

One Season. One bargain. One last chance at love.

THE *Duke's Bargain*



PROPER ROMANCE

MEGAN WALKER

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Bargain*

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Praise for
MEGAN WALKER



★ “[*Miss Newbury’s List*] is a resounding success for Walker, whose talent for emotional intricacy and smart wit elevate the standard of excellence in the genre.”—*BOOKLIST*, **Starred Review**

“Readers will find it easy to invest in practical, business-minded Amelia as she learns to follow her heart. This gentle love story [*Lakeshire Park*] is a treat.”—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*

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Praise for
THE DUKE’S BARGAIN



“Megan Walker’s latest masterpiece shines with wit and heart. Discover dazzling settings, vibrant characters, and deep self-discovery while following Georgiana and Lucas around the London Season. Long-time readers will relish appearances from Walker’s best-loved characters as the worlds of *Lakeshire Park* and *Miss Newbury’s List* combine in this fresh, exciting Regency romance.”

—ARLEM HAWKS, author of *Across the Star-kissed Sea*

“Every book Megan Walker writes becomes an instant new favorite, and *The Duke’s Bargain* is no exception. This stunning romance is brimming with sparkling dialogue, brilliantly crafted characters, and a passionate, vulnerable love story between two lost souls searching for redemption. I dare you not to swoon.”—JOANNA BARKER, author of *A Love Most Daring*

OTHER PROPER ROMANCES
BY MEGAN WALKER

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Miss Newbury's List
Highcliffe House

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For Henry—

*Whose sweet smile and bargaining skills
for more screen time are unmatched.
May both take him far in life.*

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Chapter One

MARLOW

“They are calling you a hero, Marlow.” Gabriel sat at his desk, sloppily signing his name at the end of our contract. Still in his silk banyan, he reeked of stale rum and cheap cigars from what I could only assume was another late night out. I dared not ask. “Some sort of god for what you did for your Miss Newbury.”

I stood above him, raking an impatient hand through my hair, ignoring his rambling, as usual, and particularly so in this case. I did not care what the *ton* said of me. And I certainly no longer cared about Miss Newbury’s well-being. I needed this document signed and Grandmother’s ring in hand before I could leave Gabriel’s home and begin my search. If I did not find a wife soon, this contract might prove more necessary than either he or I dared imagine.

“You do understand what you are signing?” I asked curtly. He’d barely glanced at the pages.

“You’ve always loved a wordy contract, haven’t you, cousin?” Gabriel forcefully dotted an *i*, then closed his ink jar and flitted a bored look at me. “My signature means that should you die without an heir, and I inherit this cursed dukedom, I vow to care for your mother, to never sell off our lands”—he collected the papers haphazardly—“to never have any fun, to die a painful death, and to leave no evidence of my existence behind whatsoever until, God-willing, one of my more competent sons comes of age.”

I let out a breath of relief and took the papers from him. No loose threads. The work was nearly finished.

“How is your health, by the way?” Gabriel asked, peering up at me. “You are looking thin. Are you exercising?”

“The doctor says I am in fine form.”

He blew out an exaggerated breath. “Thank heavens for that. We both know I am not fit for management. Or Parliament for that matter. Lectures at Oxford were enough of a chore.”

I’d pity him if I hadn’t paid for his education myself. “Grandmother’s ring?”

“Ah.” He livened up, patted his jacket down to his trousers, then rose from his seat. “Is it true, though? The rumors? That you rode horseback and came upon the scene just in time, your coattails blowing in the wind like some winged creature of devastation, to save both your intended and her beloved?”

My jaw set as the memories quickly resurfaced. Of Miss Newbury demanding I save that useless heap of a man from bleeding out, of her declaring her feelings for *him* and rejecting me—*me!*—with our wedding but days away. Oh, yes, the *ton* had sung like canaries when her family canceled the wedding. I was decidedly tired of hearing about it.

“Gabriel, I am in a foul mood, and I wish to go home. Do not trifle with me.”

He stood and crossed to the side table, before rummaging through the contents of a drawer. Surely, he would not keep such an important family heirloom—one worth a small *fortune*—in a random drawer in his study.

But of course he would. My cousin’s very nature was so at ease, so relaxed, he could fall asleep while slouched against a corner wall. Which was exactly why this contract was necessary. Some things needed to be worried over.

He called over his shoulder, “You are always in a foul mood of one sort or another. That does not make the rumors any less true. I should say, I am rather proud of you. You could have let the man die, and instead, you showed him mercy. Perhaps there is hope for you after all.”

“I should have let him die,” I muttered, even though I did not mean it. I hadn’t known at that precise moment how deeply my intended felt for the man. Like a fool, I’d given her control. I’d let her emotions affect mine, and I’d gone soft. And now, look at me.

My entire reason for marrying Miss Newbury in the first place was to recoup the final plot of land that my bachelor uncle had sold during his short control of the dukedom. He’d made a mess of things—sullied the family name and nearly made us the laughingstock of the *ton*—but after his death, my father had brought it all to rights.

When Father died, I’d promised to finish his work, and I had. I’d bargained with Mr. Newbury—the land for my title. In the end, I still got what I wanted.

One way or another, I always did.

Now there was only one thing left to do: secure the family line with an heir. Had things gone according to plan, I’d likely have one already half developed. But, thanks to *love* and those ridiculous enough to believe in such silly notions, I was placed squarely back at the start.

In short, I needed a wife.

And I meant to impress one with the ring my grandfather had given my grandmother as an engagement present. Perhaps this time, with a priceless

family heirloom on her finger, the woman I chose would last long enough to make it to the altar.

Gabriel shuffled through untidy papers and broken trinkets for another moment, and I sighed heavily, exhausted from another day's managing. I wanted my soft leather chair and a stiff drink. Cleo at my feet, falling asleep by the crackling hearth.

"Ah. Here it is!" He held out a scrap of paper.

I drew a calming breath through my nose. "That is not Grandmother's ring, Gabriel."

"Yes, but see here. I shall have it returned in a fortnight." He shrugged as though the absence of one of our grandmother's most prized possessions—the ring that she'd worn every day of her adult life—was nothing to fret over.

"Returned?" I swiped my face with a hand. I had asked Gabriel to do *one thing* while visiting the family estate in London. *One* thing that he'd assured me he could do. I never minded if my cousins wanted to stay at the house while I was away—we all had memories there to revisit, to continue living through—and I had only asked for one small, though important, favor from Gabriel. Bring back Grandmother's ring. Save me a trip to London. I should have known better. I should have, as usual, simply gone myself.

"What have you done?" My tone was patronizing, but *honestly*, how could he be so daft? So irresponsible? He was two-and-twenty years of age! Tension tightened my shoulders, and heat rose up my neck. I had enough of my grandfather's temper to frighten anyone who irked me. But I had learned from my father how to control it. Deep, controlled breaths. I took several through my nose. "That ring is worth *more than this cottage!*"

"I made an error in judgment—"

"*A mistake,*" I corrected him. Something my family was markedly good at.

"I drank too much at White's. We were playing cards."

My temper surged as the pieces fell into place. Devil take him. "You *gambled* away our grandmother's ring?"

Gabriel did not flinch. He shrugged. "I was foxed, Marlow, if you can possibly understand what it is to go out and chum about. And I had a dashed good hand. It was a sound play."

Clearly not! I'd have to move fast. Swoop in before the new owner discovered what that ring was worth. Play to his weakness, whatever it was.

"Who has my ring, Gabriel?"

He hiccupped. "Don't know him. I wrote his information on this paper, and I'll write him today and have the ring returned. I hear he's a reasonable man, so it shouldn't be a problem."

I snatched the strip of paper from Gabriel's outstretched hand, anger and frustration burning in my chest.

His brows furrowed, and with that subtle change in his demeanor, I remembered with acute clarity the eight-year-old boy who'd followed me around the estate whenever his mother visited my father. Those big brown eyes that had watched me shoot my first deer, then he'd hugged me tight around the neck and told everyone he knew how his older cousin, the future Duke of Marlow, had made a perfect shot from fifty meters away. He was still that boy in many ways.

I was not.

"I am sorry, Marlow," he said. "I made a mistake, but I shall see it made right."

"I will set it right." I rubbed my temples, feeling annoyed and guilty that I felt that way toward Gabriel, who never *truly* meant any harm. Gabriel had strength in ways I did not. Indeed, I often envied how unaffected he always seemed to be. Then again, he did not understand the weight of a dukedom. The success of one was the success of an entire generation, as were the failures. I held that burden. I did it, so he did not have to. "I shall see myself out."

"Oh, me? I am well enough, thank you." Gabriel pretended to straighten his crooked cravat. "So kind of you to ask."

"You need a long bath," I said, glancing at the strip of paper I'd confiscated. *Milton House, Northwest Hampshire.*

"This is it? How the devil am I supposed to find this man? You don't even know his name?"

Gabriel shrugged again. "My butler seemed to think it possible."

"You have a *butler*? For this small of a house? Am I paying for him?"

He frowned, looking around the room in thought. "Why, yes, I believe so. Thank you for that."

"He's fired," I enunciated. "You can have a man-of-all-work and a valet."

Gabriel's eyes went wide. "Then who would get the door?"

I folded the paper strip in half and tucked it away in an inner coat pocket. All I had was the man's address. But, in truth, it mattered little who he was. I'd learned in the past four years of truly stepping into my father's shoes that everyone and everything had a price.

At least the journey would not be too far, and perhaps I could leave for London straightaway after. I hadn't planned to stay for the whole Season. Just long enough to show face in Parliament, vote on the important matters, and find a wife.

So . . . a fortnight at most.

I could make a few quick return trips if duty required.

I turned from the room, calling over my shoulder, “Will I see you in London?”

“As soon as my new racehorse is settled.” Gabriel followed me, and I could hear the grin in his voice. “After that fellow—what *was* his name?—left, I sobered up. Won a few hands. I may never ascend to the dukedom, but I am quite good at cards.”

“Deuces, how are we even related?” I muttered, eyeing the overlarge portrait Gabriel had commissioned of himself now hanging proudly in his sitting room.

“I shall look forward to meeting your new intended, whoever she may be. You ought to secure a private license this time around. Make it so she must marry you straightaway, no time to fall in love with her mysterious neighbor like the last one.”

That wasn’t his worst idea, actually.

At the door, he patted my back like a nursemaid. “Let us get fast to work on making that heir of yours! No time like the present, eh, cousin?”

No, indeed. A man should feel excited by the prospect. Eager. But I’d been eager once before, and look how that had ended.

This time I would be thoughtful but not overzealous. There were certain things I would look for in a wife: Loyalty. Intelligence. An ability to see reason and act accordingly. Not one to be overtaken by emotion.

Respect, certainly. Friendship, hopefully. Romance? Unnecessary.

I would bait my wife as any man did during the Season—by parading my wealth and status.

I’d buy her a roomful of flowers because that was what a courting man did. Then, after signing a concise yet thorough contract of marriage, I’d seal the deal with Grandmother’s ring.

But first, to Hampshire to get it back.

Chapter Two

GEORGIANA

“It was Sister Agnes!” I cried in shock, clutching my book to my chest and falling back upon a dusty pile of hay, swaddled loosely in a thick wool blanket. “Can you believe it, Mercutio? *She* was Signora Udolpho all along. *She* killed the marchioness.”

At my side, Mercutio licked his paws, his dark eyes flicking up to mine as though he’d read *The Mysteries of Udolpho* a hundred times and was, as usual, bored despite my enthusiastic revelation. *Obviously, Georgiana*, I imagined him purring.

But it shocked me to my very core. All this time, I’d thought Emily’s father was the killer. Ann Radcliffe had me in her clutches yet again.

A frigid breeze seeped through cracks in my hideout—a little hay shed adjacent to the stables where Mercutio and his many wives often slept—and I tightened my wool blanket around my shoulders as the sunlit air filled with bits of hay and fur and dust. My new ring snagged on a thread, and I braved the cold to untangle it.

Raised diamonds encircled an emerald ring on my right hand. It was heavy, expensive, and absolutely something the marquis would have gifted his lover.

I, however, did not have a lover. Nor a suitor. Nor any man vying for even a second of my attention. My ring was a gift from my brother, Peter, who had won it gambling in London. His new wife was not overly fond of jewelry, especially the gaudy sort, and for that I was grateful, as I was his second choice for its recipient.

I dearly loved the way the gems sparkled on my finger. It must be worth a fortune, but Peter hadn’t once wondered aloud how much. He’d only hoped it would make me happy. And it did, despite it being from my brother and not an eager, lovestruck suitor.

Love! Pish. In the past eight months, I had trained myself well against it. Romance was no longer something I pined for. Not in novels, and certainly not in real life. No, the *mystery* was for me. Analyzing characters and their human

motivations—*that* was my interest. What makes a person lie? To what lengths will they keep their secrets, and, what, in the end, causes them to unravel?

In truth, I also loved reading about people whose lives were far worse off than mine. What were scandal and rejection from society compared to being murdered by one's own family?

I lay back in my spot, huddling close to Mercutio for what bit of warmth his little body offered, and distracted myself from *those* memories by bringing the book to my nose. "But if Signora Udolpho—*Sister Agnes*—is still alive, then who is behind that curtain?"

Mercutio paused his licking, his ears twisting keenly, body tensed. He rose up on all fours, his tail swooping as he pounced down from his perch, shoulders gliding smoothly as he stalked toward a Mercutio-sized opening in the wood door.

And just like that, I was alone.

Abandoned by a cat who likely understood only half of what I told him, and that was being generous. He was now my only friend and confidant, and I spoke more to him than I did to any human acquaintance I had left, including my brother and his new bride.

Amelia Moore.

She'd taken his name now. *Our* name, though I felt less and less of a claim on it.

After Sir Ronald's house party, and the Grand Mistake I'd made there, Peter had married Amelia, and we were a . . . family now. I shuddered at the thought. As the months had passed, it seemed *she* was his family, and I belonged out here with Mercutio. Away from their jests and laughter, their late-night rendezvous in his study, their pitying glances were I ever to surface in the middle of an intimate conversation that was likely about me and *Oh, what can we do for poor Georgiana?*

The answer was nothing. I had paid my dues. I'd offered my apologies, asked for forgiveness from all parties, and even listened to the vicar's weekly lectures for a month. And, yes, I regretted what I'd done.

I would have *never* initiated what had surely become the end of my life in more ways than one had I foreseen the repercussions.

That night had cost me my dearest friend, the one man I had ever imagined a future with. It had cost me every other friend and acquaintance save for the vicar and his patronizing wife. But most harshly, that one decision cost me the good opinion of the *ton*. Society looked down upon me in a way I'd only ever read about in the papers.

Scandal, they called it. *Madness*.

I *had* gone mad. Talking to a barn cat. Watching him lure in felines and catch mice and sleep high in the loft in a patch of sunlight, all the while imagining the dramatics of his world, *his* society. Mercutio was certainly the king of cats.

I feared I would never feel sane again.

“Miss Wood?” a desperate voice called. Jane?

Still bundled, I rolled into a sitting position, my unmanageable hair poking out at every angle. “Yes?”

The wooden door swung open on a squeaky hinge, and Jane huffed a sigh too bone-weary for so young and small a stature. “There you are, Miss Wood. You must come quickly. Someone is here, and Mr. Wood sent for you straightaway.”

Peter knew I did not wish to be present for callers. Not since that first month, when our little country town was satisfied that the rumors were true, that I had scandalized myself and my family, and that I was, by all accounts, and out of Mrs. Beaumont’s own mouth, *a trollop*.

For a kiss that had lasted until the count of two with a boy I thought I loved.

I sat back in my spot. “No, thank you, Jane. Tell him I am indisposed.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Mr. Wood *and* Mrs. Wood *insist* you join them. Indeed, they are speaking of you at this moment with the duke himself.”

Mercutio poked his head through the door hole, despite the entire door having been opened for him.

“The . . . duke,” I spoke slowly, confused. An old familiar tug of interest struck a kindling in my thoughts. Who had come? And why?

“Yes.” Jane’s round face was turning as pink as a peony. “You are required in the drawing room at *once*.”

Well. I would certainly feel more shocked by our visitor were I not still reeling over Signora Udolpho’s true identity. I could not think of a single duke Peter knew well enough to entertain. Certainly none that had want of *my* presence. Unless there was a problem, and *Peter* needed me. We both knew Amelia did not have spine enough to confront a duke. She hardly managed her late baron stepfather. What if this man was older, severe, demanding things he did not deserve? I was the only one of us with a free tongue, who could, at present, get away with murder and no one would be surprised. I stood, brushing hay from my blanket and thin muslin skirts with my free hand, weary already.

I met Jane outside the shed, which sat a short walk from the house. Instantly, Jane went to work picking straws out of my loose chignon, muttering unmentionable distresses, and prodding me with her cold fingers.

“Leave the blanket,” she directed.

“I haven’t a coat,” I said.

Jane was near to tears with worry. All this over a duke? Was Society really

worth the stress? In my worst and loneliest nights, through endless tears and painful regret, I had asked myself that very question, and the answer was always unyielding—

Yes.

