swept his paperwork and ledgers to the floor. In seconds he had her sitting on the edge of the desk with her legs spread. She leaned back until she was resting on her elbows. Robert pushed her skirts up to her waist.

His gaze moved to the apex of her legs and he groaned, long and loud. Her dark curls were already slick with her arousal. He sat down in the chair and pulled it towards the desk, preparing for his meal.

“Robert?” Her voice shook with need and embarrassment.

He placed his hands on her thighs and gently pushed her legs further apart. “Shh,” he said as he stared at the lovely, plump, pink folds. “I’ve always wanted to do this,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

Elizabeth leaned up further, nervous now from his tone. Her eyes widened in shock as she watched Robert’s head drop between her legs. “What are you.....oh my....” Her eyes rolled back in her head in pleasure as she felt the tip of Robert’s hot, wet tongue trace the seam of her slit. She dropped back on her elbows.

“Mmmm,” Robert growled as he flicked his tongue over the little firm nub down to her center where he got a better taste. This was better than any fantasy he’d ever had. He traced his tongue around her core and then dipped it inside. Within seconds he was rewarded with more liquid as Elizabeth ground her wet slit against his mouth, frantic for release.

Fingers threaded through his hair, holding him prisoner between her legs. He slid his tongue further inside of her while his thumb rubbed the little swollen nub between her folds. Her moans became frantic as she thrashed beneath him.

He had to close his eyes and force himself not to come then and there. In a minute, he promised himself. His movements became more urgent as he pushed her over the edge, desperate for her now. Her moans and pants were driving him out of his goddamn mind.

Even knowing that the door wasn’t locked and they could be caught at any moment wasn’t going to stop him. For over a month, his body had been in agonizing turmoil, desperate to be with her again. Day and night he had to fight the urge to hunt her down, pin her against the wall and take her. He fought it every single day. The nights were the worst as he held her in his arms, but somehow he managed to allow himself

the gift of simply holding her.

Now he didn't care. He had to have her. There was nothing on this earth that was going to stop him from taking her again. It would take every footman in this house to tear him off her and even then he would fight to get back to her. Right now he was back with his minx from the orangery and nothing else mattered.

She clasped a hand to her mouth and screamed his name. A loud moan tore from Robert's throat at the sound of his name ripped from her beautiful lips. While her orgasm was still tearing through her body, he stood and pushed himself in past her throbbing walls and began thrusting, knowing that he was not going to last very long.

Their eyes locked, hungrily. Robert licked the last drop of her arousal from his lips in a sensual move. Elizabeth found herself responding by pushing herself up until she was sitting up with her legs and arms wrapped around him.

Robert wasted no time in wrapping his arms around her and dropping his mouth to hers in a hungry kiss. Her hands slid up, gripping his hair in her fists as she returned his kiss.

The memory of that night did not do her justice. She was so wet and hot for him, not to mention incredibly tight. This was heaven. He could feel her starting to throb around him. He quickened his pace while his mouth moved to her throat, kissing and licking her skin, loving the way she whimpered.

She turned her head, burying her face in his shoulder as she called out his name. That and the feeling of her hot, wet and unbearably tight sheath milking his c**k was enough to drive him insane, but it was his name on her lips that was his undoing

“Minx! Oh god, Elizabeth !” he groaned loudly.

Chapter 18

Exhausted and not sure that his legs would hold him any longer, he fell back in the chair, taking her with him. He held her with one arm. With the other he reached back and opened a window to erase the scent of their lovemaking.

He leaned his head back while Elizabeth buried her face against his neck, clutching his shirt tightly in her small fists, both of them panting hard. It was several minutes before either one of them could move or talk.

Robert squeezed his eyes shut and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He'd messed up again. Never before had he ever been tempted to finish in a woman. Hell, he'd never been in a woman without using a sheath and pulling out to guarantee no children. This was the third time he'd been inside of Elizabeth without taking any precautions.

It had been five weeks since that night in the orangery. Was she carrying his child? Would she have told him? He squeezed his eyes tighter as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. As much as he'd like to avoid this topic, he had to know. Elizabeth was a smart woman. If she were carrying their child, she would have told him. Surely she would have. Even if she hated him, she would tell him, wouldn't she? Before anger could surface he shoved it down.

He had to at least ask even if he already knew the answer. She wasn't carrying his child. This time probably wouldn't be enough to get her with child either. This had been a mistake, a pleasurable one, but a mistake nonetheless. It would not, could not, happen again. He was leaving the country soon and she was heading for an estate somewhere up north. After this they would probably never see each other again. His arms tightened around her at the thought.

* * *

Elizabeth inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. She wanted to remember him this way, the way he held her, the way he touched her, the way he looked at her like she was the most precious thing on earth. All those childhood memories didn't matter any longer. She needed to remember the man that had held her tightly and kissed her tenderly in the orangery.

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When their child asked about his father, she wanted to be able to tell him kind things. Their child? She sobbed softly in the crook of his neck before she could stop herself. When had she finally accepted that she was pregnant?

She needed to tell him, she realized, but how? They'd made love, but she knew that men were able to have sex without their hearts being involved. She also knew without question that Robert hated her. She'd always known that and these foolish mistakes didn't change anything. She also knew that he'd hate her more when she told him, because he would do the right thing.

No matter what kind of mean little boy he'd been, he was without question an honorable man now. He would marry her and, for the rest of their lives, he would resent her for trapping him in a loveless marriage. She'd be forced to live with a man that she cared deeply about and know that she'd stolen his freedom, his choice. She would hate herself. She just needed some time to figure this out.

If only she could determine how he felt about her and, if she discovered that he did truly hate her, then she would do what she had to in order to protect their child. She would tell him and live with the consequences of a loveless marriage. She just needed a little time to figure out how to tell him. She should tell him now, she realized that, but she was just.....

She was scared, terrified really.

What if Robert couldn't force himself to do the right thing? What if his hatred for her was too strong? What if she couldn't go through with marrying a man who didn't love her? There were too many "ifs" in this situation and it made her wish that she

had someone that she could confide in, but there was no one.

Her mother would have a fit. She'd most likely turn her back on her for bringing shame to their family. She was ruined, unwed and pregnant. Her mother would tell her father, who would either shoot Robert or force him to marry her and that was not the way that she wanted this handled. She was sorely tempted to go to Mary at once and tell her, but that would end in the same tragic manner. Only it would probably be Anthony that shot Robert and not her father.

Perhaps it would be best to think this through and to be sure that she was carrying a child. She'd never been pregnant before and had no idea of what to expect. There was no one to ask. That last thought turned her stomach. Realizing they were still intimately connected, she carefully climbed off him. He seemed hesitant to release her, but did after a slight pause.

Without a word they both stood and fixed their clothes. Robert ran his fingers through his hair, trying to fix it even though he'd rather keep it the way it was as a reminder of having her in his arms once again.

Elizabeth cleared her throat. "I should go upstairs and freshen up before tea."

Robert met her eyes briefly before looking away. "Elizabeth?"

"Yes?" She didn't look up from straightening her skirts, too afraid that she'd break down and tell him before she was ready.

In a quiet, rough voice he asked, "Have your courses come since the night of the orangery?"

Intense heat flooded her cheeks. She turned away from him not in embarrassment surprisingly, but fear. If he found out, what would he do? She just stopped herself

from laying her hand across her stomach. He'd taken her virginity and it was his child in her womb. Technically she now belonged to him, she realized. Fury rose up in her at the idea. She would not belong to him or any other man, she decided rebelliously. She refused to be some man's property, having to ask and beg for everything. She didn't want to be married to a man who didn't love her even if she loved him.

"That's a vulgar question even for you," she said crossly, avoiding answering the question the only way she knew how.

Robert's eyes narrowed on her. She'd avoided answering the question the same way she had when they were children and she was caught doing something mischievous. But that was ridiculous. If she were pregnant she would tell him. She was a smart woman. She knew the consequences of having a child out of wedlock. She would be shunned and the child would carry the burden of the shame for the rest of his life. Unless....

His gaze shot to the closed door. Was she planning on marrying James to give his child a father? He ground his teeth until the muscles in his jaw burned under the pressure.

"Are you carrying my child?" he bit out, deciding to end whatever game she was playing.

"No." I'm carrying my child, she thought as she tried to get a rein on the rebellious emotions clamoring for control inside of her. It was the only way she could lie. Everyone knew that she was a terrible liar, sometimes though she was able to lie if she thought about the answer in a different way. As much as she hated the idea of marrying for anything less than love, she also hated the idea of trapping him. She cared about him too much to do that and she didn't want to hurt him. She just needed some time to figure out how to tell him without him hating her. One thing was clear, she needed to leave before anyone else figured out that she was pregnant and took the

decision on how to tell him out of her hands.

Robert studied her expression for a moment longer. She was a bad liar, he remembered that much. He was hoping he would be able to tell, but he couldn't. He sighed heavily. "Listen, we.....I didn't do what I should have and there may be..." he took a deep breath before continuing. "There may be a child as a result of what we did today. In a month's time we should know."

Her eyes widened in horror. "I won't be here, Robert. I'm leaving by the end of the week."

He shook his head. "No, you're staying until we know for sure." He gestured back to the desk. "And we most certainly will not be doing this again." It sounded like the last part pained him, but she had to agree that it was probably for the best.

Elizabeth placed her hands firmly on her hips. "No, I am leaving. If something happens because of this, I will write you," she said, realizing that it was the cowardly way to handle this and that was fine with her. She'd rather not be there to see the horror in his eyes when he learned that he was trapped with her for life.

"No. You're staying," he said firmly. He didn't trust her to contact him for some reason that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Also, he wasn't ready for her to leave, not yet.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply before continuing. "Robert, I am going. I have been waiting for weeks to go and I refuse to put this off any longer."

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“You’ll stay,” he ordered. “Besides, it doesn’t seem as though your father is going to allow you to leave anytime soon. Seems he has plans for you,” he snapped, anger once again rising at the thought of her marrying James.

“You don’t have the right to tell me what to do!”

He took a menacing step towards her. “You will stay !”

“I’m leaving!” she yelled.

“The hell you are! You will stay until we get this whole mess settled. Once that is done, you can stay the hell away from my family!” He took another step until they were mere inches apart. She pressed her hands flat against his chest and shoved him, but he didn’t budge.

“I will go near whomever I wish and it is none of your concern who I marry. If I chose to marry James, that will be none of your business either!” She had absolutely no plans on marrying James, but that seemed the best thing to throw in his face at the moment.

He glared down at her. Perhaps she’d gone too far because at the moment she was pretty sure that he was seeing red.

“You will never marry my brother,” he said in a low harsh tone. “If you even try, I will make sure everyone knows who had you first. I’ll tell them how you took me in your body and in your mo-”

She cut him off with a hard slap across his face. The sound seemed intense in the otherwise quiet library. This time when she shoved him back he moved.

“I hate you!” she ground out between clenched teeth as she wiped frantically at the tears streaming down her cheeks. She shoved her hand in her pocket and pulled out his knife. She threw it out the open window before he could take it from her. “Stay away from me or so help me God, I will make you pay,” she choked out before she ran from the room.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, pleading with it to calm down long enough for her to reach her room as she ran upstairs, ignoring the servants’ curious glances as she past them. No sooner was she in her room than she lost the battle with her stomach. She raced across the room, past Jane, who was hanging a dress, and grabbed the chamber pot. She lost the contents of her stomach once again, not able to stop herself and knowing as she did it that the servant in her room might very well seal her fate.

Chapter 19

Robert picked up the ledgers off the floor and tossed them onto the desk. He shoved his hands through his hair, wishing that he was punching someone, anyone.

He couldn’t stand this. The one woman in the world that he shouldn’t want was the one woman he was discovering that he couldn’t live without. She was becoming an obsession for him and he was powerless to do anything about it.

Even a half hour later he was having a difficult time believing that a part of him had hoped that she was going to tell him that she was carrying his child. When he’d discovered that she wasn’t pregnant, he felt like part of him died over a child that had never been.

For the past eight years he’d lived his life according to a plan, and so far everything

was going smoothly. This time was meant for him to build up his estate and investments so that he could do what he loved for the rest of his life. He should be relieved that she wasn't interfering with his plans instead of standing here fuming.

What he needed was to take a mistress. He needed someone that wouldn't interfere with his life and was there when he needed relief. That's what he wanted, someone that wouldn't make him lose his control. Hell, he didn't care if she was pretty as long as she had a warm body and knew her place. He would talk to his brother later to see who was available.

He ignored the sudden clenching of his stomach at the thought of being with another woman. This was how it was. Men of his station kept lovers and mistresses. Even his father kept mistresses and he cared about his wife. Every man he knew did this. It was time he did as well.

With that settled, he sat back down at the desk, hating himself because he knew that he could never do it. What was wrong with him? There was really no need to wonder why he couldn't go through with it. It only made his anguish worse.

A light scratch at the door tore him from his inner turmoil. "Enter," he snapped.

Marie, his mother's maid, stepped inside and immediately closed the door behind her. She walked into the room, fidgeting with her fingers and looking around nervously.

"What is it?" he forced himself to ask politely. Scaring this woman off would not be smart. His mother kept this woman around for her ability to gather gossip. She was the best. There wasn't anything she couldn't find out, which was why Robert had been paying her a hefty sum for the past month to come straight to him with everything concerning Elizabeth.

For the past month he'd learned about all the men Elizabeth met with and what she

did when she left the house. He also learned one rather interesting piece of information; Elizabeth had been dismissing her maid in the mornings for the past two weeks. At first he thought she knew that he was in bed with her and was trying to protect her reputation, but she never gave any indication until this morning that she was aware of his nightly visits. It still puzzled him.

“Sir, I have something that I thought you may find interesting,” she said with another nervous look at the door and then one at the open window. “If you wouldn’t mind, sir, it might be best to close that window.”

He closed the window, forcing himself to remain patient. She was nervous and he didn’t want to frighten her off. He gestured to the chair in front of the desk, but she remained standing.

“What is it, Marie?” he asked.

She licked her lips nervously. “Remember you said if I brought you something really important, you would give me an extra shilling,” she reminded him, smart.

“Yes, is this something worth an extra shilling?” His voice was cool and calm.

“Oh, I believe it is, sir.” Again, she shot another look back at the door.

He sighed inwardly as he pulled the coin out of his pocket and handed it to her, hoping it would move this along. She took it and smiled briefly before putting it away.

“Well?” he asked, feeling his patience once again leaving him.

She cleared her throat delicately, clearly preparing for the moment. He cocked an eyebrow, silently telling her that this drama was unnecessary. Smart girl picked up on

it.

“Lady Elizabeth has been sleeping in later than normal,” she announced with flourish.

That was what he paid a shilling for? “That is the important news you wished to tell me? Clearly you and I are of a different opinion on importance, my dear.”

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She shook her head. “That is why she dismissed Jane in the morning.”

He glared at her. She licked her lips nervously before continuing. “She also no longer drinks her tea in the morning. Actually, she places it untouched outside her door, except for this morning.” His scowl deepened. “Also, during tea she sits far away from the tea and asks for lemonade.”

Robert waved an impatient hand for her to continue, hoping that this was leading somewhere. “Her appetite is also gone. She only picks at her food now.”

He hadn’t missed that over the past two weeks. The few times they ate together in the past she’d had a healthy appetite, but in the one or two times he saw in her in the dining room these past two weeks she was pushing her food around on her plate. Was she unhappy? Sick? Upset about something? Was it possible she was so preoccupied thinking about him that she was having a difficult time like he was?

That was too much to hope for.

“Anything else?” he asked, kicking himself for being taken in by a servant. Normally he was smart when it came to money and didn’t part with it easily.

She nodded, clearly biting back a smile as she said, “Lady Elizabeth has been ill for the past two weeks.”

He froze. Surely she wasn’t....

“And she missed her courses.”

Every muscle in his body froze. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I had to give Jane, her maid, a shilling not to tell anyone but me." She quietly cleared her throat. Robert automatically pulled out the coin and handed it to her. "Also, not too long ago Lady Elizabeth ran into her room and became ill."

His hands gripped the edge of the desk tightly until his knuckles turned white. "Is she.....do you think that....."

Marie nodded. "She is most certainly with child, sir."

* * *

"It's so nice to have both of you for tea," Lady Norwood said to James and Lord Dumford.

"Thank you, my Lady," James said pleasantly while Lord Dumford looked decidedly unhappy about the younger man's intrusion. It was clear to Elizabeth at least that the man came today with the intention of once again asking for her hand.

After the incident in her study, not to mention her queasy stomach, she was in no mood to deal with Lord Dumford and his proposal that would no doubt consist of a half hour sermon on God and her place to take a husband. Turning him away unfortunately was not an option if she wanted to keep her mother happy. Knowing that she was too lightheaded to do anything more than nod, she decided the only option she had was to invite him to tea where she found James already waiting for her.

"Lady Elizabeth, I was wondering if perhaps you would do me the honor of a walk in the garden?" James asked.

Elizabeth had to stop herself from groaning. She'd been hoping to avoid this for as long as possible. When she was a little girl, nothing on earth would have made her happier than the prospect of marrying James. The conversation she overheard in the library hadn't affected her decision in the slightest. She could never marry James.

Not when she was desperately in love with Robert.

"Ah, Lady Elizabeth, I believe you promised me a walk in the garden," Lord Dumford pointed out almost desperately.

Did the man actually think that she would say yes to the first man who asked? She had absolutely no intention of saying yes to either man. In fact, if she could manage it, she would very much like to sit perfectly still where she was since both her head and stomach were currently spinning.

"May I have another cup, dear?" her father asked, looking quite pleased with himself.

"For me as well," Lord Norwood said, also looking rather pleased. No doubt both men were here to witness what they thought was going to be an announcement that would lead to the joining of their families. Since everyone was well aware of her childhood infatuation with James, they probably thought she would happily accept his offer.

Even knowing that she was about to disappoint everyone in the room couldn't deter her from her decision. She would say no to both men. Her mother would argue for her to accept one of the men since they were both her top choices, but she would most likely push for Elizabeth to accept James' proposal the most. Her father would argue, plead and then demand that she marry James. James' parents would unintentionally make her feel guilty because she loved them. She knew how happy it would make everyone if this match was made, officially connecting their families, but she couldn't do it.

She couldn't marry a man she didn't love and she couldn't marry the man she did love. Robert might be able to tolerate her somewhat right now, but he would hate her when he found out that she was carrying his child. But she needed to tell him. As frightened as she was, she couldn't do this alone. Their baby deserved better than to be labeled a bastard and right now she was terrified to continue doing this on her own.

James stood up, holding his hand out to her expectantly. "I would be honored if you would walk with me in the garden, Lady Elizabeth," James said charmingly enough, earning smiles from both sets of parents and a disapproving scowl from Lord Dumford.

She opened her mouth to accept just to get it over with so she could retire to her room for the rest of the day and lay down when Lord Dumford jumped to his feet.

"I'm sorry, but I must insist. Lady Elizabeth promised me a walk first," he said firmly. She knew that he was lying, but to announce it to the room and insulting him in her mother's house was not done.

James' smile looked forced as he pulled out a ring.

Oh no, not here with witnesses .

"I suppose I could ask Lady Elizabeth here just as easily as in the garden," James said, turning his attention to Elizabeth.

"Now see here, sir!" Lord Dumford said in a huff.

"Elizabeth, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" he asked while Lord Dumford turned three different shades of red as he sputtered nonsense about proprieties.

Her mother and Lady Bradford both gasped, pressing a hand to their chests while her father and Lord Bradford smiled smugly. Lord Dumford looked decidedly unhappy.

"Well, Lady Elizabeth," James said, grinning knowingly, "will you marry me?"

She opened her mouth to ask to speak with him privately when someone unexpected answered for her.

"I'm sorry, brother, but I'm afraid Lady Elizabeth is unable to accept your proposal."

Elizabeth was the last to look in Robert's direction. After taking a much needed breath to calm her stomach, she looked over and frowned.

Robert stood just inside the small ballroom with such a look of deadly determination that she couldn't help but feel a tingle of apprehension. The two men who were practically cowering behind him caught her attention. One was clearly a minister and the other could easily be a surgeon based on the small black bag he carried.

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"What's the meaning of this?" her father demanded. No doubt he was upset with the interruption to the engagement that he coveted.

"I'm sorry, my Lord," Robert said to her father, but his angry emerald eyes were focused on her, "but Lady Elizabeth has already agreed to marry me.....today."

Chapter 20

He knew!

Elizabeth forced herself to remain calm, knowing that was the only way she was going to survive this. There had to be a way to get out of this and, while she sat there trying not to lose the contents of her stomach once again, she would try to think of a way out of this or pray for a miracle, probably both.

James chuckled good-naturedly. "As much as I appreciate a good jest, Robert, I'm afraid you're interrupting Elizabeth's acceptance."

"She most certainly was not about to accept," Lord Dumford said in outrage.

Robert moved his gaze to the older man and said in a quiet, controlled voice, "Leave. Now." He spoke softly, but the threat was clear.

Lord Dumford noticeably swallowed. He took a step back and to the side, well away from Robert's reach before leaving the room at a quick pace even as he glared at Robert.

"You can't be serious," James said, indicating to Elizabeth who was the only one who'd remained seated, "You hate each other."

Robert looked at her for a moment. She hoped to catch a glimpse of the kind, sweet stranger who'd made love to her in the orangery, but he wasn't there. She'd never seen anyone's eyes look so cold before. The fact that it was because of her made her want to cry and beg for his forgiveness. She hadn't meant to hurt him.

"It doesn't matter how we feel about each other. We are to be married today. Now," he said, pulling out a folded piece of parchment. It was more than obvious that everyone in the room knew what he held by their expressions of outrage and disbelief. Robert had procured a special license for an immediate marriage, something that was very likely to cause a scandal.