Acceptance. Approval. Alliances. I had not realized the importance of social connections not just for marriage but for daily life until I'd lost them.

I would do almost anything to have a second chance. To be once again accepted by those who had ousted me by no fault of their own, but by my giving them no choice in the matter.

Loneliness was an ugly, bitter hag, and I was tired of her.

"Leave it!" Jane insisted, and with a huff of annoyance, I let the blanket fall from my shoulders with a light thud upon the cold earth.

Arms folded, I followed her to the house, up the stairs where so long ago Peter and I had descended from our carriage—him, separated from his new love, and me, freshly heartbroken and wholly unprepared for the social rejection that awaited me in the days and months to come.

How quickly life could change.

Figgs opened the door, and we entered.

Jane immediately rounded upon me, prodding me again and pinching my cheeks. "Flowers!" she snapped to Figgs, who came alive in his pursuit of the vase just behind me. He gave Jane a hothouse hibiscus, and she bit off the stem with her teeth before plunging the flower in my hair. "You smell like stale manure. And this dress?" She shook her head in distaste. The pink muslin was admittedly a year or so old, but so comfortable, and that was all I'd worried over of late. Jane pushed me toward the drawing room. "You must go in regardless. Mrs. Marcus said to remind you not to embarrass the family!"

The housekeeper warning *me*? I snorted, then froze at the sound of voices. Low, strong voices. Peter and someone else. And I remembered what I'd already forgotten—appearances and first impressions were everything.

"I should change," I said, but it was too late. Jane was pushing me through the doorway and into the bright, airy sitting room of the house I'd grown up in. My father's house until his death two years ago, and now Peter's.

It did not feel like mine anymore.

Peter's worried eyes found mine, and the nerves in my stomach tightened into knots. Where he was normally relaxed with Amelia at his side, nearly always at ease, my brother sat rigid in his chair. As I strode over, he stood, and the tall man across from him, his back facing me, slowly stood as well.

Towered, more like. The man was tall and broad, his coat finely tailored to fit his intimidating figure. No doubt the finest wool money could buy.

“Georgiana.” Peter frowned, his gaze darting to the man who refused to turn round and face me. “We have a visitor.”

How dearly I wished I had dressed properly this morning, taken time to have my hair done up, merely washed my face or dabbed on rose water before being seen in this state. I used to have airs, a *presence* in a room. Not anymore. For now, I’d have to pretend. Luckily, I’d been reading enough Ann Radcliffe the past several months to have a trick or two up my sleeve.

“Brother,” I said, gliding toward small, doe-eyed Amelia who was sitting stalwart in her spot on the settee, her hand resting on her bulging stomach—the best and only thing about her I truly liked. I wondered if this duke reminded her of her late stepfather.

“We have the pleasure of welcoming His Grace, the Duke of Marlow into our home,” Peter said.

I rounded them, and looked up.

Heavens, he was *young*.

Severe, to be sure. But not much older than my brother.

His ice-blue eyes pierced into mine like lightning, but I did not look away. The Duke of Marlow. Had I not read his name in the papers recently? Something about a broken engagement. I tried to piece together everything I knew about him but only came up with *foul-tempered* and *unsociable*. I held his gaze as I curtsied, and Peter cleared his throat. “Your Grace, may I introduce my sister, Miss Georgiana Wood.”

The duke blinked. “Miss Wood,” he said in a commanding voice that made my collecting nerves shudder. His face read like the beginning of a mystery—hard lines, brooding lips pressed firmly together, not an ounce of warmth in his cheeks. This was a man with secrets. “You have something that belongs to me.”

I had something of *his*? What on earth was he talking about? I tilted my head, not willing to reveal my ignorance, as stoic as Sister Agnes until the end, despite the sudden tightening in my chest. I smiled falsely and took my seat. The motion distracted him long enough for me to glance at Peter, retaking his own seat beside me, who only shrugged and shook his head.

I found the duke’s attention on my hands, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

If my name had not been slandered in the scandal sheets more times than I could count, I would be consumed with mortification to be seen in such disarray, and by a duke no less. I still was, but I had learned that when circumstances could not be controlled, one had to adapt. Anytime I felt my insecurities rising, I let pride take over. That pride, whatever was left of it, would have to carry me now.

I waited until the duke’s gaze flicked to mine. “I cannot imagine I have

anything that Your Grace would desire but do elaborate. You have my full attention.”

“That ring,” he clipped, nodding toward my hand. “It belongs to me.”

I raised my brows, idly thumbing the band. Was it true? “My brother won this ring gambling in London, as I’m certain he’s told you. It was given to me as a gift.”

The duke scoffed under his breath but did not so much as move his neck as he spoke with cold clarity. “It’s repossession was a mistake for which I am happy to compensate you.”

Ah. He hadn’t *meant* to gamble it away. Perhaps this beauty was meant for a lover, after all. I thumbed the jewels. “I assume you knew the risk when you sat at the gaming table.”

His jaw set. “I do not gamble. My cousin made this mistake.”

Spoken as though he himself never erred. Typical of a man. One of many reasons I was not in a hurry to marry one. Not that any of them would have me. “I see.”

“Name your price, then.”

I looked to Peter, whose eyes grew wide. Amelia watched me with curiosity.

I—Georgiana Wood—in my lowly and fallen state, finally had the attention of a duke. There was a time in my life I would have been eager, even ecstatic, to make the connection. But now? I knew once he left, he would not think twice about me. I pressed my lips together. I would have to take him for all he was worth. As large a sum as I could squeeze out of him. How much would I need to buy myself a little cottage? To have a modest living for the next ten years until everyone forgot who I was and what I’d done?

If only I could buy back the favor of the *ton*.

This ring must be worth quite a lot for him to come so quickly to retrieve it. Either that, or he was incredibly sentimental. The latter was too endearing to consider. I needed more information to unriddle him. Perhaps if I prodded just a bit more . . .

“I am afraid I have grown rather fond of this ring, Your Grace. I cannot think of a price that would tempt me. Surely there are other rings—”

“Mr. Wood. Perhaps you might intercede?” The duke’s attention, his very position in his seat, shifted wholly to my brother, and my mouth hung open like a fish. The audacity of this man to disregard me so fully! So quickly! I had *not* forgotten how cruel the *ton* could be, but still it stung. My price, should I ever relent to sell, had officially doubled.

Peter only chuckled, raking a hand through his hair. His gaze flicked to mine, then back to the duke. “I am afraid I do not control my sister, Your Grace. She is

quite independent. The ring is now in her possession, and so it is *her* you must bargain with. I offer my condolences.”

Wait a moment—did I have *bargaining* power here?

Peter tilted his head as though to urge me on, but I did not like the thunderous look the duke gave him. The last thing I wanted was to hurt *Peter*’s reputation, though he had never cared overmuch about the *ton*. He favored our father, and I favored our mother in that regard. I would not push too hard. But perhaps, I could ease the duke into an idea that might suit me more than money . . . for surely he had nearly as much power as English royalty. Could he simply snap his fingers and grant my wish?

He reluctantly returned his attention to me. “If not money, another ring? Diamonds?”

Diamonds? Good heavens! What sort of rare, irreplaceable jewel was on my finger? I picked at the gold casing around it, and the duke stiffened.

“Stop that. You will damage the jewel.” He again looked to Peter as though he wondered why my brother did not have me in better form.

What, exactly, *could* I ask for? He’d offered money, now *diamonds*. Was there a line? How far could I push it? My mind raced through ideas. What did I truly need above all from someone like a duke? Not money, though that was always nice. Not anything of substance, for Peter saw to all my needs. I truly did not *need* a cottage for living; I could live in the dower house on our estate if I wanted solitude. What I wanted most—what I lacked—was . . . friends.

Society.

I remembered it perfectly. During my first Season, I’d made acquaintances, listened in circles, and learned, but I hadn’t felt the need to spend time securing friends when I had Peter, and Peter had Sir Ronald. Of all the regrets, that one I felt keenly.

The duke shook his head in frustration. “I can offer you three hundred pounds. Would that suffice?”

My mind went utterly blank.

Three. Hundred. Pounds?

I leaned back, watching as the duke stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders, trying to relax his evidently building tension. Tension that was worth three hundred pounds. More, even, since I suspected he was likely paying low for his first offer.

Amelia’s eyes were popping out of their sockets. She mouthed something like *Yes*, but Peter was very clearly trying to urge me further with a stare that I knew meant, *Keep going*.

I offered the duke a smile. “Perhaps we *could* work out an exchange.

Though, of late, I have little need of money.”

We stared each other down our respective noses. I knew I should be frightened of him. Instinct told me he could be very dangerous. And, yet, I had lost so much and fallen so far, what could this man, duke or not, possibly do to hurt me?

“Let us not play coy. Everyone has a weakness, Miss Wood.” He enunciated my name as though it were dirt beneath his boots. “Indeed, I have read about yours in the papers.”

Peter stood abruptly. “I shall have to beg your pardon,” he ground out, all humor drained from him. “You will not speak to my sister with such a tone in our home.”

My confident shoulders sank. Not afraid of hurting my feelings, was he? We might as well speak plainly, then.

“Peter,” I said, my gaze still firmly locked with the duke’s. “Amelia looks as though she could use a breath of fresh air.” I nodded to Amelia, who struggled to stand before taking Peter’s arm. She whispered something near his shoulder, and though his eyes were fiery daggers, he relented.

He swallowed hard. “We will wait just outside the door.”

“Very well.” I flicked my hand to hurry him off.

The duke and I listened as their footsteps pattered upon the carpets and through the sitting room door, neither of us so much as breathing.

Then, alone, the room so quiet one could hear a pin drop, I said, “I’m not the only one whose name has been in the papers. I recognize yours.”

“Do you?” He lifted his nose. Narrowed his eyes. “Tell me, have you read anything particularly fallible? Abhorrent? Scandalous?” He waited for the space of three breaths to prove some point before continuing, “No. You have not, and that is the difference between you and me. One word from me, and you might find your name filling more than one page in next week’s papers.”

Well, then. The true Duke of Marlow had finally joined the conversation. “Is that a threat?”

He shrugged, sitting back. His long legs stretched out between us. “It does not have to be. This negotiation can be as simple as you wish it. Simply sell me back my ring. I shall pay you handsomely. You could”—his gaze washed over me—“buy yourself a new dress.”

I ought to feel insulted. I raised a brow. “If you’ve actually read the papers, then you would know I have no need of nice dresses, Your Grace. Nor of your money. Nor do I care if you slander my name so thoroughly that every household in England speaks it ill. Your Grace can have no understanding of

what it is to be forgotten, rejected, and utterly withdrawn.” I leaned forward in my seat. “I would welcome the attention.”

His piercing blue eyes trailed my face, and I itched for a mirror to see what he was seeing. Dust and dirt. Strands of hay. Freckles from too much sun.

The corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly. As though he was amused.

“I actually believe you,” he said, half lost in his own thoughts. “But I will not leave without that ring. I cannot return to London without it.”

Again, I pressed my lips together, unyielding. His offer would have to be good. Unbelievable, even to someone of means. Something to keep me occupied and happy for a long while.

He looked at me. “Shall I appeal to your compassionate heart? Do you have one?”

I almost laughed but refused to give him the satisfaction. “If you can thaw it out first.”

He hesitated, then seemed to try his hand anyway. “The ring was my late grandmother’s.”

Ah. Dare I believe him? “You should not have told me that. A duchess’s ring? Now I know it is worth a fortune.”

He scrunched his nose and frowned, muttering a curse under his breath. “A hit, ma’am.”

I’d missed this—verbal sparring, stretching my mind, connecting with another person. I missed Society. I missed having an intelligent conversation with someone other than Peter or Amelia or the vicar. It had been so long. I had taken for granted the endless nights of before, where every day had purpose, and I wanted that life back. I wished I could step back in time, undo what I had done wrong, but I could not. I did not have the power to rebrand myself within the circles of Society, nor to alter the opinions of the *ton*.

I looked to the duke. But *he* did.

My calloused, frozen heart stuttered awake. *He did*. “I know what I want,” I breathed. The Season was just beginning. Indeed, everyone would already be gathered in London.

The duke looked up, brows furrowed. “Speak.”

“You mean to return to London for the Season?” I asked, hesitant. Would he agree?

“I do.”

“I want the advantage of your companionship amongst the *ton*.”

He drew back, confused, watching what I hoped was more confidence and less desperation on my face. And then his eyes grew wise with understanding.

“You want me to sponsor you? Absolutely not. We are strangers. I would

rather give you the money outright.”

His words were bruising, as blistering as the icy cold in his eyes. “I want nothing more from you than to be seen with you,” I said. Perhaps it was not a fair trade, for it wasn’t quite that simple. I’d need him to pretend to be my friend, at the very least a happy acquaintance. And I knew exactly who I wanted to be seen by. A few names came to mind. Lady Diana. Lady Jersey. . . . Mrs. Johns? Would the duke agree? I had a feeling he was just as desperate as I. His attention toward me would be enough to incite interest. His approval would give me back my life.

I added, “I want Society’s good opinion again.”

At this, he chuckled mirthlessly. It was enough to make me want to throttle him. “You think they will truly welcome you?”

I thought about it in silence for a moment. Could I go back to before? As though nothing had happened?

No.

But could I make them overlook that one mistake? “I think they will be intrigued enough to make my presence tolerable.”

He seemed annoyed. “And then, what? Shall I keep you until a suitable husband comes to call?”

I scowled at him. “Heavens, no. I do not want a husband.”

“Then, what, pray tell, is the point?” His lips were twitching upward. “You realize what you have in your possession is a rare and valuable jewel worth a magnificent sum, and instead of money or substance you ask for *approval*. Are you quite serious?”

He could not understand. A man such as he would be constantly surrounded by people, friends, family, even servants who worshipped him. Peter had always been my dearest friend, but now he had Amelia. I’d never had a bosom friend, certainly no one close enough to care after I’d fallen in the eyes of the whole. I could not live out my days like this. I could not wait for Society to forget. I only needed a few friends to keep me company. A friend to write to, who would actually write me back. Enough acceptance to be invited in.

“Will you agree, or not?”

He actually considered for a moment. “I have business of my own in London.”

I waited, chin raised. He meant to intimidate me into offering another option, or worse, forfeiting the fight. But I would not relent.

“My time is extremely valuable,” he said through his teeth. “I am wasting it now, and I have no interest in wasting it further.”

“I am aware,” I said. “Which is why I do not ask for much of it. An equal

sum of your time to what this ring might otherwise cost you to buy back.”

The duke’s jaw tensed. His knee started to bounce as he drew in a deep, heavy breath, then huffed it out with evident annoyance. Through the silence, I waited, until at last, he said, “Three outings. No more than a month. You will find your own accommodations, and I want that ring in my possession from this moment on.”

His eyes stared daggers into mine, and I realized I’d been holding my breath. My lungs, pained from it, finally inhaled, and I nodded my understanding.

Had I just—was I going to *London*? Could I finally be redeemed?

It could not be so easy. One moment I’d been reading with Mercutio, and the next, I had the Duke of Marlow practically eating out of my hands.

My heart beat furiously in my chest. I could hear it pounding in my ears, feel it pulsing in my temples. This was real. My second chance.

I had no doubt the duke would be a nightmare of a man to manage. That he’d do anything and everything in his power to make this difficult for me. I would have to tread very carefully. Meet him mark for mark. Keeping control would be key.

“The ring will be returned only after your end of the bargain is fulfilled.”

“No.” His hands fisted. “I will not allow that ring out of my sight from this moment on. I must ensure its safekeeping.”

“If I give you this ring now, how can I know you will follow through with your promises? No, that I cannot do.” But I supposed I could give him *something*. “Now that I know its significance, I’ll place it safely back in its box and guard it with my life.”

He shook his head and crossed his arms over his wide chest. “Give it to me now. You have my word that I will keep my end of the bargain.”

Demanding, wasn’t he? His title alone might be enough for many people to trust him. But I trusted only one man: my brother. “I am afraid I must insist on keeping it.” *Hiding it*, more like. Lest he hire some private service to come searching through my things.

He stared hard at me, and I wondered how many people had cowered under that stare and given in to his demands. Not me. Not today. Not with so much at stake. He uncrossed his arms, jaw tight, and leaned forward with those blue eyes unyielding and cold upon mine. His tone was critically short. “If you insist on being difficult, then I suppose we ought to draw up a contract.”

I frowned at his tone. “Contract?”

“If you wish to bargain like a man, Miss Wood, we shall make it all perfectly legal. A contract is absolutely reasonable.”

I hesitated. Was he trying to trick me? Though I supposed a contract would

not be *unreasonable*.

“Yes, of course,” I said with another false smile. I could read, and I was certain he thought me far less intelligent than I actually was.

Scowling, he nodded back, glancing me once over. “I assume you’ll be escorted by your brother.” Drat. I had bargained without even asking Peter’s permission. The whole point had been to relieve Peter of my presence, and here I was asking him for a favor, and a rather large one at that. He’d never said outright that I was an inconvenience in his newly married life, but I could easily imagine that he often wished he and Amelia were alone. The apartment in London would be painfully smaller. But temporary. Especially if I could form the right friendships, meet the *right* people. With the duke in my corner, I’d only need a few weeks. Or . . .

Mama currently resided with friends in France, information I’d gleaned from our solicitor. I’d written to her about Peter’s wedding, but her response must have gotten lost. I hadn’t seen her since she moved away. Would she return for me now if I asked?

“I will speak to my brother.” I stood, silent and reeling. I needed new gowns, but I hadn’t any time. More, I needed a thorough washing like I hadn’t had in months. And Jane, I’d need Jane with me, and my face creams. And I had to know what on earth happened next in *Udolpho*—

The duke stood, regarded me a moment, then called, “Mr. Wood, I think we are finished here. A moment, please.”

A moment, indeed.

Chapter Three

MARLOW

Any problem in life could be solved by a well-written contract. This morning proved it.

Mr. Wood and his sister had whispered together for a few moments, his eyes wide, and hers, to her credit, calm and composed. She'd hurried upstairs while her brother and I had drafted a full page. Concise, but cleverly vague, as any good contract should be. Better still, I had few responsibilities in this arrangement, and even less liability.

In short: I would take Miss Wood on three outings, all within one's month time. Their family would stay in an apartment in Mayfair, and I'd arrange her transportation to and from all events. I would be under no obligation to lie about or mislead anyone regarding our arrangement. We would be introduced as friends, nothing more, nothing less. And if, by the end, she had not of her own volition regained Society's good opinion, the ring would still revert to my possession. Annoying? Yes. Absurd? Far beyond it. But playing friends with this woman would be far less expensive than buying back the ring, and per our contract, I had accounted for absolutely everyth—

Drat.

I sighed. "What happens if she dies?"

Mr. Wood's hand froze, his pen dipped in an ink jar. "Beg pardon?"

There was really no good way to say it again. I cleared my throat. "Forgive me. If, ah . . . in the event of Miss Wood's untimely death, I'd like to add a line that the ring would belong to me."

Mr. Wood's expression hardened. "Is that truly necessary?"

I raised a brow. "It is a very valuable ring, Mr. Wood."

From the tightness in his jaw to the pure, undeniable hate in his eyes, the man looked ready to strangle me. Instead, we endured a moment of silence as he collected himself, then he said, "Then may I also include an addendum: her untimely death should have no direct nor indirect link to you or your associates."

He muttered something further about *accidental* and *natural causes*, and after reading over the whole a final time, I agreed.

There. Everything accounted for, to the very dot.

Favorable, indeed. I wouldn't have to spend a pound to right cousin Gabriel's mistake, and better—once Miss Wood arrived in London, all I had to do was walk beside her three times. I did not have to engage with her at all otherwise, though, yes, she'd be introduced to my mother and family. But I did not have to answer to them.

Indeed, as long as they were happy and thriving, I had done my part. My life was not theirs to arrange, and should they meddle, I would make that perfectly clear.

Sitting back in Mr. Wood's leather armchair across from his desk, I could feel the tension in my shoulders finally relaxing. Another problem solved. I was almost, finally, finished.

A light knock sounded on the door.

"Come in." Mr. Wood blew softly on our drying contract.

"Is it finished?" Miss Wood took a seat beside me. Her hair had been arranged. And she'd put on a brown pelisse, buttoned high, as though to cover up the mess that was her day dress. No more evidence of dirt on her cheeks, nor on her hands . . . and no ring.

She smelled of dirt and hay and something sweet. Apples?

Her hazel eyes flicked to mine, and I cleared my throat. Underneath all that dust and dirt was a very attractive woman. Somewhere. "Indeed. If you've a pen, I am prepared to sign and leave the two of you in peace."

"Georgiana must read it first," Mr. Wood said, pushing the paper across to her. "She may want to amend."

My jaw clenched, and I breathed deeply to relax it. Who, exactly, did these Woods think they were? The contract was sound. I watched Miss Wood's brow furrow ever so slightly as she read. My guess was she'd used her beauty to advantage more than her mind, if the rumors that had gone round about her cavorting in the middle of a ballroom were true. Not that I cared.

Miss Wood set the paper on her brother's desk, her porcelain face a smooth mask. "Interesting. I appreciate the bit about my untimely demise."

Her dark stare said otherwise.

"Is there anything you would like to add?" Mr. Wood tapped his pen on his desk. "Anything you need for your outings?"

The man was urging her on. If they wanted my money, they should have taken the first deal.

"She will want for nothing under my care," I assured them in an effort to

keep anything further from being written down. “If there is nothi—”

“I’d like a line added where the duke might not speak ill of me, nor confirm nor deny our arrangement if asked during or after our time together, nor shall he seek to harm me or incriminate me or treat me as any less than he would a close, personal friend.” The woman crossed her arms, that little haughty chin raised.

I sat up straighter. If only she knew I did not *have* close, personal friends to emulate. “Miss Wood, this is simply not how contracts are written. You cannot add every single possibility and expect us to agree. There are a myriad of obstacles that might occur at any given moment that are beyond my control.”

“Your control?” she said, lowering her chin. “I was under the impression a duke’s word was as good as gold. If you cannot keep me from harm, treat me well in word and deed, and maintain your honor over time, then I do not know what we aim to accomplish here. I cannot bargain with a man I cannot trust.”

Trust? I almost laughed. Lack of trust was exactly why we needed this contract to begin with. “As long as you hold that ring, you will be safe from any harm from me, verbal or otherwise.” Besides, would any of this *really* hold up in a court of law to *her* advantage? Likely not. “But, by all means, write it down, and I shall sign it.”

She grinned as though she’d won.

Her signature was loopy and large—Georgiana Wood.

Mine, admittedly, less elegant, more slanted—Duke Marlow.

I’d signed myself away like a working-class man, and I supposed I had just agreed to do a job. I reminded myself of the payment—Grandmother’s ring—and the reality of my future drawing nearer. The dukedom was recovered. My father’s legacy nearly secure.

I had one last venture to see through, and a wife to court. The Marlow name would finally, again, be one to fear.

Chapter Four

GEORGIANA

He'd left on his horse without a second glance, his coat billowing in the wind behind him.

Peter closed the door behind us as we reentered the house, with Amelia quiet between us.

"That was . . . unexpected," Peter said. He glanced at Amelia, and they shared some private thought. Amelia's lips twitched, and a breath later they were both laughing, holding on to each other for support. "His grandmother's *ring*?"

"The one time you go out gambling. You had no idea. *No idea* what you'd come home with." Amelia laughed. "That poor man. He was *sweating* with worry you'd not give it back."

Peter's grin split his face. "Little did he know, had I not gifted it to Georgiana, I would have given it back without a second thought." He shook his head. "There must be some sentimental value to it. Perhaps he's promised it to someone, or his mother is in a fit."

"Is his grandmother still alive? Perhaps *she* is the one in a fit. Poor man." Amelia laughed again. "Regardless, that was quick thinking, Georgiana. Turning that awful duke on his head like that. I think this might just solve everything."

"I think so too." Peter's grin softened. He took Amelia's hands in his and winced. "I suppose I must return to London."

"Of course." Amelia threaded an arm around his back, and he held her side. "Though you'll forgive me for being the tiniest bit cross since you only just returned." He'd had business in Town but hadn't stayed because of the little bean growing inside Amelia. She was due in three months' time. Another reason I could use friends to visit. To escape to.

"Thank you, but no, Peter," I cut in. "I will go alone."

Peter's forehead creased, and he smiled only halfway. "Alone? Where will you stay?"

I shrugged absently. We hadn't spoken of my mother since I'd asked if he wanted to invite her to his wedding. He'd turned a shade of red and almost spat

the word: No. But he had to see how my staying with Mama simply made more sense.

"I had the idea . . . perhaps I could call upon Mama. She is only in France. I am sure, if I told her about the duke, she would come back."

Peter recoiled like he'd been slapped across the face, his eyes utterly betrayed, and I instantly regretted the words. If I could have stuffed them back inside, buried them deep, I would have.

"Your mother," was all Amelia said, nodding once and looking to Peter. She had an annoying habit of buffering any uncomfortable situation. "That is *one* idea. But there is also the apartment in Mayfair, and you and Peter would only be gone a few weeks."

Peter shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his cheeks coloring again. "You do not want me to come, Georgie?"

"Of course, I do," I said with earnestness. "But would you not love, for once, to have the house to yourselves? Especially before the baby comes. You—" I swallowed hard, glancing at my sister-in-law. "You *and* Amelia both deserve to walk freely in your own home without wondering if I am around the corner. And do not say you aren't careful to watch for me. I know you are."

"You have never been a burden to us," Amelia said, shaking her head. But she'd say anything for Peter.

"This house is big enough for us all," Peter said. "But if you are uncomfortable, I can certainly situate you in the dower house with a servant or two. I did not know you wanted that freedom."

"I don't," I hurried to say, lest he think I was unhappy by his hands. "I simply want . . ." *Someone. Anyone.* "I could just as well stay with Mama."

Peter sighed, his shoulders sinking. "She is not capable of the mothering you seek, Georgiana."

"Peter," Amelia whispered, grasping his arm. I was glad my brother had someone to support him, but sometimes it was painful to watch. I ought to have that too. A parent, at least. With Father gone, for better or worse, all I had was Mama.

"Like it or not, she *is* my mother," I said softly.

But he continued, "Then where has she been?"

He was trying to make a point. Trying to say she *chose* to stay away from us, despite what had happened between them. "You will not let her come."

"And has she invited you, ever, to stay with her in France?" He looked pained, as though the very question made him ill.

The familiar aching resurfaced, as acutely as ever. "No."

He nodded once, as though that settled it.

Did it? Mama had never been truly happy, never truly attentive or loving to any of us. But Papa had told us stories of London—how she was the life in every room, how she'd light up and laugh and dance with any and everyone—and it had always been hard to imagine.

"But perhaps she feels unwanted too. Perhaps she needs only the opportunity. To be needed," I said.

"With the duke at your side, I am certain she would come. But not because she cares." Peter drew in a long breath. "I will come to London with you."

"You won't even let me write—?"

"I need you to trust me. I need you to be on *my side* on this matter. I would do anything for you. Please—let me keep you safe from this." He sighed again, and Amelia wrapped her arms around him.

I wanted to peel her off and throw her out, just for a moment.

"And if," Peter continued, "after your Season in London, you want to seek her out privately, of course I will not stop you. But you will stay with *me* in the apartment, under my protection."

My throat had gone dry, so I nodded. Grateful, but I could not help feeling like a burden. "Very well."

Peter nodded. "The duke returns to London straightaway. I will make it known when we arrive, and he will call upon us to make arrangements. This is a great opportunity, and I am proud of your quick thinking. Together, we will see your wrong made right, Georgiana. Things will brighten for you. I promise."

I looked down at my slippers for fear the emotion in my throat might raise to my eyes. "Thank you, Peter."

"Don't start that," he said, pulling me in close. "Go and tell Jane we're London bound."

I nodded into his shoulder, swiping away the one treacherous tear that had fallen before pulling back to offer him a smile.

The sooner we made it to London, the sooner I could let Peter free.

So, Jane drew me a warm bath.

She scrubbed every speck of dirt off my body, tied my damp hair in curling papers, and slathered me with oils. For the first time in a very long time, after settling my nerves, I fell asleep feeling like myself again.



The next morning, reality still hadn't quite sunk in.

We'd packed my best dresses, colorful pelisses, spencer jackets, ribbons, underthings, my favorite silk robe, and various slippers, as well as my face creams, tinctures, and powders.

I paced the chaos of my bedchamber one final time, searching for anything I might need, anything I might have neglected, as servants carried my trunks down to the carriage. Finally, with my travel bag on my arm in which I'd packed the final volume of *Udolpho*, my notebook, my favorite little pillow, and the miniature I had painted of Mercutio, I followed.

Peter stood by the front door with Amelia at his side and in his ear, whispering what I could only imagine were calming words. When they saw me, they both drew close.

Amelia forced a smile, unable to hide the sadness in her eyes. "You look lovely."

"Thank you." She'd be well taken care of without us here, but I knew she'd miss Peter. I knew she'd worry. It was in her nature.

"The *ton* can be cruel, but there are good people to be found among them. Trust your instincts." Amelia turned to Peter. "And promise you'll write."

He drew her near and kissed her head. "Every day."

I thanked her again, then left them to say their goodbyes alone.

The carriage waited for me at the bottom of the steps, fully prepared with all our things.

"I hope I haven't forgotten anything," Jane said as I settled in across from her. A new wave of nerves passed over me. I hoped I hadn't either.

Soon, Peter let himself in, sitting beside me. We waved to Amelia from the window as the carriage jolted forward, and I gave Peter his corner. I watched the trees pass by my window and breathed deeply through my nose. I could do this. I could smile and laugh and find my place again.

In the space of one afternoon—in the blink of an eye—I'd been given a second chance.

I would not waste it.



Traveling from our home to London took a full day. Peter rested the horses often, and we took a long luncheon at his favorite inn along the way.

And I planned.

It went without saying that wherever the duke wished to go, others followed.

I had no doubt the three women I wanted to catch in friendship would be aware of him. But, more, if I could get noticed by the right people, doors would start opening again. Invitations would come.

I wouldn't have to hide away with barn cats. *Forgive me, Mercutio.*

The sky started to darken just as the roads grew easier.

I peeked out my window. Tall buildings clustered together on either side. London.

Despite the late hour, I heard bustling voices, a mixture of laughter and shouting as we passed familiar sights on rickety cobblestone, and my heart raced, remembering how, not long ago, Peter had taught me these streets, and how I'd trailed him and Sir Ronald and their friends through Hyde Park, to the opera house, and through every ballroom. How desperate I'd been. How hopeful. I hadn't a care in the world other than securing Sir Ronald's affection. I'd thought our hearts were meant for each other. How horribly wrong I'd been.

I had created an illusion in my mind and heart, and I would not be tricked so easily again.

This Season, I would focus on renewing old acquaintances and making new ones. I wanted my life back, but I would not be greedy. To be among Society would be enough.

"I will write to His Grace this evening," Peter said as the carriage slowed at the apartment. "Let him know we've arrived. I imagine he will call tomorrow afternoon."

I nodded, nerves collecting in my stomach. The duke would be kinder in public. He'd agreed to it in writing. "You should go out tonight. With your friends."

Peter smiled. "I am an old married man now, Georgiana. *You* are 'my friends.'"

I shook my head to encourage him. "You are about to become a father. You ought to take the opportunity while you can. Regardless, I'm to bed early. And, who knows, you might meet another duke's cousin at the card tables and win me my own working farm."

Peter threw his head back and laughed. "How can I argue with that logic?"

And so it was settled. Peter left me and Jane to settle in, then chased his friends to White's.

I dined alone, forgoing *Udolpho* for the scandal sheets and a glass of wine—or two. The same names appeared, Lady Diana's among them. She was here, in the middle of it all, and had been seen buying a bundle of flowers from a street cart, some of which she'd later worn in her hair to the opera. No doubt that same cart would be bustling with attention tomorrow. I had half a mind to visit myself.

Jane helped me into bed, and I reread the sheets once more.
I fell asleep with the page falling to my chest.

Chapter Five

MARLOW

She was in London. Miss Wood.

Her brother's letter had stated it simply enough—they'd arrived; here was their address; please come at my earliest convenience.

As though I might come like a dog whenever they beckoned me.

"You look murderous, Marlow," Maggie said, teacup clinking against its saucer as she set it down. She and her husband had arrived in my absence for a short time away from home. Gabriel too. My mother was beside herself with happiness to have a full, boisterous house, and Maggie was happy to have some time away without her daughters.

I loved them all. But I'd like them a lot more when my affairs were situated.

"More tea?" Maggie prodded.

Since she'd married and become a mother, achieved all her life's goals so to speak, Maggie had turned to Gabriel and me with a renewed interest. Gabriel called it purpose, I called it boredom, but whichever it was, whenever we gathered, her meddling grated on our nerves. Before having a family of her own, she'd played mother to both Gabriel and me, always despondent when one of us misbehaved. Many times, we ran away and hid from her, but she'd find us. She always did.

"No, thank you, cousin. I should respond to this." I waved the letter in the air and stood.

"Always responding to important letters nowadays," she teased. "What is it this time? Parliament collapsing in your absence? Another damsel in distress?"

Gabriel lowered his paper, half amused, half as interested and meddlesome as his sister.

I rolled my eyes at them both. They would find out about Miss Wood soon enough. "My friend has arrived from Hampshire. I should write and invite her to Lord and Lady Waymont's party."

Maggie sat back in her seat. "A woman?"

"A *friend*," I said pointedly.

“Gabriel, are you hearing this?” She turned around in her seat, a catlike grin on her face. “Lucas has a lady friend he’s inviting to the Waymonts’ party.”

“Do we know her?” Gabriel asked over his paper. “What’s the chit’s name?”

“She’s not a *chit*,” I corrected him, more so I would not have to hear his slang than because I cared what he called her. “And her name is none of your business.”