Elizabeth felt her stomach turn as terror shot through her. He was serious. She couldn't marry him like this, she just couldn't. She'd hoped to explain about the baby to him and come to some sort of agreement. She wasn't foolish enough to believe that it wouldn't have ended in marriage, but she'd hoped for something on more amicable terms. She didn't want to be forced into marriage by a man who hated her. She opened her mouth to tell him that just as her stomach lurched. Clamping a hand over her mouth, she practically jumped from her seat and just barely made it to the large potted plant by the piano in time.

* * *

Robert clenched his hands tightly by his sides as he watched Elizabeth give him further proof of her deception. There was no doubt in his mind now that she was carrying his child. He ignored the confused looks of their families and from the servants who'd lingered in the room as he watched her. The fact that no one moved to help her hadn't slipped his notice. Everyone appeared to be too stunned to do much of anything but stare at him, never mind help Elizabeth.

As angry as he was at her, he couldn't stand to see her suffer. With a muttered curse that had Lady Norwood and his mother gasping, he stalked over to her. Kneeling down next to her, he gently rubbed her back as she finished. He ignored the loud whispered conversations going on behind him and focused on Elizabeth as she tried to calm her breathing.

He could feel her body tremble beneath his touch. She was scared, he realized. For the first time since he'd known her, she was scared. That alone would have softened his heart if it hadn't been for one simple fact.

She'd tried to keep his child away from him and that was unforgiveable.

"Robert, please don't do this," she whispered.

"What is going on here?" Lord Norwood demanded.

Robert stood, bringing Elizabeth with him. When she tried to move away from him, he tightened his hold on her arm. He faced their families and the two men he'd brought with him.

"Lady Elizabeth has accepted my proposal. We've decided to marry today," Robert announced to an already stunned group.

Everyone gaped at them. Lord Norwood opened his mouth to say something, closed it, shook his head and opened his mouth again. "Elizabeth, is this true? Do you wish to marry Robert?"

"No," Elizabeth stressed. Her refusal normally would have irritated him, but she no longer had a choice, neither did Lord Norwood for that matter.

Lord Norwood exhaled a relieved sigh. He looked at Robert and gave him a

sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry, son. I understand how easily it is to become infatuated with a beautiful woman, but she clearly doesn't feel the same way. As fond of you as I am, I don't think the match would work," he shifted his gaze to James, who still looked confused, but somewhat relieved. "Now, I believe we should go to my office and have a celebratory drink. What do you-"

Robert cut him off. "I'm sorry, my Lord, but I believe there's some confusion. Lady Elizabeth does not have a choice in the matter. She will marry me."

All good humor fled Lord Norwood's face. He took a threatening step forward. "You dare dictate to me, boy? In my own home?" His father stopped Lord Norwood from taking another step by placing his hand on the other man's chest.

"What is going on?" his mother asked no one in particular.

James ran a frustrated hand down his face as he considered Robert. "This is no longer funny, Robert."

"Do you see me laughing?" Robert bit out. "This is the very last thing on earth that I want, but I don't have a choice."

Elizabeth managed to pull her arm free. "And it's the very last thing you will get. We are not marrying today or any day," she said through clenched teeth.

"You will be my wife in less than ten minutes," he said coldly. "I guarantee it."

She looked towards her father for help. "Father, please do something!"

Lord Norwood shook his head, giving Robert a pitying look. "I'm sorry, son. She doesn't want you. You need to set your sights on someone who does. I will not force her hand in this."

Robert shook his head, unconcerned. "The choice is no longer yours, my Lord. In the eyes of the law she is already mine and she will marry me today."

Every pair of eyes widened at that declaration. Eerie silence once again filled the small ballroom. It was his father who finally broke the silence. "What did you do?"

Before he could answer, James was in his face, shoving him backwards. "You stupid, selfish bastard!" He swung at Robert and would have made quite an impact if Robert hadn't ducked out of the way.

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Robert made no move to strike his brother. "I'm sorry, James. But there's nothing I can do to change this. Believe me, I wish there was." He didn't miss Elizabeth's soft gasp or her hurt expression before he was forced to duck out of the way of James' fist once again.

After a few more swings, he was left with no choice but to end the confrontation. With one well-placed punch to the jaw, he sent his older brother stumbling back.

James rubbed his jaw as he glared at him. "I hate you," James said evenly before he turned around and walked away, pausing only long enough to send Elizabeth a look of regret.

His father stepped in front of him. "Please tell me that you didn't do what I think you did."

Robert shook his head slightly. "I can't." With that his mother and Lady Norwood broke into sobs. They sat down on the small sofa and held on to each other while Elizabeth looked around nervously and the men looked wary.

"Papa, please don't let him do this."

"It's not up to him any longer, Beth. In the eyes of the law you already belong to me," he said, gesturing to the surgeon he'd brought with him. "Unless you can prove you're not carrying my child we will marry at once."

Lord Norwood looked pleadingly at his daughter even as the color drained from his face. "Elizabeth?" The way he said her name said it all. He wanted her to deny

everything.

Elizabeth didn't answer her father. Instead she stepped forward and held his gaze. "If you force my hand in this, Robert, you will be sorry," she said tightly.

He looked into her beautiful eyes and sighed. "I already am, Beth."

Chapter 21

"It's not so bad," Mary said softly as she poured warm water over Elizabeth's shoulders.

Elizabeth wiped her eyes with her palms. "Yes, it is. I'm married to a man who hates me. James now hates me. Mother and Lady Bradford have both taken to their beds and, according to the servants, haven't stopped sobbing since they found out word spread around the ton about my condition and the quick ceremony. Father will not speak to me," she mumbled pathetically.

"You have been rather busy, haven't you?" Mary asked with a kind smile.

She nodded numbly before she burst into fresh tears once again. "I'm so sorry. I don't know why I can't seem to stop crying," she said, mortified that she hadn't been able to stop crying since the forced ceremony.

"Shhh, it's perfectly natural. It's been a very stressful day given your condition."

Elizabeth simply nodded as Mary continued to run warm, lavender scented water over her hair. Today she was supposed to make last minute preparations for her trip. Instead she found herself married to her childhood enemy and there was nothing that she could do about it. The moment he'd found out about the baby, she belonged to him.

Despite everything she promised herself over the years, she was now another man's property. If that wasn't bad enough, the man she now belonged to hated her and she loved him more than anything. This situation was hopeless.

"Did you know?" Mary asked softly as she poured more water over Elizabeth's back.

"Know what?" she mumbled against her knees as she sniffled back another sob.

"That you were with child?"

Elizabeth closed her eyes tightly as she hugged her knees to her chest just as tightly.

"Yes."

"Oh, Elizabeth," Mary said on a broken whisper. "Why didn't you come to me for help?"

"It was my problem," she muttered pathetically.

"Elizabeth, surely you knew that you couldn't hide this from everyone forever. What were you planning on doing once you began to show?"

"That's what I would like to know," Robert drawled, earning a startled gasp from Mary.

"You don't belong in here!" Mary said and Elizabeth didn't need to look up to know that her sister was already halfway across the room and shoving Robert out of the room. She'd never been happier with her sister's bossy ways than she was at that moment.

She didn't want to see Robert, not yet. Not when she was still so angry about what he'd pulled. He knew that she didn't want to marry and yet he forced her hand. She

wasn't foolish enough to believe that she actually had a choice in the matter. As much as she detested the rules, she also knew that she couldn't fight them. She'd freely given herself to Robert and no matter the circumstances of that choice; she'd ruined herself and became damaged in the eyes of society.

Society's rules also decided that the baby in her womb was Robert's property and, as a result, so was she. The moment she realized that she was carrying his child she also knew that he now controlled her life, today only made it official. For the rest of her life she would have to answer to Robert and be dependent on him for everything. Everything she owned was now his and there was nothing that she could do to stop him from spending it however he wished.

He could spend every last pound on women and cards. She wouldn't be able to do anything to stop him and she hated it. She hated having no say in her life, no choices, and she especially hated him for making her fall in love with him, because he certainly would never return those feelings. No, he'd go out of his way to make her life a living hell and there was absolutely nothing that she could do about it.

Of course she could make her situation tolerable by becoming a doting wife. She could become the perfect wife and keep her mouth shut and stay out of her husband's way and simply be thankful for his generosity, but that really wasn't her way. She hadn't been lying when she promised that he'd regret this, not only because she had absolutely no plans for becoming a simpering wife, but because she would make sure that he knew early on that it was best not to try and control her.

Her father had learned that he couldn't control her and now so would Robert.

"Leave us," Robert said in a hard tone.

Elizabeth softly snorted at that even as she sniffled. If he really thought that he could order Mary around he had another thing coming. Her sister loved her and would

never abandon her. She would-

"Goodnight, Elizabeth," Mary said on a weary sigh seconds before she heard her bedroom door close with a deafening click .

Wonderful, she thought as she wiped away another tear, hoping that the dimly lit room was too dark for him to see her crying.

"How are you feeling?" Robert asked, his words were cordial enough, but his tone was cold as ice.

"You didn't need to check up on me, Robert. I'm fine. Goodnight," she said firmly, hoping he'd just leave and let her come to terms with everything.

Not only was she married to a man that didn't love her, but he didn't even like her. He'd certainly made his feelings clear on the matter when he'd humiliated her and forced her into a marriage that neither one of them wanted.

* * *

“You and I need to have a talk,” he said quietly, too afraid that if he spoke any louder that he would lose what little control he had and start yelling.

He still couldn't believe what a bitch she'd turned into. She'd certainly fooled him into believing that she'd grown into a kind woman. Over the past month he'd seen her be kind to servants, children, and even beggars on the street. She treated everyone with a sweet smile and a kind disposition, but now he had to wonder how he ever fell for such a farce.

Only a heartless bitch would allow her child to be labeled a bastard when the father was more than willing to give it the protection of his name. He knew only too well how society looked down upon bastards, how they were treated like lepers. He'd attended school with several boys, who'd had the misfortune of having been born in that unfortunate set of circumstances.

It hadn't mattered who the boys' fathers had been, how intelligent they were, how funny they'd been or how good they'd been at sports, they were all treated like garbage. They were teased, taunted and constantly reminded that they didn't belong. Their prospects in life were severely limited because of their status, guaranteeing them that they would never find a way into a life that should have been theirs.

They were outcasts, not good enough for the class that they should have been born into and too good for the class that they'd been trapped in. They'd have trouble getting work, being respected or simply marrying. They didn't fit in anywhere and that knowledge would follow them to their graves. The fact that Elizabeth had been

willing to place their child in that life infuriated him to the point that even looking at her sickened him.

Once the small ceremony had finished he'd simply walked away from her, too afraid of what he might do if he stayed. He'd never hit her. He'd never hit a woman before and had no plans on doing it now, but he had been very much afraid of saying something that he'd eventually regret. As much as he hated her right now, and by God did he hate her, she was still the mother of his child. For their child he planned on showing her respect, but that was simply it.

She was nothing more than the woman that he was now trapped with. She was his wife and he would see that she had a roof over her head, food in her stomach and clothing on her back, but that was all. They were leaving as soon as he was certain that the scandal that their hasty marriage had created died down enough that it wouldn't affect their child if he or she ever decided to return to England.

He planned on taking her when he left the country. He'd keep her in the room furthest away from his so that he didn't have to see her every morning. As long as she stayed out of his way and brought his child into this world, she could do whatever the hell she wanted after that. She could return to England after she had the child and he wouldn't give a damn. Hell, at this point he didn't even care if she raised their child. He'd happily hire a nanny if that's what needed to be done.

At least now he knew the motivation behind her cruelty. He hadn't when he'd walked out after the ceremony, but upon his return a somber Lord Norwood had been waiting for him in the library to explain Elizabeth's inheritance and dowry. When Lord Norwood finished explaining everything and left him with a stack of papers to go through, his anger had intensified to a very dangerous degree.

Elizabeth had been more than willing to condemn their child as a bastard for a very large inheritance that awaited her on her next birthday. She would have been a very

rich woman, and she probably thought that her money alone would have given their child all the protection that it needed, but it wouldn't have. Society loved to look down on its inferiors and no amount of money would have been able to stop that for their child or for Elizabeth.

It had made him wonder if she even planned to keep the child. Did she already have plans to have a surgeon rid her body of the child or was she planning on abandoning the baby as soon as it was born? He'd forced those questions from his mind, too afraid that he'd end up killing someone in a fit of rage.

Never in his life had he been this furious. The only thing that had managed to calm him down and even put a smile on his face was the fact that Elizabeth would never see a single quid of that money. She would never enjoy the luxurious life that she desired, because she'd married him.

The fact that she had no idea yet that she'd lost everything brought him such joy. As her husband, everything that she had was now his and she probably assumed that she'd be able to manipulate him with her sweet smiles and passions in the bedroom to gain what she wanted.

She would be wrong.

Not only would he never fall for her sweet act again, but his wealth hadn't changed since this morning. If she had married his brother or the Marquis in a proper wedding, then she would have indeed become a very rich woman by the end of the ceremony. Then again, if she had succeeded in leaving before anyone had discovered that she was with child, she would have been able to enjoy her newfound wealth. That is, until it was learned that she'd had a child out of wedlock. Then everything that she'd gained would have simply been taken from her.

The stipulations were very clear in her godmother's will. Of course, he'd be willing

to bet everything that he had that Elizabeth wasn't aware of the conditions of the will, otherwise she would have never allowed him to touch her that night in the orangery.

Elizabeth's godmother had certainly cared for her, that much was clear, but she'd also been a stickler for the proprieties of society and had expected her beautiful goddaughter to marry well. At the very least, she'd expected her goddaughter to remain chaste for the rest of her life.

The expectations had been very clear, in order for Elizabeth to gain control of her inheritance she needed to either marry well or remain a virgin. She hadn't done either. His father might be an Earl, but Robert was only the second son, not very likely to gain the title since James would probably be married within the year with a babe on the way soon after that. That night in the orangery had sealed her fate. By allowing him to take her into his arms, she'd lost her inheritance.

He'd actually considered waiting until tomorrow and allowing her father to explain the situation, but where would the justice in that be? He deserved something for the hell that she'd put him through and he fully intended to collect his reward.

"Please just leave, Robert," she said quietly as she hugged her knees to her chest.

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“And abandon my beautiful wife on our wedding night?” he asked with mock indignation as he picked up a chair and brought it over so that he could sit right in front of the bathtub.

With a sigh of anticipation, he sat down in the chair, leaned back with his arms folded over his chest and his legs stretched out in front of him. Was it wrong that he was planning on enjoying her downfall? Probably, but he didn’t care. She’d brought this on herself and he was going to enjoy every last minute of it.

“Just.....just leave,” she whispered, not bothering to look up at him, but that was fine with him as long as he had a front row seat to her downfall.

He’d never before been purposely cruel to a woman. It just went to prove that Elizabeth brought out the worst in him. At least he had a lifetime of revenge to look forward to, he decided as he thought over the best way to break the news to her.

“I had an interesting conversation with your father a little while ago,” he simply stated to get things started.

“I’m sure that you did,” she mumbled.

“Did you know that there is no dowry for you?” he asked conversationally as he watched her every move, waiting for the reaction that he craved.

“Yes,” she said quietly with a slight nod as she continued to stare down at her bathwater.

“You don’t find it curious that a man as wealthy as your father wouldn’t set aside money to see you married?” he asked, anticipation soaring through him as he continued to toy with her.

“No.”

He cocked his head to the side as he studied her. “And why is that?”

She gave a humorless laugh as she turned her head slightly away from him and as discreetly as possible, wiped at her face. So she was crying, was she? Already trying to manipulate him then. She’d learn very quickly that her tricks wouldn’t work on him.

“You already know why, Robert, so please just leave me alone.”

He pursed his lips up in thought as he considered her request. “No, I don’t think that I will.”

“Can you not gloat about the fact that you now control my inheritance tomorrow?” she asked, a bite of anger lacing her words. “Please just leave me be,” she whispered in defeat, her voice cracking with emotion as she once again wiped at her face.

“What inheritance?” he asked, savoring the moment of her downfall.

She shook her head in disgust. “You don’t need to play these games with me, Robert.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he said, nodding as he decided to end this game and get right to the conclusion. “This game has gone on long enough. So why don’t I explain how things are going to be from this point on?”

He didn't give her a chance to answer, not that she made any attempts as she continued to sit there in what had to be a cold bath by now. It was best to explain the way things were going to be from now on and then leave her to her fate while he went to one of his clubs and enjoyed himself. Who knows, perhaps he'd follow in his father's steps and set up a beautiful mistress to see to his needs. He certainly didn't owe Elizabeth anything, especially his fidelity.

"You will be given a yearly sum to cover your clothing needs and that is all. I will personally see to it that our child is well taken care of. You may have a room of your own and you will see to your motherly duties. Other than that I don't give a damn what you do as long as you stay out of my way."

She nodded as though she'd expected as much from him and he wasn't sure why that grated on his nerves. Did she really think so little of him? Did she believe that he was purposely cruel or did she accept the fact that she'd pushed him to it?

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you," she said on a choked sob, obviously trying to get back in his good graces so that he'd give her part of her inheritance. It actually made him hate her more for the attempt.

"I'm sure that you are," he said darkly as he glared at her.

"Don't you have any questions about your inheritance?" he asked, wishing to end this so that he could leave.

After a slight pause, she shook her head. "I'd rather not."

"That's probably for the best," he mused, watching her intently before he broke the news to her. "Since it's gone."

"Gone?" she asked, sounding confused as she finally looked at him.

He forced himself to ignore the evidence that she'd been crying as he continued. She would never manipulate him again and she'd be smart to learn that now.

"Of course it's gone," he said with a shrug. "You didn't meet any of the conditions of the will after all."

"Conditions?" she asked, looking adorably confused.

"There were several conditions. The first one of course was that you were expected to marry well," he said with a shrug simply to annoy her. "Then of course was the condition placed on your birthday."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, frowning.

"You were expected to remain chaste in order to receive your inheritance." When she simply stared at him in confusion, he added, "Untouched."

She paled at that as she noticeably swallowed.

He reached up and lazily scratched the back of his head as he gave her a careless shrug. "So, you see that whatever plans you had when you decided to keep my child from me wouldn't have worked. Then again, if you had simply accepted my brother, you would have gained a title and a fortune."

"But, I don't love James," she mumbled absently as she hugged her legs more tightly to her chest as if that would protect her from her new reality.

He ignored the bait that she was trying to hand him. Did she expect him to ask if she loved him? Did she truly believe he was that gullible? She'd learn in time, he supposed as he got to his feet, but he couldn't leave until he struck the last blow.

“You should probably write your sister and congratulate her,” he said as he returned the chair to its place in front of the dimming fire.

“Why?” she mumbled, sounding sad and giving him what he wanted.

“Because you’ve just made her a very rich woman.”

Chapter 22

“Mary?” she asked, swallowing nervously as she reached out and gripped the sides of the tub, praying that the inheritance that had been meant for her would go to the one sister that would use it wisely.

Mary would use it as Elizabeth had planned. She’d turn the estates that she’d inherited into schools for the poor and unfortunate as well as safe homes where women would be given training and more options in life. The money that she’d inherited would have gone a long way to make sure that all the schools could have run tuition free for many generations to come.

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The only estate that Elizabeth had planned on keeping for herself was her north estate. It would have been more than enough for her to live out the rest of her days quietly, but Mary wouldn't need that and would most likely turn it into another opportunity to help the less fortunate. Heather on the other hand.....

She wouldn't part with a single quid if it meant that it helped someone that she deemed beneath her. Heather would spend the money on lavish gowns, jewels, parties and every expensive bauble that she could get her greedy hands on. She would never even consider helping anyone but herself.

When Robert had happily announced the loss of her inheritance she'd felt sick. She'd failed, because she'd given into her own greed and made love to a man who hated her. The fact that she couldn't regret her baby even if it meant the loss for so many made her feel horrible. If Mary were the one to inherit in her place then everything would be okay. Mary would fix this. Mary would make sure that the schools were started immediately. Mary would-

"Heather stands to inherit, of course," Robert announced, shattering her last hope.

"Oh.....God.....no," she whispered hollowly.

Robert chuckled as he slowly walked to the door. "Yes, I'm sure that you're quite upset about that. No doubt that Mary would have given you whatever you wanted, but Heather.....," he said meaningfully as he paused before continuing, "I doubt that Heather would share so much as a shilling with you."

Her stomach cramped down violently with that last announcement. All of her and

Mary's plans for the future, gone. There would be no schools, no donations to the poor....nothing. She'd lost it all in one night. So many lives that were never going to have a chance, because of her.

She'd ruined everything because she'd fallen in love with the wrong man, she thought numbly as she struggled to stand up on trembling legs as her head spun, making her increasingly dizzy.

Fresh air, she needed fresh air, she decided as she somehow managed to stand up.

"Elizabeth?" Robert said, sounding uncertain as she struggled to step out of the tub.

"J-just leave me alone, Robert. You've delivered your blow so just go," she said just before her legs gave out and she fell forward.

* * *

"Elizabeth?" Robert said anxiously as he cradled his unwanted wife in his arms.

She'd gone deathly pale on him. Her cold body trembled in his arms even as she tried to push him away.

"Leave me alone," she mumbled, pushing weakly against him to gain her freedom, but he simply ignored her attempts as he carried her to the bed and laid her down.

She was just playing a game, he tried to tell himself as he pulled his arms away so that he could stand up. She was simply upset that she'd lost a fortune, he told himself, doing his damndest to build up his anger at her once again. She was just trying to manipulate him so that he would....so that he would....

"Oh, God," he choked out as he slowly stood up, his eyes locked on the blood that

stained her pale thighs.

“I-I don’t feel very good,” Elizabeth mumbled, whimpering as she turned onto her side and curled into herself.

He swallowed his fears for his unborn child and wife as he took a step back, stumbling on unsteady legs. He blindly reached out and grabbed the silk rope hanging by her bed and pulled on it, again and again until he was sure that there was a small army of servants racing to their room.