The two of them exchanged wide eyes and wider grins.

“On the contrary, it sounds like her name is very much our business,” Gabriel said. “Is she handsome?”

I groaned. This was *my* house, despite how often the two of them descended upon it, and I would not be barraged with questions over this ridiculous and very temporary arrangement.

“She is hardly worth noting,” I said, pacing toward the door.

“*Hardly worth noting*. I have never heard him speak in such raptures over a woman in my life,” Maggie said. “Gabriel, I think our cousin has found love at last.”

For the first time in his life, Gabriel looked halfway serious. “Did you get the ring? From . . . what was the fellow’s name? The man in Derbyshire.”

Hampshire. It was incredible that Gabriel and I had studied under the same tutors. For once, I was grateful for his drinking habits and poor memory. Otherwise I’d have to explain why I had Mr. Wood’s sister at my side.

“I have it sorted, but—”

“Perfect. I assume she is qualified for the role?”

Then, Maggie chimed in. “Lucas, *who* is she?”

At the moment, I wished *I* had a drinking habit. My shoulders had gone from relaxed to tense in the space of sixty seconds, and I was ready to bolt from the room. “Her name is Miss Georgiana Wood.”

Maggie frowned, turning thoughtful.

“I’ve heard that name.” Gabriel’s brows scrunched together. “Maggie, where have I heard that name?”

“I have heard it too. Hampshire, you say?”

“Thereabouts. Deep in the country. You likely have never met—”

Maggie snapped her fingers, pointing at Gabriel. “Lady Demsworth’s son. What is his name, the redheaded baron?”

“Sir Ronald.”

“Yes!” she breathed. “Penelope Longfellow was at that party—the one where Miss Wood threw herself on poor Sir Ronald and caused such horrible scandal for the family. It was in the papers, but Penelope said they didn’t report the half of it. Rumor has it, Miss Wood and Sir Ronald were beholden to each other, and

then he met some lowly girl from Brighton and changed course. Miss Wood could not bear it and tried to force his hand.”

Beholden to each other? Maggie read far too many gossip papers.

Gabriel harrumphed, somehow both surprised and impressed at the same time. “A woman scorned.”

“Rumors,” I clipped. “And I won’t entertain them. Miss Wood will accompany me—*us*—on a few outings while I am here in London. Keep your thoughts on the matter to yourselves.”

Maggie scoffed. “You cannot be serious. That girl is so far beneath us, it’s embarrassing.”

Interesting, because she seemed to be everything my cousin admired—clever, cunning, and resilient. “Margaret, I am not in any mood—”

“Forcing *me* into the company of a trollop!” Maggie huffed angrily. “You’re not—” She drew in a sharp breath of surprise and sudden understanding. “Lucas, tell me you’re not . . . *cavorting* with this woman.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened. He dropped his paper and gripped the arms of his chair. “Whatever you’re doing, marry her first so the child at least can be legitimate.”

Gads, my family would be my death. How had Father managed all that he had *in addition to* the dramatics of the family? I managed hundreds if not thousands of livelihoods beneath our name, and my cousins still expected me to worry about the opinions of others? It was exhausting. I owed them no explanation, but I would have the final say.

“I am *not*—” I started, voice loud and firm. I immediately regretted falling prey to their theatrics. My jaw set. “I will remind you both who you are speaking to.”

Gabriel quickly bowed his head. But Maggie stared back, her nose in the air. “I know exactly who I am speaking to. And, yes, you are the Duke of Marlow. So you must think of the family—”

“I think of nothing else!”

She drew back at my tone, eyes downcast, cheeks reddening. Gabriel froze in his seat.

I hated it. Hated how I sounded. Hated how they reacted as though I might actually throw them out on their backs. My father had never once raised his voice at me. Would that I could be so patient and steady. That I could instill so much confidence that no one questioned me at all.

Maggie did not understand. And, frankly, I did all this so none of them would have to. I softened my voice. “My judgment stands. If you are in disagreement, you are welcome to leave.”

I ought to say I did not want them to leave. That I'd like for them to understand how difficult these things were to manage, and that for once, I wanted something for myself—Grandmother's ring. The one she'd worn every day for as long as I could remember. Whenever I was sad, she'd take me in her lap and let me trace the gems with my finger. I missed it. I missed *her*. That ring personified comfort from disappointment, safety in the middle of a storm, and deep breaths when responsibility had come too soon. Perhaps one day its wearer would feel what I felt when I'd looked at it.

Gabriel, at my request, had moved it from one of our country estates to London, then he'd gambled it away. Could I not reacquire it without having to explain myself to the few people I should be able to count on no matter what?

Maggie swallowed hard and straightened her back. Slowly, she stood with all the elegance of a queen and curtsied. "As you wish, Your Grace." The look she gave was nothing short of mocking. Then she turned on a heel and left the room in a sweep of skirts.

I waited a few beats to let the drumming in my chest settle. Following her would only upset her more. Gabriel settled back in his chair with his paper.

That had not gone well at all.

I folded Mr. Wood's note and made my own departure.

In the foyer, voices sounded nearby. Maggie, I imagined, taking out her frustrations on some poor soul.

I took the stairs to the upper floor, past the library to my private chamber until every sound and every moving thing went still.

Sometimes I wished I'd had a real sibling. Gabriel and Maggie were as good as, having been forced into my company nearly every day of my childhood and then tutored and polished alongside me into adulthood. Little good it did us, for even as adults, we still fought like children.

At times like this, I found myself wondering what true companionship felt like. What would it feel like to have someone in those quiet hours at home? Someone to help share the weight I carried. The burden of the dukedom. The loss of one perfect duke and father, the large missing piece at the center of it all.

I closed my bedroom door behind me and leaned back. No time for sentimental thoughts. I had a duty, and a plan, and one particularly irksome problem.

Miss Wood. And the Waymonts' party.

I *hated* the theatrics of it all. The entire play that was the London Season, and most of all, the cast of actors known as the *ton*.

The fact that Miss Wood sought *their* approval, that she wanted *their* attention was enough to prove that I was lying about any supposed friendship.

She was exactly the type of woman I had no interest in spending time with. Maggie and Gabriel would see that soon enough without my having to explain myself. They might wonder why I kept her around, but they wouldn't worry over it when she left.

I tossed Mr. Wood's letter on my round table in the corner and found a note waiting.

In Mother's elegant hand.

I read the title with a quick glance: Eligible Ladies of Note.

I spat out a curse as I fell into my leather chair and idly picked up the page. She meant well. She wanted to help. And of late, at this time of year, we both needed to be kept busy.

Most of her names I recognized. A few piqued my interest, namely one who Mother had highlighted as being mature and independent, both excellent qualities for a duchess—Lady Diana Thompson. She'd made her debut last Season, when I was decidedly absent chasing down the last of our family's lost holdings and engaged to Miss Newbury. I knew Lady Diana, but not well.

Lady Diana's name had also appeared on the list I'd asked my steward to make of eligible women from financially stable families in the *ton*. I wanted to align myself with a woman from a family with good sense, should, heaven forbid, she have to lead the future duke in my stead until my heir came of age.

Always look ahead, my father had so often said. For it was my uncle who hadn't, who'd cared only for the present, and who'd ultimately ruined us. I would not be so daft, seeking pleasure in the moment without thought to the consequences. Someone had to be even-keeled. Someone had to bear the weight of the whole. My father had been that man for so long, but now it was my burden to bear.

I set Mother's note aside and pulled out a sheet of paper, ink jar, and pen. The polite thing to do would be to return Mr. Wood's letter. To call upon them and welcome them to London.

I was not feeling very polite.

Chapter *ix*

GEORGIANA

Two days after my arrival in London, the duke finally deigned to respond. Of all my reasons to hate him, his neglect of my brother was at the top of the list.

We were in the sitting room when Peter got the letter. He'd had two late nights out, and I could tell he was already spent and homesick, as evidenced by the novel he'd written to Amelia with lettering so small I could not read it from a glance. He'd spent his afternoon filling the entire page, wasting not a speck of space. He set it aside and unfolded the duke's letter. I abandoned the pianoforte and sat on the arm of his cushioned chair to read over his shoulder.

The duke's handwriting was slanted and sleek. The ink dark from pressing his pen firmly into the page.

"He welcomes us to London," Peter said, looking serious as he read down the page. "He and his cousins will come to collect you this evening for . . . a dinner party."

"*This* evening?" My stomach filled with tightening knots. Dash, that man! That was in mere hours! Had he waited so long to tell us on purpose to thwart my efforts? Heavens, I hadn't aired out a dress or started on my hair. I lifted a hand to measure its curls only to be disappointed by their lack of bounce. I was not prepared. Who knew what further abominations I might find—and with no time to quell them.

Peter continued, "Hosted by Lord and Lady Waymont. He will bring you home directly after, and that will satisfy the first of his three required outings."

"Lord and Lady Waymont," I breathed. My heart flew into my throat. I remembered them from last Season. Their parties were the talk of the *ton* and not even Sir Ronald had secured an invitation. One had to be either *very* wealthy or hold a *very* old title or have a *very* favorable connection with the family. I had . . . exactly none of those things.

This was the sort of opportunity I'd only dreamed of. I hadn't actually considered the duke would lead me into these circles. The Waymonts were

beloved. They were as good as royalty. Merely to be seen in their home was half the battle of winning back the *ton*.

To be seen with the duke let alone with the Waymonts at one of *their parties* meant inciting interest with everyone who was anyone, regardless of their invitation or lack thereof. People talked about these sorts of things—who had been where, and when, and with whom. I only needed my name thrown about in the light a few times to be back in the game. News would reach home before long.

This invitation would undoubtedly lead to other invitations, and that was how a scandal withered away to nothing more than an old story.

I only had to get through the night unscathed.

With the Duke of Marlow at my side.

Peter's jaw was set. He flipped the page over. Nothing on the back. And then he looked up at me. He shook his head. "Duke Marlow is the most direct and unfeeling person I think I have ever met. *Do this, do that*, not an ounce of care or concern throughout any of this."

He had no idea. The duke was a terrifying threat. He could do or say whatever he wanted with no consequence. And I had no doubt he thought less of me than he did his scullery maids.

"I do not need his care. Only his influence."

Peter trailed a weary hand over his face. "And who's to say he does not use that influence against you later?"

That, of course, was a constant worry. He would not steal his ring from my possession, else he'd have hired someone and done so already. He knew where we lived, had known where our London apartment was for days. So, he was fair in that regard.

But he was also angry. Motivated against me. And if I upset him in the least, I had no doubt he'd make me pay for it later. I had to be the most unappealing, unassuming, and utterly quiet companion. Someone confident, whom he respected but did not feel strongly about. A friend, perhaps, who spoke only well of him. Then, at the end of our bargain, he'd release me, and neither of us would need to remember these three weeks as we walked our separate paths in our separate circles for the rest of our lives. I assured Peter the same: "He signed the contract. He cannot speak ill of me. Even if he wants to."

Still, Peter worried at his lower lip. "He is a duke, and a respected one, Georgiana. A strong voice in the House of Lords. It was exciting at first, having his attention, but I fear perhaps I've supported you into a ruse even you cannot climb out of."

I stood from my perch and straightened my skirts. I could do this. I could

rally for the cause. What was the worst that could happen? I return to the barn with my beloved Mercutio? Had our lives *really* been so bad?

The prospect was comforting in the face of uncertainty and possible danger, so I did not give myself time to form an honest response. “When one has fallen into the depths of a very narrow crevice, brother, one learns to climb because it is either climbing or death.”

“Please be careful.” Peter sighed heavily and folded the page, then set it on the table. “Do not try to earn his favor in earnest, for I fear he will only try to humiliate you.”

“I do a fine job of humiliating myself all on my own these days, so I’d like to see him try,” I parried back. For all this talk, one would think the duke was some sort of god. Untouchable and all-powerful. And perhaps, in the social world, he was. But if mystery novels had taught me anything, it was that underneath every expensive and precisely tailored jacket was just a man. A man with secrets and desires all his own.

I couldn’t meddle with the duke. But I could outsmart the *man*.

I started toward the stairs. I’d need the whole afternoon to dress. For just like any good pretender, if I was to be believed, I’d first need to look the part.

Chapter Seven

MARLOW

I opened the carriage window, but the cabin still smelled of Gabriel's musk and amber cologne. He was dripping with it. And I could hardly breathe.

Maggie, on the other hand, would not speak to nor even look at me. She hadn't since Mother asked her to befriend Miss Wood as a valiant act of charity. Even I had been surprised by how generous my mother had been about the arrangement. Then again, I hadn't exactly told any of them the truth.

"Shall I go in with you to retrieve her?" Gabriel asked as the carriage rolled to a stop outside her door. "Your little darling friend."

"You will not so much as speak to her, or you will regret it." I scowled and reached for the door handle. Gabriel's amusement with Miss Wood could not prove a distraction tonight. I had a handful of ladies I needed to consider, all while keeping track of *her*.

"If we are to present a 'united front' as your mother says, then I do not see how your request is possible." Maggie leaned back in her seat, careful not to disturb her hair. Her words were as biting as frost, her innocent smile just as cold. "If Miss Wood can tolerate you, she can certainly tolerate Gabriel's flirting."

Gabriel grinned. "I wouldn't mind *befriending* a country girl with a little fire in her."

I did not dignify that with a response. Instead, I opened and closed the carriage door firmly behind me, and I took the few steps up to Mr. Wood's Mayfair apartment. Clean gray stone with a mahogany wooden door and planters of green bushes on either side. Respectable, to be sure. I almost felt sorry for the man, having such an intolerable sister. His life otherwise seemed quite perfect. Wealth, good standing, and a lovely, pregnant wife at home. No title to force him into Parliament.

I knocked thrice upon the door and heard a distinctive shuffling inside. Voices. Then, the door opened wide.

"Good evening, Your Grace," a servant said, and I stepped inside.

Marble floors met the same mahogany in tables, purple velvet-backed chairs, and the staircase. Oil paintings framed in gold hung on every wall. Flowers in Asian-style vases. Very respectable, indeed.

Mr. Wood walked out of a room to the right, straightening his coat. He did not look happy to see me, despite the fact that I was about to change his sister's trajectory for the better, whether I liked it or not.

"Good evening, Your Grace." He bowed. "Thank you for coming."

My lips twitched. His tone was not at all thankful. "I trust you received my letter."

"We did, indeed." He looked over his shoulder to the room he'd just abandoned. "And I trust my sister will be in good hands tonight."

I narrowed my gaze at the question in his voice—*Would I hurt her? Would I abandon her?* He couldn't say with certainty; he hardly knew me. He could only hope I was an honorable man, bound by duty and contract to keep his sister from harm. In truth, she was perhaps the safest woman in London tonight simply by standing in my shadow. I did not dignify his words with a response beyond a look of impatient confidence.

He nodded once and cleared his throat. "She's putting her music away."

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed movement over the man's shoulder.

And there she was.

Dressed in a rich blue, she walked toward me.

This was the same girl from the country? She looked different. Clean, for one thing. Golden ringlets were arranged atop her head with little white flowers pinned among them. And that dress . . . I didn't know much about dressmaking, but I didn't think I'd ever seen a dress worn quite like . . . that. The way it moved with her in waves as she walked. I swallowed hard.

Then her light, clear eyes met mine, and I felt a jolt in my stomach, as though she were some sort of rare treasure I'd just unearthed.

Ridiculous. I tugged at my jacket.

She was *attractive*. I could admit that much. A natural reaction to someone so confident and . . . handsome.

She stopped beside her brother and raised her confident little chin as though to say she was here to collect what she was owed.

Another beautiful woman here only to gain what they all wanted from me—*influence, money, luxury.*

I blinked away. "Miss Wood," I managed without meeting her eyes. Firm and sharp. "Shall we?"

She curtsied, the air between us fragrant with sweet flowers. Apple blossoms? I allowed myself a single glance.

Shouldn't have.

She said, softly, "Good evening, Your Grace."

Gads, even her voice sounded ethereal. My neck grew hot. I was suddenly overwarm in my coat. Time to go. "Do you have everything you need?"

She lifted a small, beaded reticule I'd missed entirely. With a forced smile, she tilted her head. "Not feeling particularly complimentary for your friend this evening, Your Grace?"

I flicked my gaze to her brother. The awkward thing about interacting with females was that there was almost always someone in between you. Someone listening and watching and making it impossible to say what you really wanted to say. In this case, *That dress fits you like a glove. Your figure is perfect. Despite my better judgment, I would very much like to touch you.*

Mr. Wood's brow furrowed as he looked between us.

"The carriage is waiting," I muttered instead. Now was not the time to indulge in my weaker side. Especially not with *this* woman who would certainly leech onto me and bleed me dry.

She'd proved herself intelligent with her little bargaining stunt. And, now, she would play the part to perfection. That dress proved it.

I turned, and the servant quickly opened the door for my exit. I did not wait for Miss Wood, but I heard her footsteps following behind, out the door, and down the steps.

Their gentle pitter-patter stirred my nerves, tightened my shoulders. She wasn't even that close, and yet, I knew exactly where she was. Perhaps all this running about had worn me down, and I was catching ill. In truth, I was decidedly out of practice dealing with women, especially after . . . well, they were *all* untrustworthy, the lot of them, and Miss Wood was unnerving to say the least. Unnerving because I should not care about her at all. She'd dug her own grave, so to speak, after cavorting with that man in public. I should not give a second's worth of worry to her comfort. Indeed, I should keep her a few paces behind all night.

The carriage door swung open ahead.

Gabriel poked his head around with a stupid grin that quickly vanished at what I could only assume was seeing Miss Wood trailing behind me.

The fact that she was a stranger hit with full force. A beautiful, very distracting stranger I was supposed to be dear friends with. On pretense, I was supposed to know her rather intimately, at the very least enough to invite her out with my family.

Even more reason to keep my distance from her. She'd already proven herself dangerous to the good, honorable men of the *ton*. For the first time I fully

understood why. Who knew what she was truly capable of looking as she did tonight?

Not that she could harm *my* reputation. The thought was laughable. If anything, I could further harm *hers* if I wanted to.

Did I want to?

I started to consider . . .

No! No, of course not. No. I was not the sort of man to take liberties, and certainly not where this woman was concerned. I was after a *wife*, and Miss Wood was the last woman fit for the dukedom. A country girl with terrible standing. All she had was a respectable brother and likely a decent dowry that was of little consequence to me. No, I needed an equal. Someone who knew what it was to bear responsibility, who'd been trained to run several households at once. Someone who could navigate Society, offer relevant advice, keep our family at the top.

"You didn't say she was *beauty personified*," Gabriel whisper-seethed from within as I approached. "Gads, man, I would have put on more scent!"

"*More* scent?" Maggie snorted. "Gabriel, you have single-handedly solved the Thames's stench with the level of scent on your person."

Lips decidedly pursed, I stopped at the steps laid by the carriage door. *Drat, now what do I do? Turn round and help her up?* I could let the groom do it—*should* let the groom do it—and wait outside until she situated herself. Otherwise, she might think me amiable. And that, I most certainly refused to be.

I stood as still as a statue, unyielding. Waiting.

Perhaps she'd let herself up.

I should most assuredly offer my hand. I would for anyone else. Why not now?

Because I am the Duke of Marlow, I reminded myself. And I would not be cowed. Not by anyone.

Miss Wood stopped beside me, and the groom looked to me for direction.

If I gave her my hand, she'd take it, and we'd be on our way. If I didn't, we might be standing out here all night.

I fisted both hands. Dash it all.

"Smile," Miss Wood said in a voice that was somehow both soft and sharp at the same time. "And help me up, won't you, my friend?"

My jaw tensed. Who did this little woman think she was, ordering *me* about? I glanced down at her, and our eyes met. Hers, the clearest, golden-green. That had been a mistake. Then she smiled up at me, and it didn't feel like one of Maggie's forced smiles. It was full and genuine. Filled with excitement and a vulnerability so rarely seen in London.

It was a compelling smile. Alluring. So much so that my gloved hand raised of its own accord for hers.

The light pressure of her fingers on mine seared through me, though it lasted less than a second as she took one, then two steps up and into her seat on the bench beside Maggie.

I breathed in her wake. Apples, certainly, for I was suddenly aching with hunger as I followed her inside.

“Introduce us to your friend, won’t you, Marlow?” Gabriel smirked, gnawing on his bottom lip as he eyed her.

I did not know what Gabriel got up to in the evenings beyond our shared excursions to the Club, and judging by how he interreacted with women, I did not want to.

“Miss Wood,” I said as I sat. “May I introduce my cousins—Mrs. Margaret Drexel and Mr. Gabriel Brennan. They are brother and sister. Cousins, this is Miss Wood.”

Maggie’s lips twitched ever so falsely. “Not *the* Georgiana Wood from the papers?”

Miss Wood held Maggie’s gaze as though to gauge *her* reaction to the recognition. If she was affected by all that had been purportedly written, she was a professional at hiding it.

“The very same. It is lovely to make your acquaintance,” she said, folding her hands in her lap.

Maggie sighed with evident exasperation. “I cannot say the same. However, since we are forced upon one another’s company, I will say this: Whatever your intentions are with my cousin, I have no doubt you will be disappointed. A duke is a far cry more powerful than a baron. He will not be as generous as Sir Ronald was in the aftermath.”

“I, however—” Gabriel started to say and was promptly kicked by his sister. “Codswollop!”

“That is quite enough.” My words sounded bored, but really I was simply tired. Tired, and the night had only just begun.

Miss Wood shifted in her seat. “I have no intentions toward your cousin. Or any man for that matter. I am decidedly through with the lot of them.”

“Had your fill, hmm?” Maggie taunted.

“Margaret—” Gabriel started, and this time it was *his* voice holding rebuke.

Miss Wood studied her with a look that could only be described as measuring. Sizing up her opponent like two foils in a fencing match. “Fill would not be the right word, no. Bored, perhaps.”

Maggie frowned, clearly annoyed. So Miss Wood turned her attention toward

Gabriel. "Have you been in London long?"

The woman was a study in composure. Maggie was about to burst into flames, and Miss Wood could simply . . . divert her attention.

Gabriel leaned against the corner and crossed his arms. "I come and go," he said, as though it were no great thing. "Spend most of my time in the country on my estate."

His estate? I raised a brow. My lips parted—

"I love the country," Miss Wood said. "I grew up in Hampshire."

"And how did you meet our cousin?" Gabriel seemed all too amused.

"He came to call." She spoke as though I'd *wanted* to. "I supposed he'd read about my talents in the papers."

I nearly choked on my spit. "By jove, woman—"

"A jest, Your Grace." Miss Wood twirled a golden curl around her finger, a knowing smile on her lips. "We soon realized we have much in common and became fast friends."

Maggie's eyes were murderous, but she said nothing. Fast friends? This woman was more calculated than I'd thought. Spitting falsehoods like a professional at the gaming tables.

"Ah." Gabriel laughed. "Shared heartbreak, was it?"

"Something like that," I muttered. I wished I could tell him this was all *his* fault. His mistake had brought her here. I was regretting it all, but I reminded myself a few outings with this woman had been, by far, the cheapest option to recover Grandmother's ring. Doable, with a little patience.

I drew in long, even breaths through my nose.

The carriage was slowing just outside the Waymonts' house. A line of waiting carriages were parked along the drive, Mother's among them.

My fingers itched to loosen my cravat. As unbearable as this carriage ride had been, the last thing I wanted to do was parade past nosy women and their money-hungry husbands. How could they get a share of my fortune and estates? What recent investments had caught my eye?

How about they do the work for themselves and mind their own business?

I had business of my own tonight—the marriage kind.

I needed to hone down my possibilities and get the contract done and signed. More, I needed the girl waiting in front of clergy at the end of the fortnight. I'd already spoken to the archbishop; he, like so many others, owed me a favor.

But, first, to choose the woman.

The thought made my stomach tie itself into knots. I'd done this once before—met a woman, liked her well enough, and proposed marriage. But I'd made a few key mistakes. I hadn't considered Miss Newbury's wandering heart. I

needed to make sure the heart of any prospective wife was in the right place—set upon the dukedom—before I wasted any of my time. But, how?

I helped Miss Wood down, and she waited to the side for me, quiet and watchful. Maggie actually scoffed as she took my hand and stepped down. Gabriel stalked ahead as he usually did when he was on the prowl.

The man was worse than Beau Brummel. He knew he was being watched and reveled in the attention.

I knew it too. But I felt the opposite. I did not want anyone looking at me, thinking about me, or even speaking to me until I had my plans officially in order.

“Keep your eye on that one. She’ll ask to take your arm, but don’t let her lead.” Maggie gave me a pointed look, nodding her head to Miss Wood before hurrying after Gabriel.

“Is she always so angry?” Miss Wood watched her take the steps up to the veranda.

Per our contract, I stayed by her side. “I do not think she likes you.”

Miss Wood blew out a breath. “I want only your companionship tonight, not any more undue attention. So, no, I will not be taking your arm.”

Irksome woman. “I did not offer it,” I muttered back. And I wouldn’t. No matter how alluring she was. I straightened my coat as we started forward.

Miss Wood was a dangerous creature—beautiful and confident. Such a combination could only spell trouble, and trouble was the last thing I needed tonight.

Chapter Eight

GEORGIANA

The Duke of Marlow certainly made an impression.

I followed a step behind him as we walked toward the house. I'd forgotten how tall and broad he was. A towering, shadowy figure in the evening. He wore a dark brown velvet jacket over an emerald-green waistcoat and tan trousers. His top hat matched the darker shade, contrasting with the light, sandy color of his hair. Everything about him was clean-cut and crisp like a fresh note from the bank. Young and handsome and titled. The man was undoubtedly the catch of the Season, if he wanted to be caught.

But just a man, I reminded myself as we passed through the open front door.

Eyes were upon us as soon as we entered the Waymonts' grand foyer. Dozens of them.

Despite my intentions, how well I'd trained myself to behave, I felt entirely unprepared. I hadn't entered a house so fine in ages, and certainly not with a duke at my side. I was decidedly out of practice. I needed a *real* friend. An ally. Preferably an old acquaintance no longer set against me. I made a quick glance around the room, but I did not recognize anyone. Yet.

Painfully slowly, we made our way down the line to greet our hosts.

I am not alone, I reminded myself, despite how I felt standing next to the duke. I wouldn't let my fears get the better of me. I steeled my resolve. I would encourage the ladies of the *ton* in friendship. Secure their friendship now and get invitations later. That was the plan. Once they saw me with the duke, they'd be interested. I made sure to stand apart from him, so no one would think us *too* friendly, but close enough to warrant a connection. Close enough to inhale notes of oranges and expensive leather from his side.

We thanked our hosts, who led us farther into the house, into a ballroom where a small orchestra played a slow melody. Familiar faces from last year mixed with newcomers, but I saw no one I had formed a particular acquaintance with previously. I had no idea if any of them recognized or remembered me, but I knew as soon as they heard my name, they'd remember from the papers.

Everyone knew Sir Ronald. He was almost too well-connected. Too friendly and good-natured. The rumors had taken off like wildfire—

Did you hear what happened to Sir Ronald?

That woman . . . Miss Georgiana Wood. I heard she kissed him! Right there, in the middle of the ballroom, and then he looked at her like she was some sort of crazed animal!

No man of any sense will go near her now.

If she'd act that way toward poor Sir Ronald, what else has she done? What else could she do?

I focused on my breathing, in and then out again, trying to push past the memories as the duke led me to the far wall of the room. There, to our left, stood Miss Fiona Ferndale with a glass of red wine in her hand. I'd once paired off with her in cards, and though we'd lost, we'd laughed all night. Now, she did not spare me a glance. Next to her was Miss Colette Quincy, newly engaged so I'd heard; she'd promised to invite me to her family's estate. That invitation had obviously expired, judging by the way she frowned and looked away.

Perhaps, if I had spent more time strengthening those friendships instead of following Sir Ronald like a pet, I'd have a chance at regaining their trust.

I could only pray the duke felt social tonight. Without him at my side, I did not stand a chance at recovering these women's good graces.

The cousin—Mr. Gabriel Brennan, a curly-headed blond who looked like a younger, wilder version of the duke—whispered something fiercely in his sister's ear a few paces to our left, but whatever he was saying was lost on her. She gave him one last look, then scowled at me before stalking off.

She hated me on principle, but I would not let it bother me. Mrs. Maggie Drexel was not on my list of necessities.

There were three people I hoped to see tonight; or rather, I hoped they saw *me*. Lady Diana, whose opinion mattered most to the young ladies of the *ton*; Lady Jersey, who, if I played my cards right, might admit me into Almack's; and last, but certainly not least, Mrs. Johns, an old widow with enough wealth and influence in matchmaking to convince worried mamas that I was no threat to their daughter's prospects. The latter connection might be the most important of all.

I kept a careful facade as gentlemen approached the duke, hopeful for any sign of the three ladies, until a woman rounded his side, grasping his arm fiercely.

She looked about middle-aged, her eyes wide and severe, not unlike the duke's. His lips parted as she took us both in, head to toe, like we were renderings that needed to be studied.

“Is this the woman?” she asked over her shoulder. Mrs. Drexel—Maggie—appeared behind her. She nodded once, smile tight.

“Good evening, Mother,” His Grace said.

The woman—the duchess?—stepped between us. She was dressed like a queen in gold and blue, her figure slim but strong, and eyes fierce. She leaned in before lowering her voice. “Are you quite serious?”

“Mother, may I introduce my friend Miss Georgiana Wood? Miss Wood, my mother, the Duchess of Marlow.”

“Good evening, Your Grace,” I said with a low curtsy. The duchess sighed, and I wondered if I’d done it wrong.

Her Grace looked at me straight on, and it was the challenge of a lifetime, but I met her gaze as I rose. “Miss Wood, do you have any untoward intentions with my son?”

Her question drew me up short. Then I remembered Maggie’s reaction. What she’d read about me in the papers. And from the duke’s mother, the question was warranted. “Not in the least, Your Grace.”

“Heaven above, let that be true. We have more pressing matters to worry over. Come with me.” She turned on a heel toward the door.

The duke followed obediently, without a thought to me, and I hesitated. Would he truly leave me to stand alone and be sized up by the wolves? Well, I would not be left. Like it or not, he’d signed our contract, and I meant to hold him to it. A night *at his side*.

I hurried behind him.

We rounded two bends, then Her Grace stopped us in a secluded corner. She did not hesitate when she saw me, but spoke gravely, “She’s here.”

“Who?” In an instant, the duke’s countenance changed. His usual seriousness turned dark as a winter’s night.

His mother lowered her chin as though delivering a fatal blow. “Miss Newbury.”

And I would swear to it in front of a magistrate that I felt as though I was living out an Ann Radcliffe novel. Miss Newbury, the duke’s intended who’d broken his heart, was here.

“She’s Mrs. Winston now.” The duchess swallowed hard. Her hard edges seemed to soften with concern and compassion for her son. “I shall never forgive the Waymonts for not warning us. I suppose they believe the rumors that you supported their union, but I—”

“Is he here too?” the duke bit out. “Her . . . husband.”

“Yes.”

The duke lifted a hand to the back of his neck and closed his eyes.

Everyone had already seen him arrive. The whispers were likely already spinning. His Miss Newbury would have heard, and if he left now, how would that look?

It would look like he *cared*. And clearly, for whatever reason, my good friend the duke did not want that.

I, of all people, however, knew how important appearances were.

“What can I do?” I found myself asking. If I was right, if he did care and wish for a way out of this mess, perhaps I could help him. And a combined effort of any kind meant more time in the spotlight with him. “Shall I spill my wine on her dress?”

The duke’s eyes opened, and he surprised me with the slightest twitch of his lips. “Would you?”

Pleased that I had humored him, I shrugged. Clearly, I’d done worse. “If you asked me nicely.”

His mother pinched the bridge of her nose. “Everyone will be watching you tonight. They will inject meaning into your every move. Darling, I know you hate the public eye, but with your efforts this evening aimed at matchmaking, I had to warn you. You must show them how you support Miss Newbury and her new husband. It would not do to start a new courtship under the shadow of your last.”

The duke was looking for a wife. That was his *business*? No wonder he treated me like such a burden. I had barnacled myself to him at the absolute worst time.

“No, it would not,” I agreed.

The duchess turned her attention to me and sighed. “I thought at first you would be my biggest problem this evening. I hope you prove me wrong. I must hurry back before they wonder where we’ve gone. Follow slowly. And remember—they feed off your reactions.”

And with that, she nearly flew around the corner. A loving mother who cared about her son in the aftermath of his heartbreak—how must that feel? Mine hadn’t so much as written her condolences after I’d scandalized myself.

The duke stood quietly, watching the empty space where his mother had stood.

We were, for the second time in our acquaintance, alone.

I liked interacting with him better this way. I could say exactly what I wanted, without that annoying level of pretense, and he could throw it right back at me. Though, perhaps, being a duke, he never felt the need for pretense. Why should he need to change his face, his voice, his tone to suit another person?

I know you hate the public eye, his mother had said. I wondered why.

“She is sweet,” I mused, if only to break the silence.

“My mother?” He blinked at me, monotone and unfeeling. He was still reeling from the news, swiping at his neck, a million thoughts racing behind his eyes. I wondered of what, and from when, and why. What had that girl done to him? “She is sweet only because she feels sorry for me. My mother could kill you with a glance, make no mistake.”

Without his usual terse, god-above-men haughtiness, I almost felt sorry for him too.

Almost.

“You did not say you were looking for a wife.” Not in so many words.

He sighed, irritated. “My endeavors are none of your business, Miss Wood.”

Harsh words, but without his usual bite. A despondent duke. *Only a man* after all.

Laughter carried in from the distance. And we were missing it. Missing the party. Which meant *I* was missing my opportunity! This man needed to come back to his senses. He needed to pull himself together.