Once that was done, he dropped down onto his knees next to the bed and covered Elizabeth’s cold hands where they rested over her womb with his own. He gave her hands a gentle squeeze as she quietly sobbed, no doubt realizing that she’d just lost their child.

* * *

“I’m going to kill him!” Lord Norwood shouted as he was once again dragged back by the servants that were desperate to save their employer from murder charges.

Robert barely heard his father-in-law or cared for that matter. His focus was on the door in front of him as he waited for it to open and the surgeon to tell him that his wife would be okay.

He wasn’t sure how long ago the surgeon had demanded his removal from the room. The only reason that he’d agreed was so that Elizabeth would be granted some privacy, but he’d also thought that her mother would have dragged her ass out of bed and comforted her daughter. When it became obvious that Lady Norwood had no plans to comfort Elizabeth, Robert had asked for his mother to help.

His mother hadn’t hesitated in offering her daughter-in-law some comfort. As upset

as his mother was, and he had no doubt that she was distraught over their situation, she'd hurried from her room and straight into Elizabeth's room without sparing him a glance. She truly loved Elizabeth and he thanked God for that.

He couldn't stomach the idea of Elizabeth being alone right now. As furious as he was over the fact that she'd lied, he realized something important. He truly did care for her, more than he ever thought possible. He didn't want to lose her, not yet, not before he could tell her how sorry he was for causing her to lose their child.

As much as he'd once hated her, he'd had no right to torment her the way he had. She'd been carrying his child and he should have given that some consideration instead of acting like a child and giving into his anger. He'd never regretted his temper more and, as God was his witness, he would never treat her that way ever again.

All he needed was a second chance to make her happy, to take care of her and earn her forgiveness. He'd move heaven and hell for another chance with her. Just the thought of never seeing her again had him struggling to take his next breath. He couldn't live without her, didn't want to because-

Because he loved her.

He was madly in love with his wife and he'd allowed his rage to eat at him. How many times had his father or brother taken him aside and lectured him over his temper? How many fights had he started simply because he couldn't control his temper? There'd been too many to count and now his child and wife were paying the price.

"I will kill you for this, you bastard!" Lord Norwood shouted as he was finally dragged from the hallway.

“Robert,” his father said softly as he stopped by his side, looking like he’d aged a decade since this morning, “I need to know what happened.”

Grinding his jaw, Robert shook his head as he looked at his father. “It’s my fault,” he managed to choke out.

“What happened?” his father demanded tightly.

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“I lost my temper and made her lose the baby,” his said, his voice hoarse with emotion as he allowed himself to mourn the loss of his child, a child that he would never see.

“Did.....did you strike her?” his father asked quietly.

“I would never hurt her,” he bit out between clenched teeth.

“Then how did-” his father started to ask, appearing both tired and confused.

“I said things that I shouldn’t have said. I was angry with her and I.....I let my temper get the better of me,” he said, rubbing his hands over his face, wishing that he could do this day over again.

If he could do this day over again, he would do it right. He’d kiss her and tell her how much he loved her before he dropped down on one knee and begged her to marry him. If she said no, then he would have courted her and proved to her how much he cared for her. He should have-

“You should have never married her,” his father said, sounding disappointed and shaking his head in disgust as he walked away.

He didn’t argue with his father, but simply let the man walk away, because his father was right. He should have never married her, but he had and now he was going to be the husband that she needed him to be, he decided as he pushed away from the wall and walked towards the bedroom door.

When a footman tried to step in his way and stop him, Robert simply punched the man in the stomach, dropping him to the floor and stepped over him. He opened the door and quickly shut it behind him.

“Robert? What are you doing in here?” his mother demanded when she spotted him. “You don’t belong in here.”

“I belong with my wife,” he said, his eyes landing on Elizabeth’s sleeping form and remaining there as he walked to her.

She looked so peaceful, he thought as he leaned over her so that he could gently push a strand of hair out of her face. “How is my wife?” he asked the surgeon, never taking his eyes away from Elizabeth.

“Perhaps we could speak in the hallway?” the surgeon suggested, no doubt uncomfortable with his presence since being in the sickroom with your wife was simply not done.

“We’ll talk here,” Robert murmured as he leaned down and pressed a kiss to his wife’s cool forehead, ignoring his mother’s startled gasp.

After pressing a second kiss to her forehead, simply because he was relieved that she was alive, he carefully sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand in his. He looked up at the stunned surgeon and gestured for him to begin.

“Well,” the surgeon said, clearing his throat and shifting uncomfortably, no doubt well acquainted with Robert’s reputation, “as I’m sure you know, your wife lost the child.”

“And how is my wife?” he asked, praying that she was going to be okay after this.

“She is very upset, Mr. Bradford, but with rest, food and time, I believe that she will make a full recovery and should be able to have more children.”

Robert nodded as he sighed with relief. She would be okay. That’s all that mattered to him. Well, there was one more thing that he had to know.

“Do you know what caused her to lose the baby?” he asked, needing his fault in the matter confirmed.

“I believe dehydration and the fact that she couldn’t keep anything down was the cause of this,” the surgeon said on a weary sigh as he picked up his bag. “From what I understand, she thought that stress was the cause of everything, and once she realized that she was with child, she became overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do, Mr. Bradford,” he said with a sympathetic smile. “The next time, I don’t believe that she’ll hesitate in asking for help. Good day, sir.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, returning his attention back to his sleeping wife.

He didn’t know what to make of what the surgeon said, but he knew one thing, he was going to take better care of his wife from this moment on.

Chapter 23

Two weeks later.....

“Please, stop.”

“But, you need to eat,” Robert stubbornly explained as he scooped up another spoonful of that dreadful broth that he’d practically been pouring down her throat since she woke up two weeks ago. “The surgeon was very adamant about this in fact.”

“Yes, but can’t I-” Her words were cut off when he took advantage and shoved the spoon in her mouth.

“You need to build up your strength,” he said with a firm nod as he placed the vile broth concoction back on the table and picked up the cup of equally vile tea and tried to make her drink it.

“No,” she said, turning her head away.

“Elizabeth,” he said in clear exasperation, “this will help you. Now drink.”

“No!” she stubbornly said, turning her face into the pillow and pressing her lips together in silent protest.

He sighed heavily as he attempted to cup her chin gently between his fingers and force her to turn towards him so that he could pour that awful tea down her throat again, but after two weeks straight of drinking that putrid concoction, she was done.

“Elizabeth,” he said in exasperation, “you have to drink this.”

“No,” she bit out quickly before she closed her lips up tightly once again.

“It will make you stronger,” he patiently explained as he made another attempt.

“No, it will make me gag!” she managed to get out before he could bring the cup to her lips.

“Drink it quickly and you won’t taste a thing,” he lied, again, as he brought the cup to her lips, but she wasn’t having it. She pressed a hand over her mouth, creating a protective barrier against the disgusting liquid.

His eyes narrowed on the action as he placed the cup down on the table. “You’re only making this harder on yourself,” he said, reaching over and pulling her hand away from her mouth.

With narrowed eyes, she quickly replaced it with her other hand. When he pulled the hand away, she did it again until he was forced to grab both her hands, with a frustrated growl, and pinned them against the mattress. His smile was smug until he realized that with both of his hands pinning hers, he couldn’t pick up the cup and force her to drink.

“You’re being stubborn,” he accused with a sullen glare.

“So are you!” she snapped back.

“You need it!”

“No, I don’t!” she shot back, because she really didn’t need it. It was turning her stomach and no matter how much he was able to get down her throat, it did nothing to ease her hunger. She was in fact, starving.

It actually surprised her that she could think about food after....

After losing the baby.

When she realized that she'd lost their child, she wanted nothing more than to follow after it. The pain of losing a child was something that she never wanted to experience again. At the time she'd hated the doctor for it, but she was glad that he'd given her medicine to make her sleep. It had given her a short break from the heartache.

Unfortunately as soon as she had opened her eyes and memories from the night before came back, she had broken down and started crying uncontrollably. It had frightened the poor maid that had been stationed in her room to oversee her recovery. Her loud sobs had also startled Robert, who'd apparently passed out in a chair next to the bed, awake.

As soon as he realized that she was awake, he was on the bed and pulling her into his arms instead of yelling at her as she'd expected. He'd rubbed her back, kissed her forehead and said soothing words to her as she'd mourned the loss of their baby. When Robert realized that the maid tasked with helping her recover was only standing there, gawking at them, he'd sent her fleeing from the room.

From that point on, he refused to allow anyone else to care for her. He turned away every maid that tried. The only thing that he allowed them to do was to bring up the awful tea and broth that he force-fed her or hot water so that she could soak in the tub. When he wasn't trying to poison her, he was reading to her, holding her, sitting by her side while she slept, or holding her tightly when she couldn't bear the loss of their child anymore and broke down into sobs.

Neither one of them had mentioned the baby, their wedding, the argument they had that night or a hundred other things that they should probably discuss. Instead, he was simply there for her and it made her love him even more.

She'd never expected this level of consideration from her husband. When she'd been a child, she'd fantasized about her own Prince Charming, but even that fantasy hadn't been as perfect as Robert had been to her over the last two weeks. Men, husbands, didn't do things like this for their wives. Her father certainly never did this for her mother and Anthony, who she knew loved and adored her sister, never did this sort of thing for Mary. He would visit with her and hold her in his arms when she needed comfort, but Anthony had never devoted every single minute of the day to Mary's care and wellbeing. It made her feel cherished and helped her through the most painful loss of her life.

"Half a cup, that's all you have to drink," he said soothingly as he released her hands and picked up the cup. "Come on, just a few sips."

She let out an indelicate snort at that as she shook her head. "Not happening, Robert."

"Elizabeth, it's good for you," he said, giving her a smile that did funny things to her stomach.

"Then you drink it," she said stubbornly, refusing to be swayed by a charming smile.

With a roll of his eyes and a muttered comment about her being a big baby, he brought the cup to his lips and took a long sip that he quickly spit back into the cup.

"What the hell is in that?" he demanded in outrage as he placed the offending cup on the table. He wiped frantically at his mouth to erase the taste and when that didn't help, he grabbed the vase by her bed, yanked the flowers out of it and tipped it back, drinking every last drop. When he placed the empty vase by the bed, he was still

cringing at the bitter aftertaste left in his mouth.

“Good,” she said with a nod as she threw the covers off and shifted her legs to the edge of the bed. “Now maybe I can get some real food.”

“The doctor said that you had to stay in bed for at least another week,” Robert pointed out as he moved to help her back in bed.

“Was it the same doctor that said I had to drink the tea?” she asked, relieved when he stepped back with a sigh and held out his hand to help her to her feet.

“It’s well past midnight. I don’t think there will be anyone up to make you something to eat,” he pointed out once she was on her feet.

“I’m sure that I’ll manage,” she said, not bothering to remind him that she knew how to cook since most men of his standing would be outraged to have their wives do something that they believed was a servant’s job.

“I could always run down to the kitchens and look for something,” he suggested, sounding hopeful.

“You’d eat it all before you even left the kitchen,” she pointed out with a smile.

He considered that for a moment before he shrugged with a self-deprecating smile. “You’re probably right.”

“One day you’ll have to explain how you manage to eat so much,” she said, heading to the door, but she didn’t make it far before she found herself swept off her feet and into his arms.

“I actually have a theory about that,” he said with a smile as he walked to the door.

“Really? What is it?” she asked, too curious to pretend otherwise.

His appetite was rather frightening. She’d never seen someone eat so much food in one sitting. There were actually several maids that refused to wait on him, terrified that he’d accidentally devour their hands if they didn’t release the platters of food fast enough.

“You,” he simply said as he waited for her to reach over and open the door to her bedchamber.

“Me?”

“Mmmhmm, you,” he said with a teasing smile as he pressed a kiss to the tip of her nose and carried her out into the hallway that was dimly lit by several candles slowly burning away the late night hours.

“How exactly am I responsible for your terrifying appetite?” she asked as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“If I recall correctly,” he said, shifting her slightly in his arms so that he could safely navigate the poorly lit staircase with her in his arms, “you cursed me and all my future heirs.”

She gasped. “I did no such thing!” she said, even though it did kind of sound like something that she would do.

“You certainly did, minx,” Robert said, chuckling as he carried her down the back hallway, towards the kitchen.

“Well, I’m sure that you did something to deserve it,” she said with feigned haughtiness that had him grinning as he turned and pushed the kitchen door open with

his back.

“I buried all your dolls in the pig’s pen,” he said, chuckling as he carefully set her down on her feet.

“You really were a horrid child,” she said with a smile as she walked away from him and began to search through the cupboards, wondering what she’d done to make Robert do something so cruel. It was probably something much worse than what he’d done to her, she thought with a satisfied sigh.

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“Tell me what you need and I’ll get it for you,” Robert said as he quickly lit more candles as well as several oil lamps so that they could see what they were doing.

As she quickly scanned what was available to them, she decided that eggs, ham and fresh biscuits would probably be the easiest thing for her to make. Decision made, she told him what she needed as she did her best to ignore her stomach’s growling demands.

Robert shot her an amused smile that she chose to ignore as she started on the biscuits. By the time she had the dough made and ready to rise, she was ravenous and considering skipping this step and simply cutting the biscuits and baking them, uncaring that they would end up flat. The only reason that she hesitated in doing just that was Robert. She’d bragged that she made the best biscuits and now she wanted to prove it. But, she was so hungry and she wasn’t sure that she was going to be able to wait until-

“Here,” Robert said as he placed a small platter overflowing with cheese, bread and cut ham in front of her.

“Thank you,” she barely murmured as she started to attack the food.

“You’re welcome,” he said with a chuckle as he helped himself to the food.

For several minutes they sat there eating in comfortable silence while she kept an eye on the dough. It was actually rather nice, she thought just before Robert had to go ahead and ruin it.

“I think we should talk.”

Chapter 24

“I know,” Elizabeth agreed with a small sigh as she popped another piece of cheese into her mouth, sounding so damn disgruntled by the prospect that he couldn’t help but smile.

For a moment she stared down at the bowl of dough as she toyed with a piece of bread and he wondered what she was thinking. Perhaps she was preparing herself for another fight, he realized with a wince. He was done fighting with her. They’d been doing it since they were children and, as much fun as it had been, it was time to put an end to it.

She was his wife and his responsibility, and they couldn’t go on like this. He’d been very fortunate that he hadn’t been raised in a cold family, and he wanted their children to be just as fortunate as he had been. Like most couples, his parents weren’t in love, but unlike most couples that he knew, they were very good friends.

It probably hadn’t hurt that his parents were raised knowing that they were betrothed to each other. They were two years apart and had lived less than two hours away from each other as children. They’d accepted the situation without complaint. His mother’s family had wanted a title for their daughter while his father’s parents had wanted to fatten their coffers and ensure that their son had a pleasant wife.

They’d always been friends, sometimes acting more like siblings than a married couple. They’d never shared a room, never looked at each other with anything more than casual affection, and never pretended to be in love. Not that he wanted to know, because the knowledge would probably scar him for life, but he doubted very much that his mother had graced his father’s bed since she’d provided him with an heir and a spare so that the line could continue.

She'd also never seemed upset that her husband kept mistresses and lovers. It never seemed to bother her, and Robert knew that she was well aware that they existed. Whenever his father left to go spend the night with another woman, she always gave him a knowing smile and wished him a good night.

They'd never fought, yelled at each other or ignored either James or himself as they pursued their own amusements. They raised their children in a warm family, with love and understanding and Robert wanted that for his own family. He certainly didn't want to raise his children in a cold home like the one that Elizabeth had been raised in.

Lady Norwood was the typical mother and wife of the ton . She said the right things, wore the latest fashion, obeyed all the rules and snubbed her nose at those who didn't. She also had very little to do with the raising of her daughters. She'd left that to nannies and governesses, only involving herself in her children's lives when it came to gossip, the prospect of her daughters marrying, or if her daughters embarrassed her in some way.

The only good thing that he could say about Lord Norwood where his daughters were concerned was that the man did genuinely love and care about his girls. He'd seen Lord Norwood worry about them, smile warmly when he saw them and seem genuinely pleased to have them around.

Unlike his parents, the Norwoods were virtual strangers, choosing to spend most of their time apart. Although Lady Norwood hadn't complained about her husband keeping women on the side, she did demand a shiny bauble the next morning. It hadn't taken Robert long to figure out their routine. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night, Lord Norwood would bid his wife goodnight before he left to spend the night with his mistress. In turn, Lady Norwood would send her husband a cold glare, not because she was truly upset that he was spending his nights with other women like Robert had first suspected, but to remind him that she would expect him

to buy her forgiveness in the morning.

It was not the type of marriage that he wanted and certainly not one that he wanted his children to be exposed to everyday. While he would like to be able to put the past behind them and start over as friends, he also didn't want his parents' marriage. He didn't simply want a cordial marriage. He desired Elizabeth and wanted to spend every night with her in his arms and, in order to get that, they were going to have to talk.

"I'm very sorry that I didn't tell you about the baby," she said softly, bringing up the one subject that he'd decided to put off until another day.

"Why didn't you?" he asked just as softly, terrified that he'd say or do something to scare her or make her cry.

Too late, he realized as she wiped a tear off her cheek with a small cooking cloth. Pretending that everything was okay, she stood up and focused all of her attention on the bowl of dough. Somehow he forced himself to remain seated when all he wanted to do was take her in his arms and tell her that he forgave her, that it wasn't important, but it was.

He wanted to know, needed to know. He wasn't as angry as he'd been before. Christ almighty, how could he be? She'd just lost their child and he knew that she grieved over that child with all her heart. He'd seen the anguish in her eyes as she'd cried over the loss of their first child.

She'd only been a little over a month and a half into her pregnancy, but he knew that she'd already loved that baby. While most women would simply accept the fact that they'd lost a child since it happened so frequently, Elizabeth had taken the loss hard. It told him so much about her, confirming his earlier opinion of her and making him regret ever calling her a bitch even if he'd only done it in his head. He just couldn't

see the woman that he'd held in his arms over the past two weeks while she cried her heart out being a vicious bitch who would purposely subject a child to a life of misery and being labeled a bastard.

He just couldn't.

"I didn't want to trap you," she mumbled as she rolled out the dough with an expert touch and began to cut out circles.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked a little more roughly than he'd intended, making her noticeably cringe.

"I didn't want to force you into marrying me, Robert," she said tightly as she quickly placed the cut dough on a pan, focusing all of her attention on the task at hand so that she wouldn't have to look at him.

"It wouldn't have been forced," he explained, getting to his feet and moving to help her when she picked up the pan.

He took the pan from her and carefully placed it in the hot oven, careful not to step too close to the open fireplace beneath the ovens. Once he was sure that it was far enough inside the oven, he turned around and found Elizabeth busying herself with cleaning up the small mess on the table.

Without a word, he stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her back against his body. "It wouldn't have been forced," he repeated more softly this time.

"Yes, it would have," she said, moving to step away from him, but he wasn't letting her go.

“No, it wouldn’t have, Elizabeth,” he said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“You don’t love me, Robert. You don’t even like me and you certainly don’t want to be married to me,” she explained softly as she simply stood there, allowing him to hold her.

“What makes you think that I don’t like you?” he asked, smiling when she released an indelicate snort.

“Would you like a list?” she asked, settling back against him and making him wonder if she was even aware of the action.

“Is it a short list?” he asked absently as he enjoyed the feel of having her in his arms and no longer having to worry about proprieties and all that bullshit.

Then again, it was still looked down upon to show affection for one’s wife in public, but he didn’t give a damn. He loved touching her, holding her and he’d be damned if he allowed rules made up by a bunch of hypocrites to dictate his life. She calmed something deep inside of him, gave him peace, and made him smile even when she was going out of her way to vex him.

It was simply impossible to truly hate her.

When he realized that she’d gone quiet again, he contented himself with simply holding her. For several minutes they stayed like that, him holding her in his arms while she absently traced her fingers along his forearms. He could have held her all night, but they needed to talk. Praying that she didn’t push him away, he asked her once again for the answer that he dreaded.

“Why didn’t you tell me, minx?” he asked, pressing a kiss to her lavender scented hair.

She didn't answer immediately, and for a minute he thought that perhaps she would never tell him, but she took him by surprise when she admitted something that he never thought he'd hear from her.

"Because I was scared."

"Of me?" he asked hollowly as his arms tightened around her, praying that the answer was no, but that was too much to expect.

He'd made her life a living hell for too many years to count until finally he'd been forced to step away, terrified that he'd do something foolish like take her over his knee and give her the spanking that she so rightly deserved. Putting space between them had probably saved them from killing each other or losing their damned minds.

When she came back into his life, he hadn't been able to resist her. He loved being around her, tormenting her and waiting to see how she would react, but now he had to wonder if he'd gone too far.

"No," she said, shaking her head as she continued to trace the length of his forearms with her fingertips, "I know that you would never hurt me, but...."

"But, what?" he asked, pressing another kiss against the top of her head.

"I didn't want you to hate me anymore than you already did," she said so softly that he almost missed it.

"I don't hate you, Elizabeth," he promised.

"You're being awfully sweet about this whole thing, Robert, and while I appreciate that, I understand. I should have told you as soon as I was sure that I was pregnant and..."

“When was that?” he asked, cutting her off.

“When was what?” she asked, sounding confused.

“When did you become certain that you were pregnant?” he asked softly, praying that the reminder of what they’d lost didn’t make her cry. It killed him to see her cry.

“After what happened in the library,” she mumbled. “I didn’t know what to do or how to tell you.”

“Would you have told me?” he asked, closing his eyes as he waited for her answer.

“As soon as I figured out a way to tell you without making you hate me” she admitted, sounding so damn miserable that he couldn’t help but smile.

“Then perhaps it’s time that we called a truce?”

Chapter 25

“A truce?” Elizabeth repeated back slowly, understandably wary considering the suggestion was coming from Robert Bradford and that this wasn’t the first time he’d suggested such a thing.