If not, I would have to do it for him.

First, I needed to know exactly what I was dealing with.

I hedged, “On the contrary, I believe we ought to know at least some of each other’s business. For instance, what exactly happened between you and Miss Newbury? As your dear friend, how much should I hate her?”

He frowned. “A full wine glass down her front ought to do.”

Ah. Quite a lot, then. He must have loved her very much. A problem, indeed.

He shook his head. He looked utterly miserable. More so than usual. “Of all the parties in all of London . . .”

Heaven’s sake, seeing her could not be as dramatic as all this. Not for a man, a *duke*, like him! “Can’t you simply pretend she isn’t here? Avoid her?”

He gave me a sharp look. “Contrary to the *ton*’s belief, we did not part amicably. No, it will not be pleasant to see her. The woman makes me feel so . . . so—”

“Ridiculous?” I offered, hurrying him along. “Because that is how you are behaving at present.”

Again, with the look. “Then I suppose we are quite the pair because you look like a blossoming apple tree with all that mess in your hair.”

Maybe it was the way he said it—with absolutely no conviction—or perhaps the way his eyes flicked to my hair and then softened with regret, but I laughed, surprised. “And now you’re just being cruel.”

Again, his lips twitched ever so slightly. The Duke of Marlow had a bad

temper and a terrible way with words, but somewhere, deep down in his depths, he also had a heart.

What he *needed* was a stiff drink and a pinch under his arm to get moving. I looked around. I could not leave him here in this state, but if I could get him to the ballroom—

He huffed out a breath of resolve, arms tight at his sides. “No. This night cannot be borne. I shall call the carriage at once.”

My desperate heart rose into my throat.

Chapter Nine

MARLOW

“What? No!” Miss Wood cried. “You heard your mother. You cannot leave.” Her little elbow dug into my side, nudging me toward the hall. Luckily, she was barely half my size. “You must go out there and face her like a man. Like a *duke*.”

A duke? No, a duke would have gotten his way. A *duke* would have forced his intended into marriage for better or worse and would be halfway to an heir by now. I had failed on that account, and Miss Newbury’s presence was too sharp a reminder. I could not play nice with her in front of all these people. “Not like this. I am not . . . feeling myself.”

“Then let us resolve your feelings at once, for you promised me an outing, and this is *the* outing I have been dreaming of.” Her eyes were round and serious. I could read the desperation all over her face.

I had expected Miss Wood to seem entitled, as though she deserved her place here even without my name attached. An annoyance. A light hand on my arm, a lilting laugh, and fluttering of her lashes. Someone I would throw out of the carriage by the end of the night.

She was none of those things.

She was gentle and generous in her interactions with our hosts, thanking them for receiving her on such short notice, and complimenting their décor with polite thoughtfulness. Confident, yes. Graceful too. More transparent and easier to understand than I’d expected. Annoying . . . ? She’d struck an annoying *deal*, but so far she had asked for nothing more from me.

She stood in front of me and crossed her arms with a furrowed brow that made me want to stop fretting and study her. “I can help you.”

My lips twitched. “You? Help *me*? I do not think so.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’d rather run away instead? Defeated? Because that is exactly what they’ll think.” She pointed toward the ballroom. “The Duke of Marlow feeling sorry for himself.”

The embers of my temper flared. “You have no idea of what you speak. You

do not know me at all.”

“You do not know me either.” She threw up her hands, seemingly as put out with me as I was her. “How do you wish to feel? Strong? Then I shall faint, and you can lift me to safety and all the women will swoon.”

I scoffed. I did not need help encouraging the women of the *ton*, though I had no doubt she’d follow through. The more she spoke, the more she revealed how intelligent and clever she truly was. How well she understood Society.

“Or perhaps you want to feel dangerous? I can stage a brawl, and you can save the day. All the women will still swoon.”

I had half a mind to start a brawl myself with one particular gentleman—if he qualified for the word—already in the ballroom. Though *that* man was a proper pugilist.

Tempting, to land him a facer. I had wanted to for months now.

Doing so would embarrass my mother and taint the family name, so I oughtn’t.

Then again . . .

“No.”

She waited for a single moment, before launching into her next grand idea. “Smart? I am more than happy to—”

“Enough,” I stopped her, frustrated. Would she never relent? I could simply walk away and abandon her here. I ought to call the carriage in earnest and leave this place before anyone else saw me upended like this. I dug a hand threw my manicured hair.

Her stare burned into my profile. “Whatever you’re feeling, it is uncomfortable,” she started, slow. “And no, we are not well-enough acquainted to be in each other’s confidences. But I am well-acquainted with embarrassment, humiliation, anger, betrayal . . . I could help you get through the evening. As a friend. A conspirator, perhaps? If you’ll trust me.”

“How in the devil could I trust you?” The words slipped out before I’d softened them.

She didn’t seem offended. “A fair question. The most obvious answer is the reason I am here. At this present moment in time, no one trusts me. My word is as valuable as a paste diamond. You truly have nothing to lose confiding in me.” She shrugged. “My aim is not to dig into your deepest secrets, Your Grace. I have no doubt that in a fortnight or so we will part ways and never think of one another again. Tonight, my help would only be a means to an end. Your good mood ensures I have a proper evening, as planned, in a home I would not have been invited into otherwise.”

She would be a ringer in Parliament. Persuasive, and with a bridled

conviction I envied. I almost felt complimented, though I couldn't pin why or when she'd done it.

"Just for tonight," I found myself relenting.

She nodded, her eyes gleaming, and tilted her head back. "Tell me, then. How do you want to feel when you walk into that ballroom in a moment?"

How did I want to feel?

Not like this.

To start, I wished I could erase any memory of Miss Newbury and that whole event last summer.

I wanted to go back to *before*. When Father was still alive. When the future had limitless possibilities. I'd made all the right choices because he'd been there behind me, ensuring I chose the best path for myself and for the dukedom. I'd never worried things would fall apart because he was there to fix them if they did.

Dash it all, I *did* want to feel strong, as weak as that sounded. And unaffected by anyone and anything. My father walked every path like he held the world in his hands. Everyone had loved him. Respected him. I wanted *that*.

"Admired." I released the word, and the grief that followed it. "I want to feel admired."

Miss Wood's brows lifted. "Admired."

Gads, the way she said the word made it feel so childish. "Never mind."

"No—" She reached out. Almost touched my arm. "You want to be admired in front of the woman you almost married. I understand completely."

That was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to feel strong in front of someone who had made me feel incredibly weak.

Miss Wood turned thoughtful. She crossed her arms with resolve. "You want her to regret rejecting you."

I snapped my fingers. "Yes! That, exactly." Not because I'd loved her. I'd hardly known her. But because I was *someone*. Someone she'd tossed aside without knowing. Her rejection hadn't hurt. It had angered me. But later . . . later, when I sat alone in my bedchamber, the wondering filled my thoughts. Had there been something wrong with me?

Miss Newbury had agreed to our marriage for my title. The marriage was a great advantage to her. And, yet, it hadn't been enough. And I could not come to terms with the fact that the very best part of me—the dukedom—had not been enough.

Miss Wood tilted her head from side to side, seeming to consider a moment. "This is beyond the scope of our agreement, Your Grace."

"Beyond the scope?" I repeated. I had just revealed the most intimate details

—a man's feelings! How the devil had she pulled it out of me? She was a siren, for she had helped me to come to a desperate conclusion and positioned herself in yet another perfect situation for bartering.

Brilliant, clever woman. I had fully underestimated her. I should be ignited with fury for how she played me, and yet . . . she'd played me so well. I wanted to replay this little match to see how she'd done it.

"I think we can both agree I have been more than generous with you, you little minx. What more could you possibly want?"

Her eyes brightened with a little smile. "In exchange for my help, I'll want formal introductions to every titled woman in the room, whether or not they approach us this evening."

That was all? "Done."

Her brows jumped up. "Very well. I will play the part of gushing friend. You will have never in your life felt more admired."

I snorted. "I must say I am impressed how easily you can turn someone's misfortune in your own favor."

She grinned. "I learn quickly. If you want to really grate on her, you may call me Georgiana. Like we are truly friends. I shall call you . . . Well, what did *she* call you?"

A country deviant, a beautiful woman, and now a cunning friend. Miss Wood had many interesting sides to her. I found the task of unriddling her alarmingly distracting. "Miss Newbury called me Duke. Or Marlow."

She bit a finger of her glove, thinking. "Marlow. What is your given name?"

"I do not allow anyone that intimacy."

"If she called you Marlow, it will shock her to hear me call you by your given name. But that is entirely your decision."

Is that what I wanted? To shock Miss Newbury? What I really wanted was to make her see me as someone she never should have rejected. Someone strong. I supposed it couldn't hurt anything.

"Lucas. But only for tonight. And only in front of Miss Newbury. Otherwise, call me Marlow."

Miss Wood—Georgiana—nodded her understanding. Then, slowly, she laced her arm through mine. I tensed, relaxing into the feeling of the soft pressure of her hand and the warmth of her on my side as she leaned in close.

"I only just noticed how dashing you look in green, Marlow."

Her smile held me captive for the briefest moment, and I added another piece of her to the puzzle: alluring flirt.

But, deuces, if I did not mind this one bit. There was no pressure to look at her as a potential partner, for we both knew her judgment was not befitting of a

duchess. I could simply . . . enjoy her companionship. And tonight, her partnership. For the first time in a long time, I did not suppress my smirk. “Go on.”

She pinched my underarm and rolled her eyes. Then she tugged me into motion.

I was fast learning that Georgiana Wood was not one to be trifled with.



“Long walks out of doors, is that not what you said, Marlow? Rejuvenating to the spirits.” Georgiana looked from Lady Diana up at me with what I had learned was her London Season smile. It wasn’t her *true* smile by far. A politer version. A version that said, *Agree with me now, or regret it later*. “In fact, he especially loves afternoons at . . . which country estate were you telling me about this morning? Your favorite?”

We’d been playing this game around the ballroom for the past two hours. The rules were that when Georgiana trailed off, I finished her thought with the correct answer, and I made myself sound as interesting as possible. The result was her interacting pleasantly with the *ton*, and my impressing the eligible ladies. Namely, at this present moment, Lady Diana, who seemed quite interested. Exactly according to plan.

“Ah.” I pretended to think through an imaginary morning conversation with Georgiana. The estate I preferred was the one Father took us to every summer. “Tinlow Court.”

“Tinlow, yes.” Georgiana nodded as though she could picture the place in her memories. “Doesn’t the name itself just sound like a dream?”

Lady Diana looked between us. She had a long face. Angular features. Brown hair, porcelain skin, and a healthy set of teeth. Well enough for my purposes. She’d been an eager conversationalist, as had the majority of the room so far, much to Georgiana’s delight. But I was exhausted from socializing. And deucedly bad at conversation. I was starting to wonder if perhaps I’d made a mistake trying to find a wife the modern way. I could have simply pulled a name out of a jar and been done with it. I’d all but done so with Miss Newbury, though, and look how that had turned out.

I’d found Miss Newbury not long after reentering the ballroom. Dark brown hair and a slim, delicate figure. Wearing white, she looked exactly as I’d left her. Unlike her dreadful husband, shorter than I was by a whole head, though even I

had to admit he cut an intimidating figure. Last I saw him—*saved him* from a brutal attack, per the gossip papers—the man was all but bleeding out. Now, his bruises and wounds were all healed. His face a natural color. And he was grinning.

He had her tucked into his side a few arms' lengths away from us.

"You're clenching your fists, my dear, darling friend," Miss Wood whispered from my side. "And it wouldn't hurt you to smile."

Deuces, she was right. I was in a state, and for what? I did not care one whit about Miss Newbury. I had certainly never loved her. It was the *principle*. She'd made me a promise, and she'd broken it. Worse, she'd made me look like an utter fool. And that was unforgiveable.

The closer we moved to them, the heavier the stares seemed to weigh on my back.

"I hope to see you both again soon." Lady Diana curtsied. My attention snapped back to her.

"As do I," Georgiana said with that plastered, tight smile. She widened her eyes and nodded once sharply in Lady Diana's direction.

My cue. I bowed. "It would be a pleasure."

And she was off. I let out a breath of relief.

"A *pleasure*." Georgiana whispered through her teeth as we turned from them. "You, Duke, are hopeless."

"What is wrong with 'a pleasure'?"

She shook her head. "Women want to hear *more*. We want, 'I would dearly love to call upon you, and I shall count the hours!' Or, 'It was an utter joy making your acquaintance; I cannot bear to part!'"

I watched as her expression softened, her gaze faraway in romantic longings. Coldhearted, my hat! Had Sir Ronald said those things to her? If he had, he was more of an imbecile than I expected.

"I cannot lie to women. It's against my principles."

"Well, if you want one of them to marry you, you'd better give those principles a reevaluation." Her eyes grew round, brows raised. She was taking this entirely too seriously. "And stop smirking at me. Save your good humor for the next poor woman and perhaps you'll come off as charming."

A servant stopped in front of us with a tray of drinks. "Wine?"

"Yes, thank you." I handed a glass to Georgiana first, then took one for myself.

The servant turned away, offering drinks to someone else, then left.

And there she was. Out in the open.

Directly in front of us.

Looking right at me.

“Miss Newbury.” I cleared my throat, surprised, though I shouldn’t have been. I’d seen her near, but I’d somehow forgotten just *how* near. With that buffoon of a man beside her.

“Mrs. Winston, now.” Winston tucked his wife behind him. His grin vanished, replaced by an ugly scowl. My lips twitched. I again imagined what it might feel like to direct my fist into his already marred nose.

My old intended frowned and stepped around her husband. “Mar—” She stopped herself. “Your Grace.” She gave me a fleeting curtsy, and I nodded at her.

“My congratulations,” I taunted. “And what a surprise. You’ve healed up rather nicely, Winston.”

The man said nothing in return.

We stared.

And stared.

As did what felt like the entire room.

A hand laced into the crook of my arm. Voice softer than a rose, “Won’t you introduce me, Lucas?”

Georgiana looked up at me through her lashes, a sly smile on her face.

She was *perfect*.

So perfect, I nearly stumbled on my words.

“F-forgive me.” I ducked my chin in reluctant repentance only for her, then turned back. “Georgiana, may I introduce my old friends, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Winston? Winstons, a dear friend of my family, Miss Georgiana Wood.”

“How do you do, Miss Wood?” Miss Newbury—no, *Mrs. Winston*. That name would never feel right—curtseyed. Concern writ in her countenance. Perhaps, a little fear? What, did she think I’d forced Georgiana’s hand into marriage too? If only she knew, the shoe was quite firmly on the other foot.

“A pleasure.” Miss Wood looked down on them with the audacity of a queen. It was almost too much, and yet, I reveled in it. Having a partner was truly better than going it alone. Having *her* as my partner was almost gleeful. She was brilliant. She did not miss a single measure. “I have heard much about the both of you. I trust you are enjoying your evening as much as we are?”

“Yes. London is busy and exciting this time of year.” Mrs. Winston looked over my shoulder and reached out her hand. “You remember our dear friend and neighbor, Miss Eliza Ollerton?”

How could I forget her? Mousy and plain with a little button nose. She rounded us with the same look of concern, stopping at her friend’s side. “Your Grace. Miss Wood.”

“Miss Ollerton.” Georgiana looked up to me, then leaned close. “We are acquainted from last Season. Miss Ollerton and I attended many of the same parties.”

My brows lifted. Strange to think she and I were associating with the same people less than a year ago, and yet I’d had no idea she existed. “If only I had been in London then.”

I wasn’t sure what I meant by saying it, but it had the intended effect. Miss Ollerton looked to her friend and took her arm.

“If only you had. Would have saved us both a lot of trouble.” Georgiana turned skillfully toward the Winstons. “How long are you in London this Season?”

“’Til week’s end.” Mrs. Winston glanced to her husband. “We prefer the country, but I—I have never visited London during the Season before.”

Ah. I’d almost forgotten. How desperately she’d wanted to go.

“Is that so?” Miss Wood stepped a mite closer, her full wine glass sloshing lazily in her hand. She was barely taller than Mrs. Winston, but something about her was . . . intimidating.

I marveled at her.

And then she said, “What a lovely dress.”

Mrs. Winston smoothed her skirts. She sensed it too. They all did. “Thank you. We ought to be going, hadn’t we, Charlie?”

I looked to Mrs. Winston, saw her cowering. She would never have risen to the duty. She was too frivolous. Too fickle. I supposed I ought to thank *him* for saving me from a terrible mistake.

Nods were given, and Winston again pulled her to his side. He made to turn, but it was as though Miss Wood had been waiting for this precise moment, for she made the opposite turn.

The entire room collectively gasped as Georgiana’s wineglass—

“Ros!” Miss Ollerton cried. “Heavens, I’m so sorry. Do forgive me. Look at this mess.”

A heavy scent of wine permeated the space.

Georgiana’s lips had parted. Her hand dripped with red liquid. Wine, everywhere. Well . . . everywhere but on Mrs. Winston.

The majority of the liquid had poured down poor Miss Ollerton’s dress. The foolish woman had saved her friend.

“Dear me. I stepped right into that,” she said, as though she’d done so on accident.

“Forgive me,” Georgiana said through her teeth as Winston and several other

gentlemen thrust their handkerchiefs at Miss Ollerton. "I owe you a thousand apologies."

"No mind, Miss Wood. I know it has been a hard past year for you." Miss Ollerton curtsied, and the Winstons quickly ushered her away.

"A hard year?" Miss Wood muttered, hands still outstretched with her dripping glass.

I knew what she'd done. What she'd really intended. It was mean and cruel, but she'd done it for me. To vindicate me.

"Smile, Miss Wood. Everyone is watching."

She grinned fully then as I took out my handkerchief and handed it to her in exchange for her now near-empty glass. We moved to a quiet corner, and I placed her glass and mine on a nearby table while she removed and dried her gloves as best she could.

"It turns out I've lost my touch. I cannot even properly wine a lady's dress."

I bit back my grin. It was the most devilish thing to say, but also, in some twisted way, the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me. "I think your efforts still had the intended effect."

"You think so?" She seemed almost . . . hopeful. "For a man once besotted by her, you seemed rather unaffected."

"Well, in truth—and I think you deserve the truth after that—" I smirked. "We'd only met once before I offered for her. And that man, Mr. Winston? She fell in love with him during our engagement."

Her hands stilled. "Well, that sounds . . . awful. You must've felt—"

"Angry." I swallowed, thinking back to all I'd done. My demands and abuses from past actions. I found I did not want to tell her. I did not want Georgiana to think ill of me, despite the reality that she should. She should find my actions incredibly appalling. She should fear me, as the Winstons did. "Things did not end well between us."

Georgiana tilted her head and smiled. "What did you do?"

She'd look at me differently if I told her. That smile would falter. Fear would fill her eyes. But I'd done it. So I'd own to it. "I tried to force her hand. Told her I'd ruin her Mr. Winston's life and prospects if she did not marry *me* instead. Her father wouldn't hear of it. Made me a very nice deal in exchange for releasing her."

Georgiana's smile *did* falter. But not with fear. She seemed, were it possible, even more curious than before. "A fortunate woman, Mrs. Winston, to have had her father there to save her."

"What just happened?" Maggie seethed as she stormed toward us. Her eyes widened when she saw Georgiana's gloves.

“Just having a friendly conversation with the Winstons and company.” I looked to Georgiana, who returned my smirk.

She turned to Georgiana. “What on earth did you do?”

“Margaret,” I warned her. She might not like Georgiana, but she would not speak to her with such a tone. Not anymore.

“I think I made an error in judgment,” Georgiana said, unaffected by Maggie’s clear derision.

Deuces, why did *I* care what Maggie thought? “Miss Wood attempted to pour wine down the new Mrs. Winston’s gown.”

Georgiana held up her red-stained gloves. “Unfortunately I wine-d an innocent instead.”

Maggie looked between us like we were children caught with muddy boots and berry-stained fingers. I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing. She turned to Georgiana with wide eyes. “Why on earth would you do such a thing?”

“I did not mean to.” Georgiana looked heavenward. “*Miss Ollerton* stepped between us at the exact moment—”

“Why would you attempt to wine Mrs. Winston in the first place?” Maggie’s voice rose, so she cleared her throat and looked round, smiling at the nosy eyes behind us.

Georgiana reared back with a look that said, *Isn’t it obvious?*

I shrugged.

She sighed, tugging her stained gloves back on regretfully. When at last she spoke, her voice came out calm and sure. “Because she hurt Marlow. And that is what friends do.”

Maggie seemed surprised by her answer. Her gaze found mine and hung there. Measuring. As though, perhaps, she’d missed something.

Just then, a servant announced dinner.

Georgiana looked down at her gloves, and I wished I had another pair to give her.

Maggie sighed. “You are as mad as they say, Miss Wood.”

“She is *honest*—” I started to argue.

Maggie raised an impatient hand and cut me off, her attention still on Georgiana. “But I think I should very much like to be your friend. Come, sit near me.”



Dinner passed by in a blur of conversation as did the subsequent dancing where Mother forced me into the company of the most eligible women in the room.

In short, by the end of the night, I was exhausted and foul-tempered, and Georgiana had won over both of my cousins, my mother, and half the *ton*.

“Lady Jersey is a dear friend of mine!” Maggie was saying as they walked arm in arm out of the house and toward the waiting carriage. “I shall have to introduce you. Of course, I cannot promise anything, but if we catch her on a good day . . .”

Georgiana had an eye set toward Almack’s, did she?

Gabriel helped them both into the cabin and practically jumped inside. He leaned back on his bench and closed his eyes. The night was still early for him. He’d take his own carriage to White’s and play cards well into the morning.

“I see now why our cousin befriended you,” Maggie told her. “You aren’t at all like they paint you in the papers. And . . . I am sorry for how I treated you earlier.”

Georgiana was beaming. “You don’t have to say that.”

“I mean it,” Maggie said. “I like you. No one will speak an ill word about you while we are together. I promise.”

“Did you meet anyone *you* liked in particular?” Georgiana turned to me with a little smile lifting her lips. A smile that begged for another compliment.

I had no intention of giving her the satisfaction of a real response. “Did *you*?”

“So sweet that he values your opinion,” Maggie said to her, and Georgiana grinned, knowing full well I did not.

Georgiana continued, “I thought Lady Diana was beautiful. You ought to call upon her tomorrow. Then, perhaps Hyde Park next? Where we all can walk and talk together.”

Ah. Another of her outings. She wanted Hyde Park at the fashionable hour. She was finding the social success she sought, and I had no doubt, with my aid, she’d be back in the *ton*’s good graces in a fortnight. Regrettably, she was right. Best to get both of her remaining outings over and done with as quickly as we could so I could focus on business.

“Why not skip the call and walk Hyde Park tomorrow, then?”

Georgiana leaned back in her seat and mulled it over. “A call will be brief, a walk more intimate. Reserved for if you’re feeling more confident about her. Let’s wait a few days.”

I leaned back too. Smart for Georgiana to draw the outings out. Doing so was

in her own best interests, for our names would be entwined for a longer period of time.

A call or a walk, neither would make much of a difference in my decision. Tonight had been a disappointment for me. I'd met dozens of women, the most qualified among them for the dukedom clearly Lady Diana. And, yet, I could not force myself to feel enthusiastic toward any of them.

Lady Diana was pretty, but not any prettier than the rest. And she had said she was "not opposed to, though not overly fond of" pets, which in a polite lady's terms meant that she hated them. I did not.

"Do you feel confident enough in Lady Diana to call upon her at all?" Maggie asked.

Gabriel's eyes opened to slits under furrowed brows.

I considered ignoring her question. My feelings were none of her business, nor were they Georgiana's or Gabriel's. Though, I supposed, whoever I chose would become a direct part of my cousins' lives, considering how often they visited. I raked a hand down my face. My knee started to bounce. Maggie was the closest thing I had to a sister. Would it be all that bad to have her opinion?

"In truth, my first impression of Lady Diana was not encouraging."

"Surely you don't mean that." Maggie crossed her arms. "Lady Diana is beautiful and respected and amply accomplished."

Georgiana nodded her agreement. "First impressions are dangerous things. You cannot judge her based on a single meeting. Do you not remember ours? And look at us now."

"Were you dreadful to him?" Maggie laughed.

Georgiana's eyes locked with mine, and my leg stilled. It was as though, together, we remembered.

"He actually came to call upon my brother." She watched me as she spoke. "And I had been reading in the barn like an animal. A country girl to the core. When I came into the house, I still had straw in my hair, but he greeted me all the same. I must have smelled like horse manure."

"You did," I told her. But the truth was, I hadn't really noticed. I'd been so preoccupied with getting my ring back. I did remember the straw in her hair and a tint of dust on her face and her clothes. When I thought back on that meeting, what I remembered most was how angry I'd felt. How wronged I'd been by Gabriel. I'd felt exhausted.

I hadn't truly noticed Georgiana at all.

"And yet, here we are," she said. "Friends. You'd do well to remember that sometimes what you see at a glance is not always the full picture. For better or worse."

By that logic, I could certainly allow a measure of understanding for an awkward first introduction, but what about the fundamentals? Did those change based upon one's mood?

"I am ill-advised to think Lady Diana's temperament might change how she feels about keeping a pet indoors, for which she is not at all keen, and yet I am."

A little crease formed between Georgiana's brows. The same she'd procured when I'd told her about my engagement with Miss Newbury, and when her wine had missed its intended target.

I was beginning to feel rather fond of that crease.

It stayed as she said, "Perhaps she was frightfully nervous. Perhaps she'd not slept well, or hadn't eaten, or had just argued with her mother."

Maggie nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe her cat had just clawed her favorite chair."

Georgiana laughed. "Precisely!" Her eyes widened at me. "We must know for certain. Which is why you'll call upon her tomorrow. And we'll discuss Hyde Park soon."

I leaned my head back, for no matter what I said, with these two women one thing had become apparent: No matter which choice I made, I was wrong. And for once, I did not feel like having the final say.

They chattered on and left me to my thoughts, which were as scattered as the crowd we'd left at the Waymonts'. No matter what Maggie or Georgiana said, I could not deny my disappointment with Lady Diana, though I could not quite place why I did not feel excited. The dukedom needed someone like her—strong, opinionated, intelligent, and a sure leader. But the woman could have been more amiable! She could have at least *tried* to tell me what I wanted to hear. Instead, I'd felt irritated, and not in the way Georgiana made me feel. Georgiana irked me, but to humor. She bothered me, but predictably so. In a way that was less frustrating, more I wanted to irk her right back.

I was surprised when the carriage came to a stop a few doors down from her brother's apartment. So was she.

Her apartment door was wide open. A carriage was parked directly in front of it, being loaded with trunks by lantern light. It looked as though . . . she was leaving.

I stepped down, turning to help her, but she brushed past me.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked. Her eyes were round, lips parted. "Sir, these are my trunks. Where is my brother?"

Where is my ring? These people could not leave without first giving me my ring! "I will find him," I said, stepping forward. I was not even halfway to the door when Mr. Wood exited the apartment.

The man was in a bad way. Hair a mess, eyes bloodshot even under the lantern light. The top few buttons of his waistcoat were undone. He had not struck me as anything but proper, but perhaps, as Miss Wood had lectured, first impressions were not always as they seemed.

“Mr. Wood,” I called.

“Georgiana!” He seemed to either not have heard me or was blatantly disregarding me. “I’m so sorry. Amelia is unwell, and we must leave at once.”

“Peter,” she whispered, her voice a mixture of surprise and evident confusion, as she grasped his arms. “What has happened?”

“She fell.” He looked near to crying, and I wanted to look away—I should—but I had to know. “I received a letter a few hours ago. She fell hard on the stairs.”

Georgiana gasped. “And the baby?”

He swallowed hard. “Dr. Bennett said the baby is well, but how can we be sure? What if he’s wrong, Georgiana?”

“Oh, Peter,” Georgiana breathed, leaning in to her brother.

“We must go to her. I am so sorry, but I have to see her. I have to ensure she’s resting, and then dismiss whoever let her walk the stairs alone.”

Georgiana nodded, stepping back. “But I—” She looked over at me, and I felt oddly out of place. Oddly unsure of what to do or say, and I was *never* unsure.

We had plans. She had my ring. And though I could not fully understand the desperation Mr. Wood must be feeling, I envied him for it all the same. To be tied to and loyal to one person above all. I could not blame the man for rushing home.

I only wished I had put such a circumstance in the contract.

“Is everything well?” Maggie asked from the carriage. She stepped down alone. “Tell me you are not actually leaving so soon.”

Georgiana hung her head and frowned. “My sister-in-law has had an accident. And my brother is— It seems we must return home and ensure her well-being.”

“We shall try to return before the Season wanes,” Mr. Wood said to both Maggie and me.

But what if they didn’t?

“Try? I do not like that word one bit. We’ve made plans.” Maggie hooked her arm through Georgiana’s. “We must do something, Your Grace. What can we do to help?”

“That is everything, sir,” a servant said to Mr. Wood, and he looked more anxious than ever.

“Forgive me,” Mr. Wood said, “but we must go.”

“I understand *your* plight, sir, but surely your sister can have no reason to hurry off,” Maggie argued. Only a woman of her station would feel so bold. She looked to me. “We have plenty of rooms at Ashburn Abbey, do we not?”

My thoughts swirled in a panic. We did. She was clearly insinuating I give one of those rooms to Georgiana, but that seemed unwise for many reasons. The first being that it would look questionable to the *ton*. I cleared my throat. “I worry—”

“There would be rumors,” Georgiana finished my thought.

Sensible woman. “That, yes.”

“Not if she was a guest of *mine*,” Maggie looked among us. “Mr. Wood, would you be opposed?”

“You’ve only just met,” Mr. Wood said to Georgiana.

This is all happening very fast, I thought. To have her by my side on a few occasions was one thing, but to have the woman in my home? Dining with me? It was well above what we’d agreed to. There would be no question our family had accepted her. For better or for worse.

“But the duke is her *dear* friend,” Maggie reminded him firmly. I certainly wasn’t acting like it, was I? “And you can meet my husband.” She grinned at Georgiana. “He’s a bit of a recluse.”

What could I say? “*No, actually, I refuse to help my friend in her time of need.*” Clearly, Maggie *did* accept her, even after recognizing her name from the papers. She had befriended her under the assumption that I, too, accepted her. That was all it took, just as Georgiana had imagined. If tonight hadn’t already been enough, with my companionship *and* Maggie’s, Georgiana would be back in the *ton*’s good graces by morning.

She’d also be in my home.

Which meant I would also have the ring in my home. Would have it back as planned. We would not have to delay our arrangement. We could ensure things moved swiftly along, and then I could send her on her merry way back to Hampshire.

Why, then, did I hesitate?

“Just for a short time, and we can make arrangements for her if your return trip is truly delayed, Mr. Wood. It’s no trouble at all, is it, Marlow?” Maggie released Georgiana and squeezed my arm.

Georgiana looked to me as though to seek my permission.

I felt less in control by the second. “No trouble,” I muttered, still half in shock at the turn of events.

“Switch her things over,” Mr. Wood instructed his servants. “And inform

Jane. Move her to Ashburn Abbey. Quickly.”

The poor men sighed as they worked in the darkness to unload. To their credit, they made quick work of it. Just long enough for Georgiana to have a proper conversation with her brother, and for me to assure him she’d be under my protection and kept well.

“I know this isn’t ideal,” he said to me as the ladies returned to the carriage. “And not according to plan. But I appreciate your kindness nonetheless.”

I nodded. “I am surprised you agreed. What with how worried you were over her this evening.” He eyed me like he was trying to gauge my level of sarcasm, so I added, “My cousin enjoys her company. She will see to her every need. And my mother . . .” My mother would likely run herself to the ground accommodating her just to stay busy. “My mother will be delighted to have another young lady in the house.”

Mr. Wood’s jaw popped. He did not trust me, but what choice did he have? “Thank you. She takes care of herself, but after what happened with Sir Ronald, I have learned that she is quite fragile.”

Georgiana, fragile? I wasn’t sure I agreed. “Safe travels home to your wife, Mr. Wood.”

He nodded once, his eyes tracking his sister. Torn, I could only imagine, between two women he loved very dearly.

What must it feel like, to love so deeply you’d abandon your family with strangers?

“Come along, Marlow, the night is young yet!” Maggie called, and I turned to follow them into the carriage.

I hadn’t had a guest at Ashburn Abbey in ages. Not since before Father died, and even then, not a woman. I had routines, comforts that could be upended by a stranger in my house.

Deuces, I was the Duke of Marlow! It was *my* house.

My rules.

I would live my life as usual, and Georgiana would simply have to adjust.

Chapter Ten

GEORGIANA

The carriage ride across London went by in a flash with Maggie at my side. Half of my mind heard every word she said, enough for me to nod my head where appropriate, but the other half was still lost in the whirlwind of the past twenty minutes.

Peter was gone—the apartment emptied again—and I was in London alone with the duke and his family. This turn of events would either work brilliantly in my favor or ruin me all over again.

Gabriel seemed as pleased as Maggie to have my company. “Brilliant!” he’d said, when Maggie had explained the whole of it.

Marlow, however, had sat silent and still since we’d left. Maggie’s insistence that I stay at Ashburn Abbey had made refusing her offer seem rude, and in truth, the duke and I both needed to see this arrangement through.

He’d obviously felt the same. He wanted his ring back enough to comply.

I wondered if he was angry with this turn of events, but his expression gave nothing away, not the slightest hint of annoyance or care. It was maddening how he could keep his features so relaxed and still. Those few glimpses I’d caught when he actually let down his guard were the most interesting of all, like peering into a hidden passageway. I wished he’d tell me how he felt right now.

Perhaps the truth was, regardless of how well our first outing had gone, regardless of how I’d come to his aid, he truly did not care about me—not my reputation nor my well-being—at all. Perhaps I was like a fly buzzing in and out of his orbit, of little more importance than the dirt beneath his boots.