“I think that it would be for the best,” he said, repeating the same words that he’d used sixteen years ago when he’d tricked her into crawling out from her hiding spot in his father’s barn where she’d been hiding after a rather unfortunate incident involving Robert, a bowl of honey, and about five sacks of chicken feathers.

“I see,” she said, carefully disengaging herself from him as the need for self-preservation kicked in.

Although she wholeheartedly agreed that a truce of some kind would be beneficial so that they wouldn't end up killing each other, she just couldn't quite ignore the voice screaming inside her head to make a run for it. Knowing that it was both foolish and pointless since there was no longer anywhere to run now that they were married, she forced herself to remain in the kitchen so that she could hear him out.

That didn't mean that she was going to do something foolish like staying within reaching distance of him. As casually as she could, she walked around the table and started to work on the eggs, telling herself that she'd be able to make it to the door if this turned out to be a trap. Other than an amused smile that told her that he knew exactly what she was thinking, he didn't comment on the action.

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life fighting with you," Robert explained, stating her biggest concern.

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They didn't have a love match, the one requirement that she'd had for marriage. She couldn't even say that they were friends and given their history and how their marriage came to exist, she hadn't expected a cordial marriage when her father had grudgingly agreed that she had to marry Robert.

After his announcement that first night when he'd described what he'd expected of her, she'd anticipated to live a life of solitude where he ignored her until their child was an adult and her usefulness had come to an end. Then she'd imagined that he would probably move her into a cottage where he would never have to see her again. It wasn't an existence that she would have accepted meekly, which meant that their marriage probably would have been filled with turmoil, arguments and eventually hatred.

She didn't want that kind of marriage.

So, if he was offering her an olive branch, she would happily accept it. As long as it was beneficial to both of them and it didn't end with her living in the middle of nowhere with only squirrels and her ever growing hatred for Robert to keep her company.

"What are you suggesting?" she asked, trying not to get her hopes up that they could be friends. He'd been very kind towards her for the last couple of days and while that gave her hope, she also realized that it could have been out of pity.

"I'm suggesting that we work together to set some terms for this marriage that we can both live with," he said, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched her work.

“That sounds reasonable,” she had to admit, more than reasonable considering that most men didn’t care one whit if their wives were happy.

“From this point on, I think that it would be best if we started with a clean slate,” he suggested, sounding hopeful as she grabbed a pan, the small bowl of butter and the plate of cubed slices of ham and headed for the stove. She opened the stove door, making sure that the fire that the servants had set before retiring for the night was still going before adding some more coal and wood to ensure that the fire was hot enough to cook their food.

“Meaning?” she asked, not exactly sure where he was going with this.

“That we forget the past and start fresh,” he said after a slight pause.

“And how exactly do you propose we do that?” she asked as she dumped the ham into the pan. “We’ve always hated each other.”

“Not always,” he pointed out as he moved to lean against the wall to her right.

Instead of arguing with him or admitting just how much she didn’t hate him, she focused all of her attention on stirring the ham so that it wouldn’t burn. He didn’t say anything for several minutes, probably waiting for her to admit to something, but she refused to confess anything until she knew where she stood with him. Finally he grumbled something about her being stubborn and began.

“Most marriages start with a fresh beginning and I’d like that for us,” he said as if what he was suggesting was even possible.

“That’s because most couples didn’t grow up hating each other,” she pointed out, stirring the ham a little more than was necessary.

“True,” he murmured his agreement as he reached over and plucked a piece of ham out of the pan and popped it into his mouth. “But, most couples spend the rest of their lives hating each other.”

She didn’t bother arguing that point, because he was right. While she knew of several couples that were able to tolerate each other, she knew far too many couples that couldn’t stand the sight of each other. Her parents, unfortunately, fit the latter category. On the surface, her parents appeared to tolerate each other and to even like each other, but that was just a show they put on for the ton and their friends. They barely acknowledged each other in private and, when they spoke, it usually ended in arguments.

“What I’m suggesting,” he said, pausing only long enough to steal another piece of ham, “is that we accept what happened when we were children and move past it. I’d like a fresh start with you, Elizabeth.”

“And do you really think that’s possible?” she asked, her lips twitching as he stole another piece of ham.

“Yes,” he said without pause.

“Oh, and why is that?” she asked, sighing heavily as he stole another piece of ham and forced her to dump the rest of the cut up ham into the pan.

“The orangery,” he simply said as he stole another piece of ham.

“The orangery?” she repeated back in confusion, wondering what exactly that night had to do with starting fresh.

“Mmmhmm,” he said around another stolen piece of ham.

“Why?” she said, frowning down at the pan as he stole another piece of ham. At this rate there wouldn’t be any ham left in the pan by the time she threw in the eggs.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?” he demanded with a pout as he yanked his hand back.

“Stop stealing the ham!” she snapped, gesturing with the wooden spoon she’d just lightly rapped against his knuckles in warning.

“This isn’t making me hate you any less!” he snapped back, doing his best to glare down at her, but the way his gaze kept dropping back down to the ham as he licked his lips hungrily had her smiling and reaching for a small plate.

“Here,” she said, scooping some ham onto the plate. She’d barely moved to hand it over to him when she suddenly found the plate ripped from her hand and Robert devouring the ham.

“Your appetite is frightening,” she said with an exasperated sigh even though it secretly pleased her that he wasn’t furious by the fact that she enjoyed cooking.

His only response was a glare as he continued to eat his ham. When he was finished, he sent a hopeful look at the pan, but one gesture with the spoon had him placing his empty plate back on the counter.

“Now, what exactly does the orangery have to do with this truce of yours?” she asked, hoping to distract him from the ham so that there would be some left for her dinner.

She was starving, more like ravenous at this point. She honestly couldn’t remember ever being this hungry before. Even the few times she’d been too sick to leave her bed and had been forced to survive on broth and tea for a month hadn’t left her this

hungry. She could probably eat all the ham, she thought with a groan when she was forced to slap Robert's hand away again.

“Vicious minx!”

“Stop stealing the ham!”

“I wouldn't have to if you'd feed me!” he snapped back as he rubbed the back of his hand.

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“I’m not going to feed you until you explain this truce of yours,” she said, hoping that it would be enough to slow down his thieving ways until she could finish cooking the food.

“Fine!” he said as he deftly snatched another piece of ham out of the pan and popped it into his mouth before she could slap it out of his hand with the spoon.

“Get on with it, Robert,” she said, pouring the egg batter into the pan, hoping that it would be enough to deter him from stealing any more ham for a while.

It didn’t.

He leaned back against the wall, getting more comfortable as he popped the egg-covered piece of ham into his mouth. “You didn’t hate me that night in the orangery.”

“I didn’t know who you were,” she pointed out, stirring the ham and eggs while she kept an eye out for his devious hand.

“Ow!” he hissed, but this time he was smart enough to pull his hand back and continue making his argument for a truce. “Exactly my point. You didn’t know that I was the little boy who used to make your life a living hell and you liked the man that I’d become,” he said, his tone daring her to lie when they both knew that she’d more than liked him that night.

“That’s true,” she admitted, because really, there was no point in lying at this point. It certainly wouldn’t help matters.

“The only reason we’ve been at each other’s throats over the past couple of months is because of our previous history,” he explained and she was very tempted to add that she’d also done it because it was fun.

“You might have a point, Robert,” she said instead, adding cheese to the eggs and ham and mixing it for a minute before she removed the pan from the heat and set it aside. Shooting a warning glare at Robert, she walked over to the ovens and removed the now golden brown biscuits and placed them on the counter to cool.

“It proves that we’re capable of putting the past behind us,” Robert said, surprising her when he grabbed a couple of plates, forks, jams, honey and set it on the table instead of stealing more food.

When he picked the plates back up, she became nervous. She was starving and in no mood to fight with Robert for over food. She just wanted-

“Here you are, minx,” he said with a smile as he placed a plate overflowing with food on the table in front of her.

Touched that Robert would willingly give up food, she sat down with a smile and started to eat. She nearly moaned when the food hit her tongue. It tasted like heaven, pure heaven, and she couldn’t get enough. It wasn’t until Robert picked up her plate that she realized that she’d eaten every single morsel of food in a matter of minutes.

“You like peach jam, right?” Robert asked as he placed a second plate overflowing with food in front of her, startling her.

“Yes,” she automatically said as she looked down at the plate of food, realizing that she was still hungry.

When Robert placed three jam-smothered biscuits by her plate, she grabbed one up

and devoured it, only pausing long enough to send him a glare when he had the nerve to chuckle.

“Sorry,” he said, sitting down across from her and bringing her attention to the fact that he wasn’t eating.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she asked, reaching for another biscuit.

“I want to make sure that you get enough to eat,” he said, gesturing for her to continue and making her heart skip a beat.

Robert Bradford was willingly parting with food. Either the world was coming to an end or he was serious about making a fresh start.

Chapter 26

“Don’t be silly, Robert,” Elizabeth said with a huff as she stood up and headed for the stove. “There’s plenty of food for both us.”

He shook his head. “Just eat, minx. I’m fine,” he somewhat lied.

Although he was pretty sure that he wasn’t going to die, he was starving. The food was simple, but it smelled delicious. The rich aroma of eggs, ham and cheese accompanied by the hearty scents of freshly baked biscuits had his stomach rumbling, but it wasn’t enough to make him steal Elizabeth’s abandoned plate and devour her food.

His wife was obviously hungry and he refused to take any food from her. It pleased him to see her eating, because it meant that she was feeling better. He’d lost count of how many times he’d prayed that she would be okay over the last few weeks. The threat of losing her had hit him harder than he would have liked and it made him

realize just how much she meant to him.

Suddenly all the bullshit they'd put each other through over the years no longer mattered, not if it meant that he would lose her. He couldn't imagine a life without his minx in it, aggravating him, teasing him and making him feel alive for the first time in years. The fact that she'd lied about their baby no longer mattered either.

He wished that he'd handled things differently when he'd found out about the baby. He should have kept the matter between them and done everything that he could have to gain her trust. He should have courted her and done everything in his power to make sure that she chose to marry him. He hated knowing that the only reason that she'd married him was because he'd forced her. He'd do anything to change that.

But, there was no going back. There was no changing what happened. There was no stopping the gossip that had already spread. The damage was done. The only thing that he could do was to offer her the marriage that she deserved and the one that he craved. He wanted her to be his wife freely and have no regrets.

He wanted her to love him as much as he loved her.

So he was going to court his own wife. He was going to convince her to give him a chance, to let him show her that he was the right choice. She'd lost a fortune when she'd married him and, although he would never be able to provide her with the luxuries that she'd lost, he wanted to make sure that she was so damn happy that none of that mattered.

"There's plenty of food, Robert," Elizabeth said as she placed a plate filled with food in front of him. Before he could argue, she was spreading biscuits with a variety of toppings and placing them by his plate.

"Don't worry about me, minx. I'm fine," he said, forcing himself not to look down at

the food out of fear that he'd lose control.

“We can eat while you further explain this truce of yours,” Elizabeth pointed out and when he opened his mouth to argue, she shoved the most delicious biscuit that he'd ever tasted in his mouth.

“ Oh, God ,” he mumbled in ecstasy as he finished off the biscuit and grabbed another.

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“Do you like it?” Elizabeth asked, her tone casual, but he could tell that she was pleased.

“You weren’t lying,” he said, finishing off the last biscuit that she’d given him and grabbing three more. He quickly slathered peach jam on them and placed two of the biscuits by her plate.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a small bite out of one of the biscuits before placing it back down by her plate. “Now, about this truce.”

“Right,” he nodded, taking one more bite of that delicious biscuit before placing it back down by his plate and forcing himself to focus.

“I’d be willing to let the past go if you are,” Elizabeth said, bringing them back where they’d left off.

“I think that’s the best way to start this,” he said, looking across the table at her beautiful face. “I’d like us to start off as friends.”

“I’d like that, too,” she said softly, giving him a small smile that gave him hope. “What else?” she asked, sounding eager to fix this situation between them.

“No more fighting,” he restated his earlier declaration so that she at least knew that he was done with making her life a living hell. “And no more secrets,” he added, before he considered how it might sound.

She flinched as if he’d struck her, but instead of getting upset or making excuses for

what she'd done, she nodded in agreement. "No more secrets."

He nodded as he debated on the best way to continue. After a moment, he realized that he was actually nervous. He didn't want to make a mess of this. To buy himself a little more time, he picked up his fork and dug into the eggs and nearly groaned with pleasure.

It was so damn good. His wife was an excellent cook and for that alone he thought himself a lucky man. He didn't give a damn that she wasn't supposed to know how to cook. A man with his appetite would be foolish to look down his nose at anyone with this level of skill in the kitchen.

"The first thing that we should clear up," he said, pausing only long enough to take another bite, "is that you can cook whenever you'd like, whatever you'd like."

"Thank you," she said, sounding genuinely pleased.

He took a few more bites and decided that perhaps they should get to the basics of their marriage. "We should probably discuss your pin money and such."

"I thought we'd already discussed that," she said with a shrug. "Besides, I don't have a dowry."

"You don't need one. I'll take care of you," he said, because he would. He might not be a rich man, but he could afford to keep his wife happy, at least he hoped that he could.

She looked like she was about to argue, but instead nodded. "Thank you, Robert."

"You're welcome, minx," he said, finishing off his food.

“Where do you expect us to reside?” she asked with a touch of hesitation.

He cleared his throat nervously. He wasn’t exactly sure how to approach the subject, but he knew that he could no longer put it off, not since he’d announced barely ten minutes ago that there wouldn’t be any more secrets.

“I sold the estate that I bought a few months ago,” he said, deciding to break the news to her as easily as possible. He hoped that she took the news well and didn’t refuse to leave with him, because he’d really hate to resort to kidnapping his own wife since he refused to live without her.

“The one that our parents have been talking about?” she asked, sounding confused, but not terribly upset, at least not yet.

“Yes,” he answered slowly before adding, “I’ve bought a new estate in the country.”

“I don’t much care for London,” she said with a shrug, taking him by surprise and reminding him of their conversation that night in the orangery. “Where in the country is it?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“Bridgewater,” he said, trying not to cringe as he waited for her response.

She started to nod only to pause with a frown. “I’ve never heard of it before. Is it up North?”

“You could say that,” he said, shifting nervously on the bench.

“How long will it take to travel there?”

“About six weeks,” he admitted with a grimace.

“We’re staying for another six weeks?” she asked, appearing confused and for good reason.

Thanks to their hasty marriage and the scandal that had accompanied it, the majority of the ton had already cut them off. Invitations that had been extended to both of them weeks ago were now being rescinded. They’d had no visitors or notes congratulating them on their marriage or anyone wishing Elizabeth a quick recovery. Their parents were surviving the scandal, but just barely.

From what he’d heard, his mother had been given the cut direct by Lady Penelope yesterday in a ribbon shop and it probably wouldn’t be too much longer until that happened again. The longer they stayed, the worse it would get for their families and neither one of them wanted that. It would be best if they left as soon as possible. He was just waiting until he was assured that Elizabeth was able to travel.

“No, we’re not staying for six weeks. Perhaps another week or two,” he said, hoping that it would be quite a bit sooner than that, but he wasn’t going to rush her until she was well enough for the trip.

“I don’t understand,” she finally admitted.

“I bought a home in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. We’re moving to America, minx,” he said, preparing himself for a fight since even his mother would have taken issue with that announcement.

“America?” she repeated slowly as though she were testing out the word.

“Yes,” he said, clearing his throat awkwardly, wondering what he should say to convince her that this was for the best.

“Really?” she asked after a moment, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Yes.”

When her lips turned up into a pleased smile, he felt himself relax. “I’ve always wanted to visit America,” she admitted, appearing excited.

“We won’t be able to travel back here too often,” he admitted, realizing that she at least deserved to know the truth of the matter. He had money, but he wasn’t rich enough to afford a trip to England too often. It actually made him feel horrible when he realized that he was taking her away from her family and everything that she knew.

She merely shrugged. “Our families are well off enough that they can come visit us.”

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“You’re not upset?” he asked, more than a little surprised.

“Why would I be? You know how I feel about London and, if we’re going to try to start fresh, what better way then to start over somewhere new?”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Elizabeth,” he said with a wink.

“Now,” she said, pretending that she wasn’t pleased by his words, but he could tell by the way that she did her best to bite back a smile that she appreciated the compliment, “what else do you have in mind for this truce of yours?”

When she placed her fork down on the table and pushed the rest of her food towards him, he didn’t hesitate. He picked up his fork and made quick work of finishing off her meal. Once he was sure that no crumb had escaped his notice he pushed on.

“There will be no separate bedrooms,” he announced, deciding that it was only right to let her know that she was expected to warm his bed for the rest of their lives.

“Agreed,” she said with a firm nod as though she would accept nothing less, which explained her next announcement. “And no other women.”

He had to bite back a smile. Leave it to his minx. No other woman would dare set down such a proclamation to her husband, especially when she’d brought nothing into the marriage and relied solely on his generosity, but then again, Elizabeth wasn’t like other women.

“Don’t want to share me?” he couldn’t help but tease.

“Not unless you want to share me,” she shot back, sounding smug as her words hit home and erased every last ounce of humor that he’d been feeling.

“If any other man so much as looks your way, minx, I will-”

“So, we’re agreed that we’ll be faithful to each other,” she said, cutting him off and dismissing his murderous rage with a careless flick of her hand. “What else?”

He couldn’t help but frown at that as he stole the last biscuit. “That’s actually all I have for now,” he admitted with a shrug.

She sighed softly as she stood up, picking up their plates before heading to the counter. “Well, at the very least it should be enough to keep us from killing each other.”

“Probably,” he mused as he finished off the last bite of his biscuit and moved to help his wife. If he couldn’t make her fall in love with him, at least she probably wouldn’t kill him in his sleep.

Chapter 27

Dear God, it was still poking her!

Sometime ago she’d woken up to discover that something rather hard was poking her in the side. Not thinking much of it at the time, she’d shifted onto her side, facing away from Robert and started to drift off when Robert pulled her back against him and that hard thing shifted until it was poking her in the bottom.

It wasn’t until she’d tried to move away from it that Robert’s sleepy moan clued her into the identity of the hard object pressing firmly against her bottom. Once she’d realized exactly what she was dealing with, she had a difficult time thinking about

anything else.

Should she move?

Perhaps she should wake him up so that he could point that thing in another direction?

It was probably better if she didn't wake him, she decided, as she tried to shift her bottom forward so that his manhood was no longer pushing her cotton nightgown where it had no business. She moved quickly, shifting forward and then pushing back. She nearly sighed in relief when his manhood ceased its poking and instead lay flush between their bodies with her rumpled nightgown providing a barrier.

She closed her eyes, deciding that it was probably for the best that they both caught up on their sleep while they had the chance when Robert shifted behind her. When he shifted back, taking his manhood with him, she couldn't help but sigh in disappointment. Although she wouldn't mind a little more sleep, she had to admit that she had been enjoying the feel of it pressed against her body, that is, once it stopped stabbing her.

Her disappointment abruptly ended when she felt the tip of his manhood touch her bare thigh. The silken head slid up her leg, sliding beneath the bunched up bottom of her nightgown and continued up in one long sensuous move that ended with Robert's hard, hot manhood cushioned once again between their bodies, but this time her cotton nightgown didn't protect her from its touch.

It felt good.

Very good, she decided, biting back a moan as she closed her eyes and struggled against the urge to move against it. She couldn't believe that such a thing could be stimulating, but it was. She enjoyed the feel of it against her skin, the way it made her

body tingle in anticipation and the way that it-

“M’lady! You need to wake up!” Jane, her maid, rushed in her room to explain.

“What the hell is going on?” Robert demanded as his hold around her tightened and he pressed a sleepy kiss against the back of her shoulder.

“Your father is downstairs, Mr. Bradford,” Jane explained as she rushed around the room, picking out her clothes. “He needs to speak with you, sir.”

“He can wait,” Robert said as he pressed another kiss against her shoulder and snuggled closer to her.

She opened her mouth to suggest that Jane go downstairs and tell her new father-in-law that they needed a few more minutes when the man himself came storming into the room with her father close behind him.

“No, I can’t,” Robert’s father announced as he stopped in front of the bed. With an impatient gesture, he sent Jane scrambling from the room and making her wish that she could follow.

“We need to talk,” her father said, looking decidedly unhappy with finding Robert in her bed.

“And my wife needs her sleep,” Robert shot back sleepily as he sat up, making sure that she remained covered as he did. “Give me ten minutes and I’ll meet you in your study to discuss the matter.”

Her father stubbornly shook his head. “We can discuss the matter here.”

“Elizabeth is still recovering,” Robert argued, gesturing for the men to leave when his

father said, “And that’s exactly what’s going to save you both.”

“Save us?” Elizabeth repeated, frowning in confusion as she sat up, careful to keep the covers pulled up to her neck.

“From what exactly?” Robert asked, leaning forward and lazily resting his arms across his upturned knees.

“From each other,” Harold explained as her father made sure that the door was sufficiently shut.

“I don’t understand,” Elizabeth found herself mumbling distractedly as she watched her father turn back around, open the door and peer out into the hallway before shutting the door, locking it and returning to the front of the bed where he shared a look with Robert’s father.

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“Oh, I have a pretty good idea,” Robert said coldly as he glared at the men shifting nervously in front of them.

“It’s for the best,” her father said, giving her a reassuring smile that set her nerves racing.

“What’s for the best?” she asked, looking between the two men in front of her, but it was Robert who answered her question.

“They want to annul the marriage,” he said evenly, his tone void of any emotion as he turned his head to look at her.

For a moment she could only sit there as she struggled to wrap her mind around what he’d just said. Annulled? That wasn’t possible. He’d taken her innocence and they’d lost a child. She didn’t know much about annulments, because it was one of those subjects that was only mentioned in hushed whispers, but she knew enough to know that they didn’t qualify for an annulment. The marriage was consummated. It didn’t matter if it had been done before they took their vows; she was no longer a virgin. Thanks to the gossip spreading through every household in London, everyone knew the circumstances of their hasty marriage.

Her father, on the other hand, saw things a bit differently than she did. “You’ve been ill since your wedding night and haven’t been able to leave your bed. The servants have been in and out of this room at all hours of the night and know that you’ve slept alone. Gossip has spread of your illness and many others know that you’ve been deathly ill.”

At that she had to frown. "I haven't been deathly ill." Depressed? Weak? Tired? Yes, but she'd never been close to death.

Her father waved that off as though it was of little importance. "The only thing that matters is that you didn't have a wedding night, my dear. We've both called in some favors and we can have this marriage annulled in just a few hours and your engagement to James announced by the end of the day."

Robert didn't say anything as he continued to watch her, but she knew him well enough to know that he was furious. All the muscles in his arms and chest were flexing as though he were struggling with the urge to throttle someone, his lips were pressed in a thin line and if that didn't give away his mood, the way he glared her way certainly did. It was then that she realized that he was waiting for her response, but she didn't have much of one other than confusion.

"Why exactly would you assume that I wanted to marry James or that he would want to marry me for that matter?" she asked, focusing her attention back on the men standing in front of them.

Her father released a heavy sigh as he focused on her, his smile looking more stressed by the minute. "I don't want to see you hurt, Elizabeth. I don't-

"I would never hurt her," Robert said firmly beside her.

"Not on purpose, my boy," he said, shaking his head slightly as he continued. "I don't want to see either one of you hurt. I understand what happened. I do, but you have to agree that a marriage between the two of you is not a wise decision. Given your history it wouldn't take long before the two of you were at each other's throats and making each other's lives a living hell," her father said, taking her by surprise as he swore in front of her for the first time in her life.

Before either she or Robert could argue, his father took over. "I've already spoken with James. He understands that things between the two of you simply got carried away. He's willing to marry you as soon as possible and make things right."

"Really? He's willing to marry a woman without a quid to her name after she's left the bed of his brother?" Robert drawled lazily, but she didn't miss the threatening edge to his tone. "That doesn't sound like James."

"Yes, well," his father said, clearing his throat and looking noticeably uncomfortable. "We had a meeting with the solicitors yesterday afternoon and they believe that by annulling this marriage and marrying James that Elizabeth will meet the conditions of the will and the inheritance will once again be hers."

She would have her inheritance back, she thought as relief soared through her. All of her plans for the future would be saved. She could help so many people. She would-

Never be with Robert again, she abruptly realized a moment later.

She would never fall asleep in his arms again. Never freely enjoy one of his smiles again and that wasn't something that she was willing to give up. She loved his smile, loved being the cause of it and she didn't want to give that up for anything.

Besides, James would most likely refuse to allow her to open even one school with her inheritance, she told herself, desperate for an excuse to turn down this plan without hating herself for being completely selfish. One day she would make her dreams a reality, but she didn't want to do that as James' wife.

"It's going to cause a scandal," Robert said, drawing her attention back to the men looking almost eager at this point.

"James' title and reputation will be able to guard against that," his father explained

with a pleased smile.

“And me?” Robert asked, shifting slightly so that his bare leg was touching hers beneath the safety of the covers and giving her the support that she desperately needed.

Robert’s father cleared his throat, suddenly looking uncomfortable as his smile became forced. “We thought that perhaps you would leave town and give the gossip a chance to die down.”

“I see,” Robert muttered, sounding thoughtful.

“We realize that this situation is not ideal and that it’s unfair to put you in such a situation, Robert,” her father rushed to explain. “That’s why your father and I believe that you deserve compensation for your trouble.”

“And how much is that?” Robert asked, voicing her curiosity.

“Forty thousand pounds.”

Chapter 28

“I’d like a few minutes to discuss the matter with Elizabeth,” Robert said a stunned moment later as he did his best not to grab Elizabeth in his arms and run from this house and this conversation, so that he wouldn’t have to face the fact that he was about to lose the woman that he loved to his brother.

“I don’t think that’s wise,” Lord Norwood said after a slight pause.

“Just a few minutes, Papa,” Elizabeth said, making every muscle in his body tense.

A few minutes.....

That's all it was going to take to rip his heart out of his chest.

“Very well,” Lord Norwood said stiffly. “We’ll be waiting in my study.”

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Robert nodded, but didn't speak, too afraid that he'd say something that he'd regret later. He'd love nothing more than to yell at the man, but he wouldn't, not in a million years. Elizabeth would never forgive him, and although he was doing his damndest to resign himself to the fact that he was about to lose her and probably never see her again, he didn't want her last memory of him to be him insulting her father.

When the door closed with a soft click , he opened his mouth to speak, but realized that he didn't know what to say. How was he supposed to compete with James? He was older, had a title and a respectable reputation. He would also be able to give her the life that she deserved, that was hers by right. Staying with him would only drag her down, and he loved her too much to do that to her.

If she wanted to save herself by marrying James, then he would allow it. He would sign the necessary documents to end their marriage and then he would leave. He'd gift the forty thousand pounds to her and be done with it. He didn't want the money, didn't need a constant reminder of what he'd lost. He would-

"Why are you taking off your nightgown?" he asked, unable to hide his confusion even as he did his best not to look down and failed....about five or six times.

"We only have a few minutes," he thought she said, but wasn't entirely sure since all of his attention was on her beautiful br**sts that bounced slightly as she leaned over the side of the bed and pulled on the silk rope by her bed.

"Huh?" he mumbled, struggling to focus as her br**sts went ahead and bounced again as she shoved the covers off his lap, revealing a rather painful erection.

“Perfect,” she sighed as she threw her leg over him and straddled his lap.

“What’s perfect?” he asked absently, hissing seconds later when the tip of his c**k brushed against her wet slit.

Instead of answering him, she laid one hand on his shoulder and, with the other hand, she reached down between them and grabbed ahold of his erection. He opened his mouth once again to ask her what she was doing, but his words escaped him in a strangled moan when she rubbed the head of his c**k between the lips of her sex.

Elizabeth released a frustrated groan as she shifted his c**k against her once again. When she wiggled, brushing the tip against her core, he was forced to grab her h*ps and hold her still so that he could focus.

“Elizabeth,-”

“Are you going to help me or not?” she asked, doing her best to wiggle out of his hold.

“Help with what?” he asked, resisting the urge to close his eyes and lick his lips.

“Putting this thing inside of me,” she snapped, sounding frustrated and so damn cute that he couldn’t help but smile until her words registered in his mind.

“What?”

She let out an annoyed sigh as she continued to wiggle, testing his patience and making his eager c**k jump. “Look, Robert,” she said, pausing to nibble her bottom lip as she shifted on his lap, “we only have a few minutes to do this if we’re going to save this marriage, so I’d really appreciate a little help here.”

“You want to save our marriage?” he asked, stunned enough to tighten his grip on her h*ps to stop her maddening movements and focus on what she was saying.

She let out a snort as she released the grip she had on his c**k and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You really didn’t think that you were going to get rid of me that easily, now did you?” she asked with a sweet smile as she leaned forward and lightly brushed her lips against his.

“I can’t give you the things that James can give you,” he felt obligated to point out.

“And he can’t give me the things that you can. So, if you don’t mind I’d really like to consummate this marriage and end the matter,” she said, pulling back just far enough so that he could see her smile as she teasingly wiggled on his lap again.

It took every ounce of strength he had in him to stay still. “You’re sure?” he asked, selfishly not arguing with her or pointing out how much better off she’d be with James since he was a selfish bastard.

“Yes,” she said, leaning in to kiss him again, but he had other plans.

He swallowed her gasp of surprise as he tightened his hold on her h*ps and shifted to roll her over onto her back. Before her back hit the soft mattress, he was inside her.

“You feel so good, minx,” he groaned, pulling back quickly only to slide in slowly, enjoying the way her sheath coated every inch of him along the way.

“Don’t stop,” she said, reaching up and fisting her hands in his hair and yanking him down for a kiss.

He went willing as he reached down and cupped the back of her knee and pulled her leg up, opening her wider and allowing him to sink further inside her. It was heaven.

It was hell.

“We have to stop,” he said, struggling to pull out, but it seemed that he no longer had control of his body.

“Don’t make me kill you!” Elizabeth growled against his lips, making him moan even as he groaned in frustration.

“If we don’t stop now, the servants will walk in on us,” he said, not really caring if he was caught having sex, but he didn’t want to embarrass his wife or risk anyone else seeing the beautiful body that was meant for his eyes only.

“Good,” she said, surprising him.

“Good?” he asked, leaning down to kiss her simply because he couldn’t help himself.

“Because I plan on keeping you,” Elizabeth said against his lips, taking him by surprise.

“Are you sure?” he asked, deciding once again not to argue with her since he wasn’t an idiot. There really was no need to remind her that James was probably the better choice. She’d figure it out eventually and by the time that she did, it would be too late.

“Yes,” she hissed, panting hard as she wrapped her legs around him and arched her back to take him deeper.

“I’m never letting you go, minx,” he swore against her lips as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly against him.

“Good.”

“Do you need help getting dressed, my- Oh, my God !” he heard a maid scream seconds before the door slammed shut.

“I guess you’re stuck with me, Mr. Bradford,” Elizabeth said, smiling against his lips and giving him no choice but to smile back.

“I guess I am, Mrs. Bradford,” he said, chuckling when he heard the commotion out in the hallway, guaranteeing that no one was ever going to be able to take her away from him.

Chapter 29

“Your brother left again.”

“I wasn’t aware that he’d returned,” Robert murmured absently, barely sparing his mother a glance as he continued to pace the foyer.

“He returned yesterday afternoon after your father sent for him,” his mother explained with a huff as she gave up the hope that he’d stop pacing and sat down on the chair by the breakfast room.

“He came immediately?” he asked, shooting another glare towards the back hall.

No doubt his brother had been able to come so quickly because he’d been staying with his mistress, but he didn’t bother pointing that out to his mother since it would probably earn him a glare and a whole new lecture.

“Yes,” his mother said as she smoothed down her skirt, “you knew that he was eager to marry Elizabeth.”

“And get her fortune,” Robert pointed out, wondering why it was taking so long for the cook to make the peppermint tea she’d promised would settle his wife’s stomach.

“It’s how things are done,” she said with a resigned sigh.

“Things change,” he said, glancing at the clock by the door before returning his attention to the back hall. If they didn’t have her tea ready for her in five minutes, he

was going back there and making the damn tea himself.

“It would have been a safe match,” his mother said quietly, drawing his attention momentarily from the hallway.

“I’d never hurt her,” he said tightly, sick of the bullshit assumptions that he’d ever hurt Elizabeth.

“Not on purpose,” she hedged carefully, “but with your history, I doubt that it will be very long before the two of you are at each other’s throats.”

“We’re getting along just fine,” he said evenly, shooting another glance at the clock.

They were getting along more than just fine. After they’d made love this morning to put an end to any more suggestions that they should annul the marriage, they’d fallen back asleep in each other’s arms. Not too long ago he’d woken up with Elizabeth straddling his lap as she once again tried to ride him. Apparently once his minx got an idea into her head, she couldn’t let it go.

Thank God for that!

It had probably been the most difficult thing that he’d ever done in his life, but he’d managed to force himself to lie there and let Elizabeth have her fun. He’d loved the way she smiled, laughed and made fun of herself as she did her best to figure out the mechanics of riding him.

She’d made him smile and laugh even as he’d been forced to fold his hands behind his head to stop himself from grabbing her and slamming her down on his cock. God, she’d been so wet, dripping on his hungry c**k as she rubbed on him, desperate to put it inside her. When she started grinding her wet mound against him as she moaned and panted his name, he’d lost the battle and reached down and gripped

himself.

By that time his c**k had been completely coated in her juices. His hand slid down his length and he'd moaned. It had felt so good, so unbelievably good. His hand moved on its own as his eyes devoured the sight of her. Watching her watch him stroke himself had nearly undone him so he'd slowed down, teasing them both.

He'd loved the way her eyes became hooded, her breathing quickened, her ni**les hardened as though they were reaching for him, but nothing compared to the way that her h*ps had started to shift as though she was imagining his c**k inside her. Just watching her get excited was enough to have his balls draw up tight.

Just as he slid his hand down to the base and held it up in offering she did something that he'd never expected and had never seen another woman do before. She reached down and cupped herself between her legs and released a moan so sweet that he'd honestly been surprised that he hadn't instantly exploded.

His hand started to move again, his eyes locked on her hand as she slowly massaged her mound. His breathing had become labored as she explored herself, her fingers sliding between her slit, glistening with her arousal and, when she tentatively slid a finger inside of herself, he'd been forced to grip his c**k tightly to stop himself from coming.

For several agonizing minutes he watched as his wife learned to pleasure herself. Her expression had been one of pleasure mixed with disbelief and wonder. She'd been so goddamn beautiful and when he told her so, she'd blushed prettily, but didn't stop.

No, not his minx.

She'd loved the way that he reacted to her, enjoyed it to the point that she started to tease him . She'd caressed her breast with her free hand, slid her fingers slowly inside

her core and he'd lost control of his tongue. He told her in detail how much he loved watching her, how badly he wanted to suck on her fingers, lick her clean and f**k her. He swore, used words that no man of his class would use in front of his wife and hadn't cared, especially since it made her lose control.

When she found her moment, he'd simply watched her, loving the way her skin flushed with excitement, her br**sts bounced, and the way she moaned and whimpered with every thrust of her fingers. The moment that she'd finished, she found herself on her back and his c**k ramming inside her still quivering sheath.

He hadn't lasted long, but he'd taken her with everything he had, not holding back until she was screaming his name and he was spilling inside of her. Moments after he'd come, he was still slowly thrusting his softening c**k inside of her, wanting nothing more than to take her again, but his minx it seemed had other plans.

With a muttered cry of distress, she'd pushed him away, slapped a hand over her mouth and ran to the chamber pot and proceeded to get sick. Feeling like a bastard for taking her so soon after she'd lost the baby, he got up to go comfort her, but she wasn't having that. Anytime he came close enough to fuss over her, she would shake her head and let out a pitiful moan that left his chest aching.

He hated seeing her like this and wanted to take care of her, but the damn woman was being stubborn. The only thing that she would allow him to do was to have a bath drawn for her so that she could soak and to come downstairs and inquire about the peppermint tea that the cook had suggested would ease her stomach.

"Robert? Did you hear anything that I just said," his mother snapped in frustration.

"Yes, of course," he lied, ramming his fingers through his hair. Where the hell was her tea?

“No, you didn’t,” she said, sighing softly, but didn’t seem all that upset over the matter.

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“Sorry,” he said, shooting her a forced smile before he returned his attention to the hallway.

“I don’t want to see you hurt, Robert,” his mother said as she came to her feet and walked towards him, stepping in his path and giving him no choice but to stop pacing.

“I’m not going to get hurt,” he murmured, shifting his attention past his mother and towards the kitchen.

“I hoped that one day you’d make a good match, Robert,” she started to explain, but he was in no mood for a lecture this morning.

“This is a good match,” he said quietly, giving her a smile as he leaned down and pressed a kiss to his mother’s cheek. “Better than good.”

“I know that Elizabeth is beautiful and exciting, but that doesn’t make for a good match, Robert. These feelings won’t last forever and when they’re gone you’ll be left with a wife that you don’t want, who makes you unhappy and I don’t want that for you.”

“What feelings are these?” he found himself asking, wondering if his mother realized that he was in love with Elizabeth.

She cleared her throat uncomfortably as she shifted her gaze away from him. “The feelings men have for beautiful women, Robert. I may be your mother, but I know that men often allow their attentions to take control of their lives and I’m afraid that’s

what you've done, Robert. You've married a woman that you hate simply because she's beautiful."

"That's not why I married her," Robert said, trying to reassure his mother that everything would be okay.

"I know that you married her to do the right thing. That's how you were raised and I would expect nothing less from you, Robert, but with the baby gone you can fix this mistake. You can end this marriage before anyone gets hurt," she said, her tone pleading as she reached out and took both his hands into hers.

"You and I both know that an annulment is no longer an option. Not after this morning. By now everyone will know that this is a marriage in truth."

"Your father and Lord Norwood have taken care of that," his mother said tightly, looking anywhere but at him and not sounding pleased to have this conversation any more than he was.

"And what exactly did they take care of?" he demanded, pulling his hands away.

"They've made sure that none of the servants will talk," she said, looking up at him. "As you can see, there's still time to fix this, Robert."

"There's nothing to fix," he said evenly, done with this conversation. "We're not getting this marriage annulled so you can save your efforts, because they're not wanted."

"Would you please listen to reason and-"

"I love her!" he snapped, realizing his mistake only too late. He shook his head in frustration. "Just forget that I said-"

“You love her?” she asked, looking stunned.

“Yes,” he said, realizing there was no point in lying about it. The words were already out and knowing his mother, she would never be able to pretend otherwise.

“Truly?” she asked, her eyes narrowing on him as she waited for an answer.

“Truly,” he said, preparing himself for the tears of joy and mushy sentiments that were no doubt about to follow.

Women were silly creatures when it came to declarations of love, but at least it would gain his mother’s support, he realized. He hadn’t planned on telling her how he felt, but it was probably for the best. She’d put an end to this annulment bullshit and he could focus on more important matters like his investments. It had been several days since he’d been able to get any work done and now that Elizabeth was on the mend he could-

“Bloody hell!” he shouted, moving to yank his hand away from the vicious woman, but apparently he hadn’t moved fast enough, because his mother struck his knuckles with her fan, again.

“That’s for swearing in front of your mother!” she snapped, propping her fists on her hips as she scowled at him, making her intentions for another attack clear if he stepped out of line.

“And the first one?” he bit out, rubbing the back of his stinging hand as he glared down at his mother, but he wasn’t stupid enough to raise his voice at her. She was still gripping her fan after all.

“For lying to me!”

“I never lied to you,” he said, frowning in confusion as he thought over their conversation, wondering what she was talking about.

“If you think that you’re going to manipulate me into taking your side and looking the other way while you continue with this mistake of a marriage, then you have another thing coming, young man!” she said, jabbing that damn fan, that he was going to have to steal, in his chest as she made her point.

“I didn’t-”

“What’s going on?” his father asked, probably saving him from another rap on the-

“Ow!”

“That’s for trying to lie to me again!” she explained before he could ask.

She swiftly turned her attention on his father, who had the good sense to get the hell out of her way as she turned to storm out of the foyer. “You fix this!” she snapped at his father with a glare that clearly said there would be hell to pay if he didn’t.

“Of course, my dear,” his father muttered obediently as he watched his wife storm off.

“Where are you going?” Robert asked, watching as his father practically ran to the door seconds later.

“To my club where it’s safe,” his father said, barely sparing him a glance as he made his escape.

For a moment, he considered following his father, not really caring that it was the cowardly thing to do, but he had a sick wife that he needed to take care of first. After

he made sure that Elizabeth was settled, he would consider escaping this madhouse until everyone came to their damn senses.

Chapter 30

“What are you doing?”

Elizabeth chewed on her bottom lip as she dropped her hairpin and picked up the small nail she'd found lying on the floor near where Robert's jacket hung and proceeded to stick it in the keyhole, uncaring that the owner of the chest was now standing over her, looking amused.

“Stealing your chest,” she said, even though she felt it should be more than obvious what she was doing.

“Do you do this often?” Robert asked, placing the cup of tea that he'd promised her over a half hour ago on the small table to the right before he gently pried the nail from her hand and handed over a small, simple, but still somewhat stunning key.

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“No,” she admitted, “but I’ve decided to make an exception in this case.”

“So, you like the chest?” he hesitantly asked, sounding a little nervous.

“I wouldn’t be stealing it if I didn’t,” she pointed out as she slid the key inside the lock and with a satisfied sigh, unlocked the chest that she’d decided was rightfully hers twenty minutes ago when two footmen had carried it into the room.

It was the most beautiful chest that she’d ever seen in her life. She’d never seen a piece of furniture that she’d gladly kill for before. The chest was made from the finest wood, which had been polished to perfection. Black metal strips lined the edges and corners perfectly, making it appear as though the metal and the wood were one instead of constructed together. The design in the wood was leveled, standing out in a way that complimented the black metal to perfection.

She was sorely tempted to beg her father to buy her a matching bedroom set, something that she never would have done before, but she couldn’t. Not only would her father try to use her request against her to manipulate her into ending her marriage with Robert, but she would also be insulting her husband’s pride if she did that. He’d not only forgiven her for lying to him about the baby, offered to give her pin money when she’d brought nothing to the marriage, but he’d also turned down forty-thousand pounds to be with her. Well, so she hadn’t exactly given him a chance to turn down that money, but he could have said something.

“It’s yours,” he said, kneeling beside her.

“I’m glad that we agree,” she murmured absently as she raised the cover and looked

inside, surprised to see what appeared to be two doors at the top, acting as another cover.

He chuckled as he reached past her and opened the two doors, revealing two sections; the left half held a small deep tray at the top with three small drawers beneath it and the right half of the chest was lined with what appeared to be light pink silk on the bottom and three sides.

“This is for your slippers,” he explained as he wrapped his arm around her waist and pointed to the tray at the top, “and these drawers are for your hair ribbons, handkerchiefs, books, whatever you wish to place inside them.”

“This is really for me?” she asked, touched beyond words that he would buy her something so beautiful.

“Mmmhmm,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to the top of her head before he continued to explain the chest. “The silk will make sure that your dresses don’t get snagged on the wood and the doors will prevent them from being bounced around and wrinkled when the box is moved.”

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, tracing her fingertips along the silk material.

“You haven’t seen the best part yet,” he said, sounding quite pleased as he gripped the center divider of the tray and pushed it to the side. A small click caught her attention. She watched as the entire left side shifted to the right, sliding over the silk bottom of the right side without touching it and revealing a hidden section of the chest.

“You can hide your money, valuables and anything else that you don’t want to be found in here,” he explained as he once again pushed the small divider, but this time towards the left. With another soft click the entire section slid back in place.

“Oh my God,” was all she could manage, because she’d never seen anything like it before.

“It was supposed to be your birthday present, minx, but since we’ll be leaving in a couple of weeks I thought that you should have it now. I wanted to be here when it was brought to the room, but you weren’t feeling well and I didn’t want you to have to wait for your tea,” he said, rambling on nervously for the first time since she could remember.

“You bought this for me?” she asked, not missing the part where he’d admitted that he’d planned on giving this to her for her birthday. Since he hadn’t left the house since they’d married or her side for that matter, she realized that he’d bought this for her before he found out about the baby.

“No,” he said, confusing her until she realized that perhaps he’d bought this for another woman. If that was the case she didn’t think that she could stomach seeing a reminder that he’d wanted another woman no matter how much she loved the chest.

“This was made for you, minx,” he said, taking her by surprise.

“It was?” she asked, feeling ridiculously happy that he would do something so wonderful for her when he’d professed to hate her. It made her wonder if it was possible that-

“I made it for you.”

* * *

“You made this?” Elizabeth asked, shooting him a questioning look before returning her attention back to the chest.

“Yes,” he said with dread as Elizabeth looked over the chest, taking her time and studying everything more closely.

“When did you learn to do this?” she asked, running her fingers over the silk.

“When I was fourteen,” he said, exhaling slowly as he sat down on the floor and leaned back until his back was pressed against the foot of the bed.

“I don’t remember you doing this sort of thing when we were children,” Elizabeth murmured, picking up her tea and taking a small sip as she continued to examine the chest.

He shook his head. “My parents would never have allowed me to take up this hobby,” he said, not bothering to mention the reason why since they both knew.

Women weren’t the only ones that were restricted by the rules of society. Men were as well. Even though it was very unlikely that he would ever inherit the title, he was still the son of an earl and expected to carry himself as one. He could own land, run an estate, invest and even join the army if his father bought him a commission, but there were things that he wasn’t supposed to do, never mind like.

Carpentry was one of them.

No man of his station was supposed to work in trade, to be a laborer, but he loved it. He loved working with his hands. He loved creating something beautiful from a pile of wood and nails. It kept him focused and allowed him to calm down when most days all he wanted to do was to drive his fist through something. It had been the only thing that had saved him from doing something truly foolish when he’d been a child.

“Will you tell me?” she asked, placing her cup back on the table.

He shook his head as he looked away. “I’m not sure that you want to hear this story.”

When she gently cupped his face in her hands to pull his attention back to her, he allowed it. “Please tell me,” she said, settling down to kneel next to him on the floor so that she was facing him.

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He didn't know where to start, wasn't sure that he could share this with her. Knowing that there was a good chance that she would try to run away from him once he started, he took her hands in his and gently pulled her towards him. When she was close enough, he picked her up and placed her so that she was sitting across his lap.

Once she was comfortable, he wrapped his arms around her, pleased when she laid her head against his shoulder so that he wouldn't have to look at her when he told her what she wanted to hear.

"You turned my life into a living hell," he began hollowly, allowing himself to remember just how bad his life had been.

"What?" she asked, moving to turn in his arms, but he tightened his hold on her just enough to stop her.

"I can't tell you this story, minx, if I have to look at you," he explained, sighing in relief when she stopped trying to move.

She settled back against him and whispered, "Okay."

"Did you know that my parents had originally refused to let me attend school?" he asked, deciding that the only way that he was going to survive this was to ease into it.

"No, I didn't know that," she answered softly.

He shifted against the bedframe, getting comfortable as he pressed a kiss to Elizabeth's forehead, more for his benefit than hers. When she took one of his hands

into hers and entwined their fingers, he knew that she understood.

“They were afraid that I wouldn’t be able to control my problem and that the other boys would find out. They didn’t want me to be humiliated and thought it would be best if I were to work with a tutor until I outgrew my problem.”

“What made them change their minds?” Elizabeth asked, shifting so that she could rest her head against his chest.

“James,” he said with a smile, remembering how his older brother had fought for him. “He was always so damn protective of me.”

“I remember,” Elizabeth murmured with what sounded like a smile.

“He didn’t want me missing out or picked on for being coddled by our parents. He worked on my parents every chance he got until they finally had enough and agreed to allow me to go,” he said, dropping his head back against the frame and closing his eyes as he remembered the day that his parents told him that he could go. It had been one of the best days of his life.

James had taken him fishing to celebrate. They hadn’t caught a damn thing, but it was one of the best fishing trips he’d ever had before or since. His brother had shared stories of all the mischief he’d pulled in school, given Robert tips on how to sneak out after hours and even on how to sneak in sweets so that he wouldn’t starve. When they came home his parents made sure that the cook had made all of his favorites and, for the first time in his life, they hadn’t said a word when he reached for more food. His father had ended the night by giving him his grandfather’s pocket watch, the same watch that was stolen only a few months later by a couple of boys who’d broken into his room to soak his clothes in vinegar.

“Sometimes I wish that he hadn’t been such a good brother,” Robert admitted on a

sigh.

“No, you don’t,” Elizabeth said with a soft laugh that had him smiling despite his mood.

“No, I don’t,” he admitted, because he wouldn’t change a damn thing about his brother.

“After the incident in the park,” he said, deciding to just get it over with, “he refused to help me. I begged him to help me convince our parents to let me stay home, but he wouldn’t budge. He was convinced that if I let them push me around, that they would never stop. When I ran away he came after me and gave me the thrashing of a lifetime. It was the first and last time that he’d ever hit me.”

“When my parents realized how miserable I was, they started to reconsider sending me, but James wouldn’t have it. He dragged me to school and made damn sure that I stayed. He told me that it would be okay, that things wouldn’t be that bad, but he was wrong.”

“None of my friends wanted to have anything to do with me, which left me on my own. It wasn’t a good place to be in a school full of spoiled boys with nothing better to do than make each other miserable. Every day for about two years I was beat up, my books were stolen, my classwork trashed, my room ransacked and soaked in vinegar. They made a game of making my life a living hell.”

“Robert, I’m-”

But he didn’t give her a chance to apologize. That wasn’t the reason why he was telling her this story, he realized.

“When I was fourteen, I’d had enough and started to fight back. I wasn’t much of a

fighter, but I was angry, so goddamn angry all the time that my temper soon became unpredictable. One day they'd pushed me too far and I snapped, really snapped. I flipped out in the middle of class and threw a desk through a window."

"What happened next?"

The headmaster had beaten him within an inch of his life, but he wasn't going to tell his wife that. So instead he told her the only part that mattered to him. "I was given a choice by my instructor, fix the desk or pack my bags. I actually packed my bags and was ready to leave when I found the parting gift the other boys had placed in my bag."

"What was it?" Elizabeth asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"A lemon," Robert simply said, remembering the rage that he'd damn near gave into the moment that he found the fruit stuffed in his bag.

He'd wanted to tear the school apart, to beat the hell out of every boy that had taunted him, to make their lives a living hell the way they had made his, but he couldn't do that if he let them win, he'd realized.

"I decided not to let them win. I wasn't going to let them push me out, because I'd realized that James was right. Every morning before class and every evening after class I walked down to the village and worked with John, who was the town carpenter, to fix the desk that I'd destroyed. When it became obvious that the desk was beyond repair, he taught me how to make one from scratch."

"I didn't think that I'd enjoy it, but I did. I loved it. Long after the desk was done, I kept showing up and he never told me to leave. It kept me focused and probably kept me out of a lot of trouble. I still got into fights, but not as many and whenever John heard that I'd been in a fight he worked me until I could barely walk back to the

school. He helped keep me in line and gave me something to look forward to each day.”

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“It sounds like he was a good man,” Elizabeth said around a small snuffle.

“He was,” Robert agreed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

He held her in his arms for a long time. When the fire started to die out and she hadn’t said anything, he realized that she must have fallen asleep in his arms. Carefully, he adjusted her in his arms and picked her up. He carried her to the bed and gently lay her down. Before he could manage to stand up, she grabbed his hand and gave it a gentle tug.

Not one to argue with his wife, he climbed in bed with her and curled up behind her when she shifted onto her side. He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her tightly against him.

“I’m sorry, Robert, for what I did to you,” she said, taking him by surprise as she said the words that he’d been waiting half his life to hear. But instead of yelling at her or rubbing her apology in her face like he’d always imagined he would at this moment, he pressed a kiss to the back of her neck and said the words that would set them both free.

“I’m sorry too, minx.”

Chapter 31

Boston Harbor

7 Weeks later.....

“Ah, Robert?”

“Shhhh, not while I’m praying,” he said, momentarily losing his place before he started again, “thank you for letting us survive that trip from hell. Thank you for ignoring my prayers for a quick death when I didn’t think that I’d be able to survive another day of starvation,” he said, making her roll her eyes in annoyance.

“You were given three full meals a day just like everyone else,” she pointed out, not bothering to mention the fact that, on most days, he’d received second helpings. She sat down on a bench near their luggage, wondering just how much longer he was going to keep this up.

“I’m sorry for all the cursing that my wife forced me to do while I was on that boat,” he continued, ignoring her even as he amused her. “As you know, she’s been such a bad influence on me. Thank you for pulling me from near death and somehow giving me the strength to survive.”

“Near death?” she asked, frowning. “When were you near death?”

“When was I near death?” he asked in stunned disbelief as he opened his eyes so that he could glare at her. “How could you forget all those times that I could barely move? When I struggled to find the will to live so that I wouldn’t leave you a young widow? Did my struggle for survival mean nothing to you?” he demanded in outrage, terrifying the people that were forced to walk past him to get to the docks and making her wrack her brain as she struggled to figure out what he was talking about.

“Do you mean those few times when you had a touch of seasickness?” she asked, unable to think of anything else that he could be talking about since he’d been the picture of health during the majority of the trip.

“A touch?” he repeated in disbelief. “I nearly died!”

“Because you were forced to miss breakfast a few times?” she asked, trying her best not to laugh or smile, but he looked so adorable just then that she admittedly didn’t put up much of a struggle.

“It was hell! Pure hell!” he snapped, shocking several of the women trying to rush past him.

“Try having seasickness every morning and night,” she said dryly as she stood up and gestured for several dockworkers to help them with their luggage.

“That makes my ordeal worse!” he said, coming to his feet so that he could offer her his arm. “I needed my strength so that I could tend to you and keep you alive.”

“The peppermint tea did that,” she said with a shrug.

His gasp of outrage was simply too adorable. “You ungrateful brat! After everything I did for you to ensure your survival and this is how you repay me? With your mockery?”

She opened her mouth to tease him when the reminder that she hadn’t had a chance to have her peppermint tea this morning hit her with the force of a battering ram. “Robert?” was all she had to say.

“Damn it!” he snapped, all humor leaving his face as he scooped her up in his arms and quickly carried her over to a stack of crates where she’d have some privacy.

As soon as he stepped behind the crates, he put her down on her feet and helped her kneel at the edge of the dock. He held onto her h*ps so that she wouldn’t have to worry about falling into the water as she was sick for the first time in a week. When she was done, she sat back against Robert, who wrapped his arms around her and murmured sweet endearments as they waited for the nausea to pass.

“I’m fine,” she said a few minutes later, panting slightly as she did her best to give him a reassuring smile when they both knew that she wasn’t.

“The hell you are,” Robert practically snarled as he helped her to her feet. As soon as she was standing up, albeit a bit wobbly, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her back towards the dockworkers waiting by their luggage.

“I can walk,” she said even though she wasn’t entirely sure that was true.

“You’re not walking.”

“People are staring,” she pointed out quietly, embarrassed by all the attention.

“Then let them stare. You’re not walking!” he snapped, sounding angry, but she knew that he wasn’t mad at her.

Robert was terrified that there was something seriously wrong with her. She’d been ill during most of the trip, sometimes too sick to leave the bed. When she wasn’t sick she was exhausted, sleeping away most of the morning and falling asleep at night before the sun even had a chance to set. The ship’s doctor hadn’t helped matters when he’d tried to restrict her to their room for most of the trip.

The doctor had examined her multiple times at Robert’s request and each time he’d claimed different reasons for her illness. The last suggestion had Robert throwing the man out of their room and on his ass. He still wouldn’t tell her what the doctor said, but the way she caught him watching her sometimes let her know that it was bad.

Whenever she asked him what the doctor said, he would smile and reassure her that it was nothing. Then he would do whatever it took to distract her. They’d walk the deck of the ship, play cards, read, and reminisce about the old days until it was time to go to bed. Then he would make love to her tenderly as though he was savoring their time

together, which only frightened her more.

“Take us to the finest hotel,” he demanded as soon as they were within speaking distance of the men waiting by their luggage.

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“I thought we were going straight home?” she asked, feeling slightly disappointed that she’d have to wait another day to see her new home even though the prospect of spending the next few hours in a coach didn’t really appeal to her.

“Shhh, minx, it’s fine,” he said, shifting her in his arms so that he could hold her closer. “Everything will be fine.”

* * *

“Well? What’s wrong with her?” Robert demanded in a hushed whisper as he looked up from his sleeping wife to the elderly doctor that looked confused and somewhat amused.

“You say that two different doctors have examined her in the past two months?” the doctor asked as he adjusted Elizabeth’s nightgown and pulled the covers up and tucked her in.

“Yes,” Robert bit out, doing his damndest to keep a rein on his temper, but it was difficult right now when he was scared out of his mind that he was going to lose his minx.

“Remind me what they diagnosed her with again,” the doctor said with a patient smile as he sat down on the edge of the bed by Elizabeth’s side.

Praying that he could get through this without grabbing the elderly doctor by his shoulders and demanding that he fix his wife, Robert took a deep breath before he answered. “The first doctor said that she’d miscarried our child. The second doctor

told me a combination of things. Sometimes he said that it was all in her head, that she was just doing it for attention. Then he would say that she had liver damage, the flu, migraines even though she never once complained of a headache and the last time,” he started to say when his voice broke, “the last time he said that she most likely had cancer.”

“I see,” the doctor murmured, reaching up and pulling the covers back that he’d just adjusted. “How did he explain the weight gain?” he asked, placing his hand over the slight curve of Elizabeth’s stomach that was becoming more noticeable with each passing day.

“He said it was from her overeating to compensate for her illness.”

“I see,” the doctor said, his lips twitching as he gestured to Elizabeth’s chest. “And have you noticed a difference there?”

God, yes.....

Her br**sts appeared to be bigger and a hell of a lot more sensitive. He’d actually made her come just from licking her ni**les last week. It had turned him on so much that he’d-

The doctor chuckled, bringing his focus back where it should be. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” he said as he pulled the covers back up.

“Do you know what’s wrong with her?” he asked, desperate for an answer. He really didn’t know what he’d do without her. He didn’t want to live without her. He-

“Your wife is pregnant.”

-was going to be sick.

“W-what?” he asked, trying to make sense of what he’d just heard as his head began to spin and his legs stopped working.

With a chuckle, the doctor helped him sit down in the chair next to the bed. Then without a word, he gave Robert’s shoulders a gentle push that had him bending forward as he struggled to take in his next breath.

“If I had to guess, I would say that your wife is around four months along,” the doctor calmly explained.

Robert shook his head as he struggled to grasp what was going on. “No,” he said, forcing himself to breathe, “that’s impossible. She lost the baby two months ago.”

“I’ve been doing this for over fifty years, young man, and I can tell you without any doubt that your wife is indeed pregnant.”

“She bled,” Robert said, moving to sit up, but a fresh wave of dizziness had him dropping his head right back where it was.

“Mmmhmm, some women do that early on. It doesn’t mean that she lost the baby. Has she bled since?”

“No,” he said numbly as he did his best to wrap his mind around what the doctor was saying.

“What was the reason the doctor gave for the lack of bleeding?” the doctor asked, thankfully giving him something else to focus on.

“He said that it took months for a woman’s natural rhythm to return.”

The doctor released a snort of amusement. “That’s a first.”

“I should bring her back to London,” he said numbly even as he realized that he couldn’t afford the passage back for both of them.

Well, that wasn’t completely true. He could afford third class passenger tickets, but he didn’t like the idea of his wife being forced to share a room with strangers. He also didn’t like the idea of his wife being forced to rest on those hard cots that the third class accommodations were famous for. There was no way in hell that he was sending his pregnant wife back to London by herself.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the doctor said even though it hadn’t been a real possibility for them. “She’s obviously having a tough time with this pregnancy. I also wouldn’t recommend placing her on a ship where the passengers could carry God only knows what diseases. It’s not good for her or the baby.”

“Oh my God,” he muttered as dread crawled up his spine when he realized that he’d done just that.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about her being sick,” the doctor said, obviously reading his mind. “She looks very healthy to me, just tired. Make sure she gets plenty of rest.”

“I will,” Robert promised, turning his head so that he could look at his minx. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Chapter 32

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

“So, what do you think?”

“What do I think?” Elizabeth repeated numbly as she slowly turned around, taking in the large room covered in dust, cobwebs, the peeling wallpaper, dull floorboards,

covered furniture and ruined rugs.

“I know it’s not much,” Robert began, but she didn’t let him get far before she was throwing herself in his arms.

“I love it!” she said, giggling excitedly as she wrapped her arms around his neck and covered his face in kisses.

“Are you sure?” he asked, sounding pleased as he wrapped his arms around her and stopped her kissing assault by pressing a swift kiss against her lips.

“I’m sure,” she said, grinning hugely as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

“It’s going to take a lot of work.”

“I know,” she said, sighing with pleasure as she looked around the large sitting room, already running ideas through her head.

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“We’re going to have to do most of the work ourselves,” he explained, giving her an apologetic look.

“Can I be in charge?” she asked teasingly. She truly didn’t mind getting her hands dirty, especially if it meant that they had a home of their own, but also because she knew that he was embarrassed that he couldn’t afford a houseful of servants.

“Yes, minx,” he said, pressing a quick kiss against her lips as he turned them around and headed through the open door that led to the dinning room that needed just as much work, if not more, as the sitting room.

“I asked Higgings this morning if he could find us a live-in maid,” he announced, surprising her as he walked over to the windows that were covered in ratty old curtains that were definitely going to have to go.

“Can we afford that?” she asked, nibbling on her bottom lip as guilt once again surfaced.

Thanks to her, Robert was forced to support two extra people on a limited income. If her father had given her a dowry, things wouldn’t be so bad, but he hadn’t. They were left completely dependent on the money Robert had raised from selling all of his investments before they’d left London and the money he had left over after buying this house and fixing it.

For a moment she thought about writing her father for help, but then she remembered the morning when they’d left. He’d pleaded with her not to leave, begged her, offered her anything and everything that she could ever want and when none of that had

worked, he'd yelled at her. He told her that if she left that she was on her own. He wouldn't help her.

Robert's parents had pretty much said the same thing as they'd tried to talk him out of leaving. He tried to explain things to them, but they wouldn't listen. They didn't seem to realize how unhappy Robert was living in England, something that she had understood since that night in the orangery. All they saw was their youngest son leaving everything behind and taking a woman with him that they believed would destroy his life.

Everyone in their family was terrified that this marriage was going to ruin their lives and, no matter what they said or did, they couldn't convince them otherwise. So Robert and Elizabeth had stopped trying and instead made the best of their goodbyes. She'd squeezed her father tightly, kissed her mother's pale cheek, hugged the life out of Mary and Anthony and chased down her nephews for enough kisses to last a lifetime. She'd even had a chance to say to goodbye to Heather.

Unfortunately.

Just as they'd been preparing to leave, Heather arrived home in an extravagant coach, the first of many purchases that Heather had made with her newfound inheritance. When she'd stepped out of her coach, covered from head to toe in silk and jewels with James by her side, Elizabeth realized that her sister had made another major change in her life.

She'd married James.

Apparently the will had been more lenient for Heather. As long as she married a respectable man, the inheritance was hers. There was no request for a title, for Heather to remain chaste before the wedding, or a proper wedding. James apparently had discovered that the morning that he'd waited in her father's office for her

marriage to Robert to be annulled. Once he realized that he would only get the inheritance if he married Heather, he did everything he could to make that happen.

Not that she suspected Heather had put up much of a fight. James was handsome and titled. They were married by special license and after a very short honeymoon, they decided to come home and announce their good news, which coincided with her and Robert's goodbyes. Even though it had turned her stomach to see Heather enjoying the inheritance that should have done some good in this world, she was happy that Robert had a chance to say goodbye to his brother.

Unfortunately, James hadn't felt the same way. He'd walked right past Robert as though he hadn't seen or heard him. He did stop to give her a brief hug and wish her luck, but then he was back by his wife's side and that was it. Seeing the hurt expression on Robert's face had nearly destroyed her. She tried to call James back, but Robert simply shook his head and helped her into the carriage that took them to the ship.

"Yes, minx," he said, pressing a kiss to the tip of her nose as he turned to survey the rest of the room, "we can afford a live-in maid."

"And the baby?" she asked, voicing the fears that had taken root as soon as Robert had told her the wonderful news.

"Will no doubt be spoiled," he said with a smile as he carried her towards what appeared to be the kitchen door, but a loud knock from the front door had him pausing mid-step.

With a frown, he carefully placed her on her feet, took her hand in his and led her towards the front entrance where a formidable looking woman in her fifties stood waiting, looking around the foyer with a look of determination that actually frightened her a little. She reminded Elizabeth of her old nanny, Mrs. Mathers, who

had run the nursery like a general.

“Can I help you?” Robert asked as they stepped into the small foyer.

“Are you Mr. Bradford?” the woman asked as she looked them both over.

“Yes, and you are?”

“Mrs. Brown, your new maid,” she announced with a nod as she reached down and picked up the bag that Elizabeth hadn’t noticed until now. “I assume my room is off the kitchen?” she asked, already heading that way.

“May I ask who sent you?” Robert asked as they moved to follow after the woman, who’d apparently decided that the job was hers.

“My son-in-law, Mr. Higgings. The pay is less than I would have liked, but I suppose it will have to do,” she said, pausing to look at the tattered curtains in the dining room and with a shake of her head, she continued on to the kitchen. “Now, I don’t have any references, but you don’t really need them.”

“We don’t?” Robert said dryly, sounding amused.

Mrs. Brown simply shook her head as she paused just inside the kitchen so that she could survey the room. “No, you don’t. The only thing that you need to know is that I’m a hard worker, raised ten children, five of them my sister’s. I know how to cook, clean, run a household, and I’d wager my skills with children will come in handy soon enough. As long as you pay me my wages on time, respect my privacy, allow me to have every other Sunday and Wednesday off and remember to keep your hands to yourself, Mr. Bradford, I think we’ll get along just fine” she announced, testing a door to the right and when it opened she peered inside the room, nodded and walked inside, shutting the door behind her and leaving Elizabeth shaking with

uncontrollable laughter.

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“Did...did she just imply what I think she just did?” Robert asked, looking torn between amusement and horror.

Unable to answer, she was forced to reach out and grip the table or take the chance of falling flat on her bottom.

“Why are you laughing, minx? You should be going in there and defending my honor!” he said with mock outrage as he swept her up into his arms and headed for the door.

“Where are we going?” she asked when she could manage to talk again.

“To find a bedroom so that you can make up for your lack of loyalty to me,” he said, smiling that carefree smile that had started to appear since they’d left London.

“Because I wouldn’t attack an old woman for you?” she asked, trying not to smile.

“Yes,” he said without pause as he opened the first door that they came across and walked inside, kicking the door closed behind them as he set her on her feet. Biting back a smile, she moved away from him, loving the playful grin that tugged at his lips.

“Now,” he said, stalking after her as he reached down and undid his pants, “let’s see if we can’t find a way for you make this betrayal up to me, shall we?”

* * *

“Out,” Mrs. Brown simply said, ignoring his glare as she continued to point towards the door.

“But-”

She stubbornly shook her head. “You were warned, Mr. Bradford,” she said while his minx stuck her tongue at him from across the room and away from Mrs. Brown’s stern gaze.

“But, she-” he said, starting to point at his wife, but Mrs. Brown wasn’t listening.

“I told you that you could stay in the house as long as you didn’t interfere with our work,” she said firmly, still pointing towards the door.

“This is my house, woman,” he bit out, deciding that the woman simply needed to be reminded, but apparently she didn’t give a damn whose house it was, because she just kept pointing as she said, “Out.”

So he decided to try a different tactic, one that he hadn’t used since they were children. “She started it!” he said accusingly as he pointed towards Elizabeth, who apparently remembered this little ploy because she let out a heartfelt sob, the same one that used to work on his parents and end with him sent to his room without pudding.

Finally, the damn woman dropped her arm. She folded her hands in front of her as she looked up at him, her expression stern. “Mr. Bradford, it wasn’t Mrs. Bradford that I caught pinning you up against the wall and kissing you senseless when I returned from getting another bucket of soapy water,” she said, reminding him of his offense and making it damn difficult not to smile.

“I was just trying to clean,” Elizabeth said softly, adding a pathetic sniffle at the end

that had him biting back another smile and Mrs. Brown's eyes narrowing on him.

"Why are you taking her side?" Robert demanded, loving the mischievous smile that his minx was sending his way. "She's the one that started it! She attacked me!" he said, slapping a hand against his chest and making sure to look properly wounded. "I was minding my own business, taking down the wallpaper like you'd asked when she grabbed me from behind and manhandled me!"

With a small sigh, Mrs. Brown looked over her shoulder at his minx, who was smart enough to wipe that smile off her face and let her chin tremble as she made a show of picking up her brush from the bucket of soapy water and return to washing the floor, adding a little snuffle here and there as she worked.

The woman was screwing him over and clearly enjoying herself, he realized with a grin. His minx was wonderful, he thought with a sigh as he took a step to go to her, but Mrs. Brown wasn't having any of that.

With that damn finger pointed back towards the door, she said, "Out."

Knowing that the woman probably wouldn't leave the room again so that he could have a chance to kiss his minx, he decided that perhaps it was best to head out to the barn and set up his shop.

"Fine, I'm going," he said, heading for the door, pausing only long enough to send his minx a wink, "but you'll pay for this later."

Chapter 33

"Don't turn around."

Elizabeth had to bite her lip to keep from laughing as she looked up from her sewing

to share a knowing look with Mrs. Brown, who was sitting on the couch across from her, and looking quite amused with Robert's latest attempt to sneak a kiss under Mrs. Brown's nose.

"Go away," she whispered back, loving this playful side of her husband.

There was a slight pause before Robert whispered back, "I have something for you."

She just bet he did.

"I'm busy," she whispered back, not bothering to turn around or look out the window since she already knew that Robert was kneeling beneath the window and out of sight.

It was the same way that he used to torment her when they were children and she was stuck inside to complete her studies. He'd hide beneath the open window, taunting and teasing her until she finally had enough and made some excuse so that she could go outside and box the little beast's ears. Not that she would ever admit this to him, but she used to secretly love it when he interrupted her lessons. It gave her something to look forward to everyday.

"Meet me outside in five minutes, minx."

"No," she said, having too much fun to give in so easily.

Besides, the kisses were always so much better when she made him work for them. There was just something about teasing and tormenting her husband that brought a smile to her face. Every day Robert found a way to sneak inside the house to steal a kiss, doing his best to get in and out of the house without Mrs. Brown finding out.

Not that Mrs. Brown actually cared what the two of them did. She found the whole

thing amusing and seemed to enjoy tormenting Robert almost as much as she did. She also doubted that Robert would ever allow anyone to stop him from stealing a kiss from her and was doing everything he could to tease a smile out of her when most days, she hardly had the energy to do much more than curl up in bed and read.

She was only five months into her pregnancy, but she felt like she'd been pregnant forever. Her appetite was almost as large as her husband's, which truly frightened her. She also found herself sleeping throughout most of the day, having very little energy to be much help. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Brown, the house would still look like it was decaying, the gardens would still be overgrown with weeds and she doubted that there would be anything to eat since Elizabeth usually fell asleep halfway through making biscuits.

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In truth, she was terrified. Between the first doctors misdiagnosing her, her appetite, and the intense exhaustion that she couldn't shake, she didn't know what to think or expect from this pregnancy. Every day she worried that she wasn't giving the baby enough food, resting enough, or a hundred other things that could hurt the baby, and every day Robert did everything he could to make her smile.

He knew her concerns, had comforted her enough times over the past month to know that she was terrified that she was going to lose their baby. He did everything that he could to comfort her and reassure her that everything would be okay and when he couldn't, he held her in his arms as she cried her eyes out. He was the sweetest man that she'd ever met and she couldn't imagine what she'd done to deserve someone like him.

"Come on, minx, you know you want to," he whispered teasingly.

"I thought you were fixing the Marshall's roof today?" she said, noting that it was barely two in the afternoon. It made her wonder if he'd snuck off from work to steal a kiss from her.

"I finished a few hours early," he answered, making her smile.

Her husband was a very hard worker as everyone in town had learned over the past month. At first they'd refused to hire him, thinking that he was just the spoiled second son of an English lord looking for a handout, but once they saw some of his work being sold at the shops in town, they couldn't seem to hire him fast enough. There were several carpenters in town, but none of them had the skill that Robert seemed to have. Not to mention that he worked faster and harder than most men, at

least that's all she ever heard when she went into town. She couldn't help but wonder if his size or the insane amount of food that he ate everyday had something to do with it.

"Well, I'm still working on the baby's blanket so you'll just have to find something else to do, Mr. Bradford," she said in her haughtiest whisper that she could manage without laughing.

Robert sighed heavily. "Then I guess I'll just go fishing all by myself."

"Fishing?" she repeated with interest, her plans to torment him forgotten. She'd never been fishing before. It was one of those things that she'd always wanted to try, but her father had absolutely forbid her from ever doing.

"I was going to take you with me, but since you're not interested.....," he said, allowing his words to trail off as she imagined him shrugging even as he grinned that mischievous grin of his that used to irritate her, but she now loved.

"Wait!" she hissed, trying to get to her feet as Mrs. Brown, who was smiling and shaking her head in wonder, reached over and carefully picked the unfinished baby quilt off her lap and set it aside. Once that was done, Mrs. Brown took her hands into hers and did her best to help Elizabeth get to her feet. Although she was only five months along in her pregnancy, her stomach was a bit larger than most women's at this stage. It was just another thing that frightened her.

Just as she was about to scoot to the edge of the chair with the hope that it would give her better leverage to stand up, she felt Robert's large hands gently grip her h*ps to help her stand. Once she was on her feet, she didn't bother looking back or thanking him since that would only give him a chance to change his mind and she most definitely did not want him doing that.

With a grateful smile to Mrs. Brown, she turned to head out the front door when she remembered the blueberry tarts they'd made that morning. Deciding that she was going to need a light snack to keep up her energy, she abruptly turned and headed in the direction of the kitchen.

"Already packed them," Robert said, grinning boyishly from the backdoor as she stepped inside the kitchen. He held out his hand for her to join him.

Smiling, she went to him, only pausing twice along the way to grab some cheese, bread and a couple of meat pies along the way. As she stuffed the last meat pie in a sack, she prayed that her appetite returned to normal once she had the baby, because the thought of eating like this for the rest of her life terrified her.

"This way, minx," Robert said, taking the sack from her and tossing it over his shoulder with the one he held in his hand before he took her hand in his and led her towards the woods.

"Are you really taking me fishing?" she asked, barely able to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Why wouldn't I take my wife fishing?" Robert asked, steering her along an easy path through the woods.

"Because most husbands wouldn't," she foolishly pointed out.

"Then that's their loss," Robert said with a boyish grin, the one that made her love him even more.

* * *

"What do we do now?"

Robert chuckled at her excitement. “Now, minx, we wait,” he said, carefully placing her pole against a fallen log near the blanket he’d laid out for her so that they could see the pole dip if she got a bite.

“Oh,” she said with an adorable pout.

“Did you think the fish were going to attack your line,” he teased as he leaned in and kissed her, unable to resist such a sexy little pout.

“Sort of,” she admitted sheepishly.

“It takes time and patience, minx,” he said, chuckling as her pout deepened.

“What do we do until then?” she asked, looking around the grassy bank and then at the large pond that looked very inviting on a hot day like today.

“Normally we’d sit and wait, but today,” he said, pausing to pull his shirt off, “I thought we’d go for a swim.”

Instantly her pout was replaced with a shy hopeful smile as she looked at the pond. “Really?”

“Really, minx,” he said, quickly pulling off his boots and pants before he moved to help her remove her dress.

Her smile faltered when she looked down at herself. “Maybe I shouldn’t,” she said, nibbling her bottom lip even as she shot the pond a wistful look.

“And why is that?” he asked, stepping up behind her so that he could undo her buttons.

“Because I’m fat,” she muttered pathetically.

“You’re not fat,” he said, chuckling as he leaned forward and pressed a kiss against the back of her neck, “you’re beautiful.”

She sighed heavily as she held onto the front of her dress so that it wouldn’t drop to the ground. “And you’re a terrible liar,” she grumbled, but she did let him help her out of her dress, stockings and slippers.

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Wearing only her shift, she carefully walked to the edge of the pond and dipped a single toe in the calm water. If she hadn't been carrying their baby he would have probably picked her up and thrown her in just so that he could rile her up. God, he loved it when she was all riled up.

But she was pregnant, so he had to be good. With that in mind, he walked over to her and scooped her up in his arms before she could put up much of a fight. To his utter shock, she didn't complain at all. Instead, she sighed with pleasure as she wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head against his shoulder as he carried her into the water.

Once he was chest deep, he pulled her closer and simply enjoyed having her in his arms. As he carried her through the water, he felt her shiver in his arms. Smiling, he looked down to tease her, but instead, he felt his smile slip as he lost himself in her baby blue eyes.

She was so damn beautiful, so kind and sweet. She made him so damn happy. He couldn't imagine going a single day without seeing her, holding her, kissing her or showing her just how much he loved her. Every day he did everything in his power to show her how much he loved her, but he'd foolishly never told her how he felt, because he was terrified that she wouldn't feel the same way.

He'd been so damn foolish.

It would hurt like hell if she didn't return his feelings, but he didn't give a damn. He loved her more than anything and he wanted to tell her. He wanted to-

“I love you, Robert,” Elizabeth whispered as she pulled herself up just enough so that she could brush her trembling lips against his.

For a moment he was too stunned to react.

She loved him?

Of course she did, he realized smiling smugly as he brushed his lips against hers. That was the only reason to explain why she hadn’t killed him with her bare hands by now and why she put up with all of his bullshit. It also explained why she’d agreed to his truce, agreed to leave everything behind and move with him to a new country where neither one of them had ever been before. It was so obvious now. She truly did love him, adored him really, but she would never love him as much as he loved her, he realized, still grinning because he was more than fine with that.

“I love you more, minx,” he said against her lips.

“Probably,” she easily agreed as she wrapped her arms around his neck and moved to deepen their kiss.

“Probably?” he demanded in mock outrage as he pulled away from her so that he could glare down at her.

“Definitely,” she said with an innocent expression as she leaned up to kiss him again, but before her lips could touch his he turned his head away.

With a heavy sigh, he carefully placed her on her feet. He rubbed his hands down his face as he said, “Run.”

“W-what?” she asked, sounding confused and more than a little excited.

He dropped his hands down by his sides, careful not to splash his wife in the face. “You have to the count of ten to run before I hunt you down and make you admit that you love me more.”

“You can’t be serious,” she said, biting back a smile even as she started to inch away from him.

“One.”

“Robert,-”

“Two.”

“Wait, let’s talk about this. I was just-”

“Three.”

“But,-”

“Four.”

“There’s no way that I’ll be able to-”

“Five.”

“Can’t we talk about this?”

“No,” he said, grinning in anticipation as Elizabeth noticeably swallowed and shot an anxious look towards the shore, “six.”

“Wait,” she said, taking a step away from him, her gaze shifting between him and the

shore. "Can you start over?"

"No. Seven."

She finally took a step away from him. "What exactly are you planning?"

"For you to scream your undying love for me at the top of your lungs," he said with a shrug before he added, "eight."

Her eyes widened with that announcement as self-preservation finally kicked in. With an adorable little squeal of excitement she turned around and moved to finally make her escape, but before she could take a single step he had her back in his arms where she belonged.

"Nine," he said with a growl as he leaned down to kiss her.

"But you said that you'd give me to the count of ten!"

"I lied," he admitted as he set his plan into motion.

For the next three hours he kept her on her back and her legs spread as he used his hands, mouth and the painfully hard appendage between his legs on her until she was screaming her undying love for him. Once that was done, he decided to show her just how much he loved her. He didn't stop showing her until his voice was hoarse, he could hardly move and his minx knew just how much she meant to him.

Chapter 34

Three months later.....

"You spoil him," Mrs. Brown pointed out with a smile as she carefully placed another

apple pie on the table to cool.

“He deserves to be spoiled,” Elizabeth said, easily returning the older woman’s smile as she looked over the pies she’d made to surprise her husband.

For the past four months Robert had been working day and night, taking any job that he could get his hands on to make sure that they were well prepared for the coming winter. They’d heard that winters in New England could be especially harsh, so he was making sure that they were well prepared. When he wasn’t working on a job trying to earn more money for the coming winter, he was chopping wood, building a shed, fixing the barn for their horses, checking the roof, windows and fireplaces to make sure that they were properly secured, building shelves in the root cellar to make sure that they had plenty of space for their food. He was making sure that she and the baby had everything they were going to need.

He was working himself into exhaustion. Every time she pointed that out, he smiled and gave her a kiss as he told her that she was well worth it. He promised her that things would slow down in the winter and he would rest then, but she knew that he was lying. He already had enough orders for furniture, chests and a hundred other things to keep him busy during the winter.

“He’s going to be upset when he finds out that you were working,” Mrs. Brown said as she pulled another pie out of the oven.

“He’s not going to be upset,” Elizabeth said, knowing that was true.

Robert wouldn’t be upset when he found out that she hadn’t stayed in bed like the doctor had ordered, he would be furious, which was why she also made him some apple pastries so that he would be too busy eating to yell at her. He was such a hypocrite, she thought as she loaded a small tray with the pastries with the hopes that they would be enough to soften him up enough to take her for a walk.

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It was okay for him to work himself to death, but it wasn't okay for her to do anything more strenuous than to turn over in bed. She appreciated that he was concerned for her, really she did, but if she had to stay in that bed for one more day she was pretty sure that she was going to scream. She needed to move around, to work, to go for walks, anything that would take her mind off her huge stomach, the cramps that had started yesterday and wouldn't leave her alone and the fact that she was bored out of her mind.

Taking a deep breath and praying that the walk would help ease her cramps, she picked up the tray and, unfortunately for her, waddled to the doors. It took her longer than she would have liked, but she eventually made it to the door and with Mrs. Brown's help, managed to step outside. Murmuring her thanks to the older woman, Elizabeth started the long process of walking to the barn where her husband was hard at work building a chest for the Fairchild family.

It really was a beautiful day. The weather had cooled considerably over the past couple of weeks, making it the perfect weather for enjoying the outdoors. She hoped to be able to enjoy it before the baby came along with the snow that was sure to keep them trapped inside for most of the winter.

A few steps later she was forced to stop as a cramp tore through her back and stomach, proving her point that lying around for the past month had done her absolutely no good. She needed fresh air, sunshine and a bit of exercise. Once the cramp had dulled down enough for her to move, she took a deep breath and continued towards the barn, but she didn't make it five steps before another cramp tore through her back and stomach, robbing her of the ability to breathe.

“Elizabeth?” a familiar voice said, drawing her attention to the very handsome man walking towards her, appearing surprised and pleased to see her. “Is that really you?” James asked, placing his satchel on a bench by the rose bushes as he walked past it on his way to her.

She opened her mouth to answer him, but a choked sob escaped her as she lost her grip on the tray. She bit back a cry as she cradled her arms around her stomach and leaned forward, praying that she wasn’t about to lose the baby. It was too early for the baby.

“Elizabeth?” James asked, sounding worried as he rushed over to her and wrapped his arms around her as best as he could, but she was rather large now, making the job nearly impossible. “What’s wrong?”

She didn’t get a chance to answer him before she felt a rush of liquid pour down her legs. It was quickly followed by another one of those vicious cramps that left her barely able to breathe. She reached up and grabbed onto James’ arms as cramp after cramp tore through her body until all she could do was scream the one thing that she knew would make it all better.

“Robert!”

* * *

“It’s beautiful,” Mr. Fairchild said in a reverent whisper as he ran his fingertips over the intricate design of the bassinet. “How much do you want for it?”

Robert chuckled as he placed the sheet back over the bassinet to keep it protected. “Thank you, but it’s not for sale.”

Mr. Fairchild smiled. “Fair enough. For your child?”

“Yes,” Robert said proudly as his gaze shifted to the other covered furniture that he’d built for their baby.

“The baby will be here soon enough,” Mr. Fairfield said with a chuckle as he moved to kneel in front of the chest that Robert made for the man’s future daughter-in-law.

“Not soon enough,” Robert said, leaning back to give the man some space to look over the chest.

Only a month more to go before he was holding their baby in his arms, their miracle child and he couldn’t wait. There were no words to describe how he felt about this child. They were getting a second chance to be parents to this child and he wasn’t going to waste it. He was going to-

“ Robert !”

-have a heart attack, he realized as Elizabeth’s blood-curdling scream reached his ears. Before he realized what he was doing, he was running out the door, barely aware of Mr. Fairchild following him or demanding to know what was wrong. The only thing that he cared about at that moment was getting to Elizabeth and killing whoever was hurting her.

When he ran out of the barn and into the yard, terror shot through him as he watched a man hover over Elizabeth as she curled up on her side as she screamed his name over and over until he found himself running towards her and tackling the bastard.

“What the hell did you do to my wife?” he demanded as he shoved the smaller man to the ground and raised his fist, ready to kill him with his bare hands when recognition hit hard. “James? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Besides getting my ass kicked and having your wife scare the living hell out of me?”

James demanded as he shoved Robert away and got to his feet. "I came to talk to you."

Elizabeth's screams brought his attention back to where it belonged. As happy as he was to see his brother again and that he was talking to him again, James was going to have to wait.

"Minx?" Robert asked as he crawled over to where his wife lay, curled up into a ball and panting. "What's wrong?"

Instead of answering him, she squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

"Is it the baby?" he asked, praying that the answer was no. It was too soon for the baby. They had another month before the baby was supposed to be born.

Reluctantly, she nodded as a sob escaped her.

Please don't let us lose the baby, he prayed as he carefully picked her up and carried her into the house, because he didn't think that either one of them would be able to survive the loss this time.

* * *

"He's coming to," he vaguely heard James say.

"Huh?" was his only response as he struggled to figure out how he ended up lying face down on his bedroom floor.

"I did tell him not to come in here," James said, sounding amused as he helped roll Robert over onto his back.

“This is why men don’t belong in the labor room,” Mrs. Brown said, sounding put out as she tossed a wet cloth at him. It hit him in the face before falling off and landing on the floor, leaving Robert even more confused.

“What happened?” he asked numbly as he struggled to sit up, but a wave of dizziness had him lying right back down.

His answer was the beautiful cry of a baby. Actually, it sounded more like-

“Twins,” James said with a huge grin as he helped Robert sit up.

“Twins?” Robert repeated, not understanding what James was saying.

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“Twin boys,” James said, chuckling as he reached down and dragged Robert to his feet. “That’s why your wife was so huge.”

“I was not huge!” Elizabeth said, not sounding very mad at all as she drew his attention towards the bed where she was curled up onto her side, smiling down at two wiggling, but healthy looking, babies.

“W-what happened?” he asked, struggling to remember what the hell happened.

“What do you remember?” James asked, dragging him over to the bed where his family was waiting for him and helping him carefully lie down next to the most beautiful babies that he’d ever seen.

“Not much,” he admitted, trying to shake his head clear.

“Well, after you carried Elizabeth in here and sent for the doctor, your formidable maid Mrs. Brown kicked us both out. While we waited for the doctor, you and I had a long overdue discussion where you apologized profusely for being a selfish bastard and begged my forgiveness,” James said, sounding amused and drawing Robert’s glare.

With a roll of his eyes and a few muttered words, James carefully sat down at the end of the bed and reached over so that the baby nearest him could grab onto his finger. “Fine. I apologized for being a bastard and not saying goodbye to you.”

“That’s all?” Robert asked with a frown as he reached down and softly caressed his son’s head.

“Well, you did apologize for everything,” James said, sending him a smile. “I’m sorry for not realizing that you were in love with her, Robert. Our parents are sorry as well. They should be here in a few weeks to tell you themselves. I should have realized that something was going on.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Robert said, giving him a reassuring smile before he returned his attention to the baby who was pulling his finger to his mouth.

“Oh, yes there is!” Mrs. Brown said, stepping up the side of the bed to smile down at the babies. “You gave the doctor and me heart failure when you came running in here like that!”

“I ran in here?” Robert asked, wracking his brain, trying to remember, but it was all a bit fuzzy.

James chuckled. “As soon as Elizabeth started screaming you broke free, ran into the room, caught one look at your wife giving birth and promptly passed out.”

“I don’t remember any of that.”

“And I doubt that any of us will ever forget,” James said with a wink that had Elizabeth laughing softly as she leaned down and pressed a kiss against the squirming baby’s foot that kept lightly kicking at her.

He looked at Elizabeth, noting the exhaustion and pure joy in her eyes as she looked down at their boys. She looked so damn beautiful, and he couldn’t help losing his heart to her all over again.

“Twins, minx,” he said, gently pulling his hand away from his son so that he could push a damp strand of hair behind Elizabeth’s ear.

“Twins,” she repeated with a pleased smile.

He leaned in, careful of the baby now trying to grab onto his shirt, and brushed a kiss against his beautiful wife’s lips. “I love you, Beth,” he said, using the name that she hated to tease another smile out of her.

“And I love you, Robert Lemonade.”

Chapter 35

Four and a half years later.....

“Did you bring it?” Robert demanded as soon as the coach door opened.

James chuckled as he stepped out, his eyes dancing with amusement as he held up a dark grey rock. “You mean this rock that you so kindly asked for? The one that I had to travel to London for in the middle of the night and search the park for six hours in the freezing rain, because it was a matter of life and death?” he asked dryly as he tossed the rock to Robert.

“Thank God,” Robert sighed, catching the rock and barely sparing his brother a glance as he headed for his shop.

“What? No, thank you, James? I missed you, James?” James asked, veering off to go greet Elizabeth and the children, who were playing by the garden.

“Keep Elizabeth busy for an hour or two,” was all he said as he pulled his shop door closed behind him, praying that he didn’t accidentally break this one as well.

* * *

Elizabeth released a sigh as she leaned against the tree and watched as James played with her babies. He was such a wonderful uncle and from what she'd heard from the rest of the family, a wonderful father as well.

He was so kind and sweet, she thought, laughing when the twins tackled him to the ground so that they could show him how to give a proper bear hug. Her lips twitched with amusement when James pretended to turn into a bear and chased the twins all while cradling her youngest giggling son carefully in his arms. Her smile turned watery as she looked down at the folded parchment in her hands.

James had turned her dreams into a reality.

About a year ago he'd been looking through the estates old ledgers and had come across her plans. Not sure what to make of them at first, he'd questioned Mary and Anthony who were only too happy to finally tell him what they thought about Heather burning through the fortune that was meant to help the poor.

Shocked, he'd taken another look at her plans. Then he took a look at his wife's outrageous spending and what he saw had him finally putting his foot down and limiting her spending to a modest monthly allowance. As a result, Heather was no longer speaking to him, but he didn't seem to care. Elizabeth suspected that when Heather discovered that James had taken half of her inheritance and created a charity with it, that Heather would probably never speak to him again. Then again, that would probably make James the happiest man alive.

She wished that he'd reconsider and move to America. She knew that he would love it here. He probably would have made the move years ago if it hadn't been for Heather. Her sister refused to even consider it, never mind visit, which meant that James visited once a year just to get a break from her. Next year James was bringing his girls along with their parents for a visit whether Heather liked it or not. Elizabeth suspected that she probably wouldn't like it.

“It’s good to see him,” the deep voice that she adored said as a strong arm was carefully wrapped around her waist and she was pulled back against the man that she loved more than anything.

“It is,” she murmured her agreement as she turned herself in his arms so that she could wrap her arms around his shoulders, “but it’s even better to see you.”

“Missed me?” he teased as he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers.

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“Terribly,” she said, smiling against his lips. “When I came back from feeding the baby, you were already gone.”

“I’m sorry, minx. I had some work that I needed to finish so that I could spend tonight focusing on you,” he said, kissing her again.

“I have you for the whole night?”

“The whole night,” he promised as he leaned in to kiss her.

“What about James?” she asked, feeling bad that he’d traveled all the way from England to visit and they were abandoning him on his first night.

“Can entertain himself for one night,” he said, brushing his lips against hers one last time before he stepped away.

“This is for you,” Robert said as he held out a small beautifully carved box.

She didn’t have to ask him to know that he’d made the box himself. It was absolutely beautiful and something that he would no doubt be able to get some of the merchants in town to buy. He could probably have a very lucrative business if he focused on making furniture and trinkets, but that would mean spending long hours away from her and the children and she knew that he didn’t want that. Instead, he settled for making the things that he loved in his spare time and focused on supporting them by building and fixing homes. He was very good at what he did and was in high demand.

They would never be rich, but as long as they were able to keep their children safe

and happy both of them were more than happy about that.

“Happy anniversary, minx,” he said as she opened the box and saw...

A necklace made out of stones?

Whatever it was, it was beautiful and she loved it because he made it for her. With a smile she leaned up to kiss him, but he stepped back and focused his attention on the necklace.

“This white bead is from the old barn where you covered me in honey and feathers,” he said, drawing her attention back to the necklace. “This bead,” he said, pointing out a grey stone bead next, “is from the tree where I cut your hair off. This bead is from...”

He went on explaining where every stone had come from, pausing every now and then to smile, laugh or to reminisce about tales from their childhood. She listened as he went through each bead, growing more amazed by the minute. When he pointed out the bead from the orangery, she felt her bottom lip tremble. As he finished with the stone that he’d picked up outside their bedroom window on the night that she’d given birth to Jonathan, she found herself falling in love with her husband all over again.

“I love it,” she said, an understatement. It was the most beautiful, thoughtful gift that anyone had ever given her. It also made her realize just how much she meant to him.

“I’m glad,” he said, leaning in to kiss her, only this time she didn’t let him go.

“It’s my turn to give you your anniversary gift, Mr. Bradford.”

* * *

He was dying. There was no other explanation for it. His limbs weakly trembled as he dragged himself across the room. He couldn't think of a time when he'd been so thirsty or hungry in his life. Several times over the last twenty-four hours he considered yelling for help, but he was beyond help. He knew that.

The cause of his destruction stirred behind him. He picked up the pitcher of water and chugged the lukewarm liquid. It did nothing to quench his thirst or ease his empty stomach.

"I think I'm dying," he mumbled.

A weak laugh came from the bed. "I know I am," Elizabeth said. "We have to stop...we have to...I need food...and water.....the baby, Robert,....think of the baby," she implored weakly.

He took a deep breath. The baby needed food. His baby. He couldn't help grinning. His minx was making him a father again, hopefully giving him a little girl to spoil this time. He hugged the pitcher to his chest and brought it over to her.

"Here. Drink this and I'll get dressed and have Mrs. Brown send some food up." He frowned as he looked at the door. "I wonder why they haven't checked on us by now."

"Probably because we scared them away," she said as she took the pitcher from him. She almost dropped it. Her arms were so weak, but she couldn't drink lying back this way. She got up on her knees with great difficulty. The only thing that mattered was the water. She didn't care about being ladylike or anything else. She drank greedily, not caring about the water that spilled down her chin and down her chest and stomach. She was so thirsty. When she had her fill, she placed the now empty pitcher on the bed. Her eyes met Robert's intense gaze and she knew that things were about to take a turn for the worse.

“Oh no,” she whimpered.

Robert stared at the water dripping down his wife’s br**sts. He licked his lips. Every part of him save one was protesting the sight. He followed her frightened eyes downward. He was more than ready to go again. It felt like he hadn’t had her in years instead of minutes.

Elizabeth threw a pillow at him so she could scramble off the bed, desperate to make an escape. It was like that piece of his anatomy was in charge. He crawled after her. She didn’t bother with a nightgown or a wrap as she ran to the door and started pounding on it.

“Mrs. Brown!”

“Oh, thank the lord!” came Mrs. Brown’s worried voice from behind the door. “We were afraid you’d both perished.”

She looked back to see her husband trying to escape from the tangled sheets his foot got caught on. “We will if you don’t help.”

“Mrs. Brown, listen I haven’t much time. Can you arrange for a large tray of food and drink to be delivered,” she looked over her shoulder to discover that Robert was close to getting free, “and water for a bath as well. Please!”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Brown said, sounding amused.

“Robert?” James suddenly said as he joined Mrs. Brown in the hall.

A soft growl behind her was the only answer. Elizabeth slowly turned around, plastering her back against the door. James knocked on the door. “Robert? Come down with me to the tavern, I’m bored. Robert?”

“I’m busy,” Robert answered in what sounded mostly like a snarl.

James’ answer was a pained sigh. “Come on, you’ve done your duty. Let’s go.”

A loud whimper escaped Elizabeth as he pounced on her. He was handsome, wicked and all hers. No matter how tired or weak she was at the moment he still had this strange affect on her body after all these years and in that moment, she wanted him more than anything.

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“Robert?” James asked, sounding unsure.

Robert couldn't answer at the moment. He was busy licking the water from Elizabeth's skin. She was pinned tightly against the wall, her arms wrapped around his shoulders and her legs around his waist.

In one quick move, he was sheathed inside her. He wrapped his arms around her, protecting her from the door as he thrust inside her. The door groaned its protests as its hinges and frame were put to the test. If the position hurt Elizabeth, she wasn't saying.

Just the opposite, in fact.

She demanded him to move harder and faster. At that moment Robert didn't care that his brother and Mrs. Brown were standing outside the door or that he was on the verge of starvation. He only cared about her, about his minx. He slammed into her, once, twice, three times and then she began screaming his name and doing her best to milk him dry.

“Lucky bastard,” he thought he his brother mutter, but he didn't really care as he lost himself in the woman that he loved.

“Happy anniversary, Mr. Bradford,” his minx said minutes later as she pushed him to the floor to give him his gift all over again, making him wonder if he should call another truce before they ended up killing each other.

Epilogue

Present Day Massachusetts

Fifteen minutes until the party.....

“The end,” his father said with flourish as he shoved a bite of pizza in his mouth, making Jason wonder when they’d ordered out and how he’d missed that.

“Hey!” Trevor gasped in outrage as Jason reached over and snatched the slice he’d been seconds away from devouring out of his hand. “You bastard!”

“Thanks,” Jason said, finishing off the slice of pizza quickly before he wiped his hands off and gently picked up the necklace that was finally finished and placed it in the small wooden box that had taken him less than an hour to make and stain.

“About time,” his father grumbled as he stood up and grabbed two pizza boxes off the counter and headed for the door. “I’m starving.”

“We would have been done a lot sooner if you hadn’t embellished the story,” Trevor pointed out, grabbing the other two pizza boxes and followed.

“I didn’t embellish a damn thing,” his father snapped over his shoulder.

“Really? Not even when you said that Robert wasn’t nearly as good looking as you?” Trevor asked, chuckling.

“I had to give you a visual! A good story teller does that sort of thing!”

“Grandpa did a better job of telling that story,” Trevor pointed out as Jason reluctantly followed after them, his attention on the small box in his hands as he prayed that he did it the justice that it deserved.

“You ungrateful bastard!” his father snapped in outrage.

“Ungrateful? You made me pay for lunch and then you wouldn’t even share the chicken fingers!” Trevor snapped.

“I needed sustenance!”

“No, what you need is-”

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” his father suddenly demanded, cutting Trevor off. It took Jason a moment to realize that his father was talking to him and that both men were now frowning at him.

“To the party,” he said, returning the frown. “Where else would I be going?”

His cousin and father both shook their heads, sighing in exasperation as his father gestured for him to sit his ass down on the couch. “You’re not going to the party.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jason demanded, wondering what the hell was wrong with the men in his family. For the past two hours they’d been snapping at him to move his ass so that they wouldn’t be late for the party and now they were purposely trying to make them late.

“This party isn’t for you,” Trevor said, giving him a gentle, okay, not so gentle shove, towards the couch. “Your job is just to sit here and wait.”

His father nodded in agreement as he gestured for Trevor to leave. “We’ll check on you from time to time,” his father said, opening the door. “We’ll bring the kids and Haley’s grandmother back in a week unless you think that you’ll need more time.”

“More time for what?” Jason asked in confusion as he watched his father head out the

door.

“Don’t worry about food. We start taking shifts tonight. Just make sure that you leave the door unlocked so that we can get in to fill the fridge,” his father said, but before Jason could ask him anything else he was gone.

What. The. Hell?

Deciding that they were screwing with him, Jason got to his feet with a sigh and headed for the door, but he didn’t get far before the door opened and the most beautiful woman that he’d ever seen was walking in.

“Haley,” he said, smiling as she stepped inside, looking just as beautiful as she had five years ago when he’d married her. “What are you-”

Before he could get the words out, she was running towards him and jumping in his arms. Her arms and legs quickly wrapped around him as her mouth found his. She kissed him like she hadn’t seen him in years instead of hours.

“I love you,” she said against his lips as she reached down and started tugging his shirt out of his pants.

“Haley?” he said, wrapping his arms around her so that she didn’t fall.

“Bedroom. Now,” she demanded as she kissed her way down to his neck and when her lips reached his favorite spot, she suckled, making him groan in pleasure.

Somehow he forced himself to focus on something besides the wicked way that she licked and suckled his neck. “What about the party?” he asked even though he’d much rather take his wife up on what she was so sweetly offering him. His entire family was waiting for them. His mother had been cooking since last week and they

needed to-

“I want you naked, Jason,” she said, shattering what little control he had.

With a growl of approval, he carried her to the bedroom, kicking toys out of his way, while making a mental note to build the kids another toy box. Along the way he paused here and there to help rid his wife of her shirt, pants, shoes and socks, leaving her in the matching lace lavender panties and bra that he was going to tear off with his teeth, her glasses that made her look utterly adorable, and that sexy little smile of hers that had his c**k twitching with the need to be inside her.

“On the bed, sweetheart,” he said, giving her one last kiss before he placed her on the bed and gently tossed the box by the pillows.

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As soon as her bottom touched the soft comforter, she was getting on her knees and wrapping one arm around his shoulders and pulling him down for a hungry kiss that had him struggling not to come in his pants like some kid. Even after all these years it still amazed him that she could manage to get him this hot from a simple kiss. He had no idea what had gotten into his wife, but he wasn't going to complain. He couldn't remember a time when he wanted her more.

He moaned in pleasure when she cupped him through his pants, squeezing and tugging on his erection as he reached down and undid his pants. As soon as the zipper was down, Haley was reaching inside his pants with one of her small hands and pulling his hard shaft out. Wrapping her warm hand around his length, she gave it a tug that had him sucking on her tongue. The sexy little whimper that she gave let him know just how desperate she was to have him.

“On your hands and knees,” he said, pulling back so that he could kick his shoes off.

As he finished undoing his pants, he watched as Haley turned around and got on her hands and knees so that her beautiful bottom was facing him. He shoved his pants off and stepped out of them as he moved closer to his little grasshopper. Reaching out, he gripped the sides of her panties and drew them down, loving the way her ass wiggled in an effort to help him.

Once he had them down to her knees, he left them there and stepped up behind her, letting his shaft tease her bottom as he reached over and undid her bra. He let it fall off her, knowing that she would pull it off while he tended to other things. With one hand, he gently gripped her hip, keeping her in place as he traced his fingertips down her back, taking in every beautiful inch of her as she pressed back against his cock,

letting him know that she wanted more.

Since he never denied his wife, he stepped back just enough so that he could reach down between them and take hold of his c**k so that he could do the one thing that he knew would drive Haley out of her mind. He slowly ran his hand up and down the shaft, making sure the head was pressed against her wet slit so that she could feel what he was doing, knowing just how much this turned her on.

When she began whimpering and panting his name, he was forced to squeeze his eyes shut and grind his teeth together as he struggled not to come. He'd slept with a lot of women before her and he couldn't remember a single one that had ever loved to play in the bedroom as much as Haley did. The woman was insatiable and he loved every goddamn minute of it. He wouldn't trade her for anything in this world. He loved her so much that sometimes he feared that this was all a cruel dream and that he'd wake up and she would be gone.

"Jason, please!" she said, begging him to take her a lot sooner than normal and letting him know just how turned on she was.

This wasn't going to last long, he realized as he stepped back and released himself. Without a word, Haley got back on her knees and turned around. He reached out and took her hand into his as he sat down on the edge of the bed, his gaze never leaving hers as she moved around him and straddled his lap. He leaned in and kissed her, only pulling back seconds later so that she would follow after him. Her lips never left his as he laid back and wrapped his arms around her.

As he kissed her, he slowly shifted his h*ps from side to side, taking her in a way that he knew would drive them both crazy. It wasn't long before Haley was mimicking his motions and taking it to a whole new level. When he felt her tighten around him, he gently pushed her up so that he could latch onto one of her large ni**les with his lips. He gently tugged on the nipple, suckling her hard as she arched her back to take him

deeper inside her. Her movements became wild as she rode him. When he reached up and cupped her other breast, she lost it.

She was just barely done screaming his name when he flipped her onto her back and ground his c**k as far as it would go inside her. Instead of pulling out and thrusting back in, he continued to grind himself against her, knowing that he was hitting her cl*t in the process and loving the way her nipple hardened even further in his mouth.

Just when he didn't think that he could hold back much longer, he felt her tighten around him and he let go. He licked and sucked her breast with abandon as he ground against her, praying that he wasn't hurting her even as he had to admit that it felt so damn good.

Growling her name around her nipple, he ground himself one last time as he felt the last tremors of his orgasm leave him. As he leaned up to kiss his wife, he felt the exhaustion that he'd been fighting for the past few weeks finally catch up with him. Before he could manage to roll away from her, he felt himself drift off and he couldn't help but smile. That is until the pinching began.

"Ow!" he snapped when it became obvious that she had no plans on stopping.

When he raised himself up so that he could glare at the little bully, she merely grinned that huge grin that she was known for and asked, "Where's my present?"

"Present?" he asked, frowning until she went to pinch him again. "Ow!"

"Don't make me break out the fists of fury!" she threatened him, looking so damn cute that he couldn't help but chuckle as he reached out and picked up the box that he'd made her.

"We wouldn't want that," he teased as he moved off her so that he could sit up.

“No,” she said with a sniff, “we wouldn’t.”

“Will this keep your violent ways under control?” he asked as he placed the box on her beautiful stomach just above the light stretch marks that now marked her body from giving birth to their three amazing children. He loved kissing those marks. Every time Haley complained about them, he showed her exactly how much he loved them.

“Maybe,” she said with a pleased little smile and an excited squeal as she picked up the box and sat up.

With a smile and a prayer that he wasn’t about to disappoint his wife, he reached down and grabbed the quilt that Haley kept folded at the end of their bed and pulled it up until it covered them both. He sat back and got comfortable before he reached out and gently took the case from Haley’s hands. He waited until she was lying down tightly against him with her head cushioned on his shoulder before he opened the box.

“It’s beautiful,” Haley whispered reverently as she looked at the stone necklace with something close to awe.

“Yes, you are,” Jason said, looking down at his wife as she sent him a shy smile. Unable to help himself, he leaned down and pressed a kiss against her lips, savoring the sweet taste of her before forcing himself to pull back.

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“There are so many stones,” she said, reaching out to trace her fingers along the bottom row of beads.

“Four hundred and fifty-six beads to be exact,” he said with a smile.

“That’s a lot of beads,” Haley said, snuggling up closer to him.

“You gave me a lot of wonderful memories, my little grasshopper,” he said, feeling his eyes tear up just thinking about all the wonderful memories that she’d given him.

“What’s that white rock?” she asked, turning her head slightly so that she could press a kiss against his shoulder as she pointed to the first rock in the necklace.

“That would be from the tree where we first met.”

She pulled her hand back. “You mean the one where you peed?” she asked, sounding grossed out.

“I had a lot of soda, woman! I had to go and the damn realtor hadn’t left the key where she’d promised!” he snapped defensively.

“So touchy,” she mumbled as she pointed to a little gray rock at the three quarter section of the necklace. “And this one?”

“This one is from the parking lot of your doctor’s office when we found out that you were pregnant with Joshua,” he said, smiling at the memory of holding Haley in his arms when the doctor shared the news with them.

“And this one?” she asked, pointing to a dark grey rock close to the beginning.

“This one is from the hotel in Boston where I got to hold you in my arms for the first time.”

“And this one?” she asked, pointing to the next rock.

“Is from the same hotel,” he said, looking down at her.

“Why did you get two from the same hotel?” she asked, looking adorably confused.

With a smile, he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers as he whispered, “Because that’s when I realized that I never wanted to let you go.”

And this is only the beginning.....