In that case, I’d take his generosity while I could, and I’d stretch it like dough until we broke apart. I had his time, his friendship, and now his home, and I would enjoy every bit of all of them. I had every right, seeing as how his ring was still in my possession, and we had made a rather fair deal over the matter.

Still, I worried for Peter. Should I have left with him? He had Amelia, but if something was wrong with her or the baby, who did Peter have to take care of *him*?

I would write this evening to Amelia. Jane and I could leave at any time. It would not be the safest or smartest idea to travel alone with my maid, but I had enough money with me to take the mail coach, and we'd endure the journey. This opportunity with the duke was my only chance to regain life in Society. I could not give it up unless things were truly dire at home. And for that, I would simply have to trust Amelia to tell me the truth.

She was not the sort to ever ask for help for herself, but for Peter? She would tell me if he needed me.

The carriage slowed, and I looked out my window as we approached. A stately rectangular house of stone stood grand and looming in the clouded darkness of night, lit by lanterns, and framed by gardens and greenery.

It looked like a painting.

The carriage rolled to a stop. A young, stalwart footman opened the carriage door and stepped back as we descended.

I'd visited many grand houses beyond my own, Sir Ronald's Lakeshire Park among them. But this felt different. This view made my heart speed up.

The rolled gravel crunched beneath my slippers. The duke led us to the tall, heavy front door, propped open by another servant, and Maggie and Gabriel walked inside with as much ease as though they, like him, were coming home.

I hesitated in the doorway, looking over my shoulder at the retreating carriage and horses, with no alternative but to step inside.

I took one step on the polished, checkered marble floor that stretched out in the open entry, and looked up.

The sight took my breath.

Gold-trimmed walls. Exotic plants heavy with large leaves pushed up against corners. Colorful porcelain vases held full, fragrant flowers on every table, Grecian busts stood atop pillars on the far wall with cream carpets rolled out to greet them, and ornate plaster molding crowned a high ceiling, rising two floors with a sparkling chandelier at the center.

I'd never seen anything like it. And this was his *home*.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Maggie called back my attention from several paces ahead.

I blinked out of my trance, hurrying toward her as the men shrugged out of their coats and handed them to the footman. "Yes," I breathed. Beautiful did not seem quite strong enough a word.

The duke glanced over his shoulder at me, but I could not read him. I knew he lived well, but it was still strange equating *him* with *this*.

"I'm to bed," he said to no one in particular.

"Old grump," Gabriel murmured. He'd already paced halfway up the grand

stairway. "I'm changing, then to White's. Won't you join me for once?"

"And watch you gamble away half your allowance? No, thank you," the duke said.

Maggie led me toward the stairs. Toward *him*. "And what of Miss Wood? Your *guest*?"

More time with the duke was the last thing I wanted tonight. It was already too much being in his home.

"I am accustomed to his moods," I said loud enough for him to hear. "Let him sleep so we have half a chance at a good one in the morning."

Maggie grasped my arm and leaned forward, laughing. "Too true, isn't it?" Even Gabriel stopped to throw back a grin.

The duke continued his ascent without a word.

Maggie walked me to my room, which was a few doors down from hers. While Jane worked quickly to ready my room for the night, Maggie gave me a brief tour of the surrounding rooms, the most interesting being a large library I could not wait to explore tomorrow. We met the duchess in the hall, and she told me how pleased she was to have me stay. I hoped she meant it.

I liked Maggie. She was genuine and *fun*. I found I wanted her friendship, her *true* friendship, and felt a pang of guilt for having stolen her attention under false pretenses.

If she knew the truth—that the duke and I were barely acquaintances—what, then, would she think of me?

He'd promised not to divulge our contract. Promised to follow it.

But what would Maggie think after our time was over, and the duke no longer invited me out? If I wrote to her, would she write me back?

Alone in my room, I tucked the ring in its little box safely in the bottom of the trunk at the foot of my bed. I lay in bed that night, my opposing feelings at war—sorrow at all I'd lost, but also joy at the prospect of what I might gain; anxiety from being surrounded by strangers, but excitement for potential new friends; despair swiftly turning into hope. My life had completely transformed. If anyone came to call upon me after tonight's outing at Drury Lane, they'd be directed to the Duke of Marlow's house, where I was currently staying. Word would get around.

Nights like tonight could become *normal* again.

And this was only the beginning.

Chapter Eleven

MARLOW

My butler's hands were shaking.

The man was the most composed, most rigid servant in all of England. I had never seen a single bead of sweat upon his brow. But here he stood in front of my desk, encapsulated by bright beams of early afternoon sunlight, mumbling—

"I will understand if Your G-Grace would prefer I remained . . . if I did *not* ask . . ."

I rubbed my temples. Something was wrong with him, and I hadn't the patience to wait him out. My cat, Cleo, nestled between my boots, purring. She flicked her tail back and forth, and I swear the motion kept me from losing my temper. "Speak, Toole."

"You have my word, it would have no effect on my work. No change to my loyalty as the woman is the most loyal to the family and to the Crown."

The *woman*? "What are you saying? Plainly, for I haven't the time." I needed to meet with my steward in a half hour, and I still hadn't gone through the stack of papers he'd sent last week. I had risen to my usual routine—tea in my room, an hour of fencing, then straight to work—but somehow, I was already behind.

"I wish to ask for her hand in marriage, Your Grace. She is a childhood friend and someone I have loved all my life. Her husband has died, and she is left with nothing. I want to look after her."

My butler wanted to marry? Of all the ridiculous ideas. Did I not keep him busy enough? Where the devil did he plan to live? I rubbed an ache in my right arm, particularly sore after this morning's fencing.

"Does she have children?"

"No, Your Grace."

"Well, at least there's that comfort."

Flick, flick. Cleo's thick tail sounded on my boots.

Toole wrung his hands further into oblivion.

I blew out a breath. He was a good man. Trustworthy and loyal. But there was a reason servants oughtn't to marry. It took away from their labor. It

distracted them. I'd hired Toole because I thought we'd work together forever, and now he wanted a family besides?

"This is unexpected."

"Forgive me, Your Grace. I never thought I'd see her again. Indeed, it was my mother who brought her predicament to my attention. We've met since, she and I, and the feelings are still there. I would not ask your permission for any other woman on this earth. To me, she is perfect. Would you allow it?"

"Toole, I worry that the woman is taking advantage of you. She married another, and now is stranded, and frankly, sounds far beneath you. Does she not have family she can turn to?"

He shifted his feet. "I do not doubt her intentions. We have a shared past, one that I feel shameful to admit to. I made her promises back then that I was too cowardly to keep. I-I should have been more caring. More forward in my intentions. I lost her then. With your permission, I do not want to lose her a second time."

Toole fancied himself in love, did he? He certainly seemed determined. "While I understand your desire to wed"—no, actually, I didn't, but I wanted to keep my butler—"my primary responsibility is to the dukedom and the well-being of the estate. I will have to consider your request."

He nodded. "Of course, Your Grace. Your consideration is much appreciated."

I did not have to consider at all—his was a terrible choice. I couldn't let my butler *marry*. I needed his full attention here.

"If there's nothing else?"

"No, no. Nothing else." He bowed, hesitant to leave, as though perhaps he had something more to say.

My wooden chair creaked as I leaned back, considering this sudden shift in character. Love made people act quite strange, if love was what he was admitting to. I knew little of the subject. I'd felt drawn to certain women in my life. Desired them, certainly. But loved? I wasn't sure I'd ever allow another person that much hold over me.

Love was not something you could plan, and therefore, it was irrelevant. Love could not build a kingdom or give thousands of people livelihoods or vote in Parliament.

Toole had pledged his life to service, and look what love was doing to *him*.

I waved him off as he took his leave, but before the door had closed, a hand caught it, thrusting it back open. "Cousin."

Gabriel's cherubic countenance filled my doorway. I drew in what I hoped would prove a patient breath and reached down to pat Cleo's fluffy head.

“What now?”

“What can you do for me? Well, that’s the thing, isn’t it?” He unbuttoned his jacket and took the seat opposite me. “I’ll get straight to it. I need a little loan.”

After five seconds of silent staring, I realized he was serious. “No. Get out.” How dare the little weasel ask for *more* than the exorbitant sum I was already gifting him out of pure generosity of heart?

“Hear me out. I am serious this time—”

“Gabriel, I am overworked and overspent, and I do not have time—”

“What I am doing will *change things* for me, and for our family—”

“—for your ridiculous notions that will no doubt—”

“—and I’ve worked so hard—”

“—lead the family to ruin.”

“—if you’ll just *trust me*.” He took a long, serious breath. “Just this once.”

If only I had not trusted his whims over and over and over again for the past five years, dumping money into his frivolous investment schemes and business ideas. If he wanted me to take him seriously, he ought to drink less and do more for the family. Take a heap off *my* plate.

“No. That is final.”

“*Please*, Marlow. I cannot do this without you behind me.”

“You shall have to find another way. Toole!”

Gabriel gritted his teeth. His jaw tensed. “Why not?”

I stared hard at him. He did not truly wish to know what I thought. Not even Cleo could calm *that* rage.

“One last loan,” he pleaded. By the look on his face, for once it actually cost what was left of his pride to beg.

Toole popped his head back through the door. “Your Grace, you are needed in the drawing room urgently. Her Grace insists.”

I rubbed my face with both hands. “I am not available for calls. Please take Mr. Brennan instead.”

Gabriel frowned.

“She insists, Your Grace.” Toole stepped back, holding the door open.

Which was worse—Gabriel’s begging or Mother’s urgent-but-not-truly-urgent request? I had no time nor patience for either. But I would rather not add my mother’s wrath to my already suffocating day. Both fists thudded on my desk, and I pushed up to rise. Cleo bounded from the room. A quick moment was all I could spare.

“Marlow.” Gabriel started to follow. “What do you say?”

“Now is not the time, Cousin.”

“It has to be, or I will lose this opportunity. Please.”

I waved him off with a hand, striding around the corner and all the way down to the drawing room, where the double doors were open fully.

“There he is!” Mother had been watching for me. She did not look particularly bothered, but she was an expert at hiding her feelings. She had taught me well.

Georgiana sat between her and Maggie on the settee wearing a faded green muslin. Blonde curls pinned high atop her head, and that same Society smile turning her lips. I’d only known her for a short time, and yet, I could already see it on her face—careful stoicism. The rigid way she sat. Something was indeed amiss.

“Good afternoon,” I greeted them.

Lady Jersey and her sister-in-law sat opposite them, eyeing me with clear interest. “Lady Jersey. Mrs. Marcus. How are your families?” We’d seen them briefly last evening, and I wondered what had prompted them to come. Georgiana, perhaps?

“All well, thank you, Your Grace.” Lady Jersey looked back to Georgiana and Mother. “But we are eager to hear more about yours.” Both women seemed keen to engage her in conversation.

But my mother was unusually reticent. “Sit, Your Grace. Join us for tea, won’t you?”

“I have a meeting in half an hour.”

“Sit.” The only indication my mother gave of the serious nature of her intentions was the slightest tremor in her throat. So, I obliged her. I took the oversized chair beside her settee.

Georgiana took an empty teacup from the cart. “May I?” she asked, and I grunted my approval as I started to fill a plate. Small sandwiches with ham and cheese, early strawberries from the hothouse, and cakes. “Sugar?” she asked.

“No,” I replied, taking the cup from her. I liked my tea with just a dash of cream. I helped myself, and my mother frowned. I supposed I was acting a bit the heathen. “Thank you.”

Georgiana lifted her teacup to her lips to hide what I imagined was a laugh at my frustration.

She looked different. Brighter. Was it her hair? A new face cream or rouge? I could not account for the change, and it bothered me to distraction. Something about her was so *familiar* now.

And I rather liked watching the crease on her cheeks appear when she smiled.

Maggie cleared her throat and drew my attention. She stared hard at me and widened her eyes with an obvious *Are you unwell?* as she’d done a hundred

times when I was in a particular mood. It meant, *You are acting strange. Be pleasant.*

I did my best to oblige by frowning less.

“The Waymonts’ party was a success, was it not?” Lady Jersey asked the room. The women murmured varying degrees of agreement. “Your Grace?”

“Very diverting,” I added, taking a bite of sandwich. I hadn’t eaten since early morning, and fencing had sparked an appetite in me.

“I did not see you dance all night.”

I frowned. I supposed I hadn’t, busy as I was introducing Georgiana to the masses. “I was more social than usual in other regards.”

“I overheard many disappointed young ladies.”

Deuces, what did they want from me? Talking or dancing or some undisclosed combination of both? “I am sorry to hear it. I shall . . . have to dance more in the future.”

Georgiana’s eyes flicked to mine with evident humor. Was I *that* obvious? Could she tell I didn’t mean it?

Lady Jersey’s smile was all pride for having my assurances. “I shall tell them. There is much excitement having you here this year. Even with your . . . friend.”

“Miss Wood is very excited for him as well.” Mother set down her teacup, a tight smile splitting her features. “She is a good friend to help him find a suitable match.”

Lady Jersey looked between us with interest. “Indeed.”

Georgiana said nothing. Only smiled sweetly at them. “We are glad to hear it. Happy to see you, Your Grace. And we understand how busy your day must be.” She rose from her seat. “We hope to see you all again soon.”

Setting aside our teacups, I rose alongside my family and Georgiana and offered a bow. Mother followed our guests to the door, and we again took our seats.

“What the devil was that about?” I asked Maggie.

She sighed. “Just you wait.”

I searched Georgiana’s face for any clues, but she decidedly avoided my gaze as she said, “It appears we’ve made a grand miscalculation, you and I.”

Well, that did not sound good. “How so?”

The tall front door clanked closed, and with heavy steps, Mother strode across the room, voice shrill, “What on earth were you two thinking?”

I looked to Maggie for any sign, but her head was bowed. Georgiana sat in silence.

“Beg pardon?” I swallowed my last bite of sandwich.

Mother stopped above us, pointing her finger between Georgiana and me. “Did you lie to me? Is there something between the two of you?”

“No, Your Grace.” Georgiana, already sitting at the edge of her seat, straightened, semi-horrified. “We made an error in judgment.”

What had we done? Had I even been part of it? I’d gone straight to bed last night.

“My son does not make *errors* in judgment.” Mother’s voice was ice. Commanding. “Everything was set until you arrived. Marlow, she must go. She is in the way.”

Georgiana’s lips parted, her cleverness subdued in the face of the duchess, who sat in Lady Jersey’s abandoned seat, huffing. I had learned long ago that when a woman’s emotions were high, it was best not to rise to them or else risk elevating them even further.

I took a solemn sip of my tea. And disregarded my own instincts. “She will not go.”

Georgiana looked to me with surprise.

Mother stood again. “She *must*! Her presence is threatening to all your prospects after the way you flaunted her about at the Waymonts’!”

Flaunted her? Of all the ridiculous notions. “We made simple introductions.”

“Allegedly, it came across quite clearly that the two of you share a rather intimate acquaintance. Every caller has said you were grinning from ear to ear. Laughing together. Reminiscing! And that business with Mrs. Winston and wine? Your little friend spilt her drink all over a guest!”

“*Allegedly*,” Maggie muttered, and she and Georgiana exchanged a glance. I could’ve sworn Georgiana’s lips twitched ever so slightly, but she managed to stay contrite.

So, we’d enjoyed the night a little *too* much. Perhaps we’d laughed a little too loudly. Clung a little too closely. Thinking back, it might not have been the wisest decision to allow my future prospects to see Georgiana as my partner for the evening. Circumstances with certain guests had required improvisation. The alternative had been leaving altogether, and who could say that wouldn’t have caused even more questions?

No, Georgiana *had* to stay, else I would not have my ring. And I needed it to entice a wife and secure the future of the dukedom. The ring was a symbol of health and prosperity for our family. With it in hand, everything would come together just as it should.

“I am the Duke of Marlow. I have made my judgment on Miss Wood. We are friends, and I will not throw her out before her already short time here expires.”

Georgiana chewed on her lip, evidently thinking through her own response to

my mother's reaction. Her clear eyes flicked to mine. "Let us go out again together with a new aim in mind. We can prove them all wrong."

Was that so?

"Marlow must be seen out alone," Mother argued.

Georgiana shook her head. "You will only have them wondering where I am. If I am present but mingling with the ladies, I can earn their confidences and better help guide the duke in making his choice."

"I agree," Maggie said, sitting up straighter. "I can mingle with her. Ensure the proper assumptions are being whispered."

"And what, pray tell, shall I be doing?" I asked them.

Georgiana waved a hand in my direction. "Walking a few paces behind with Lady Diana on your arm." No hesitation. Only quick thinking.

"Must it be her?" I asked with a sigh.

"If you seek a love match, we could reconsider—"

"No," I cut her off. "I relent."

Mother blinked between us. "Where do you suggest?"

Again, Georgiana did not hesitate. "Drury Lane."

The theater would be bustling with all the elite. Eyes everywhere. It fit her desires perfectly. We were all playing into her hand like fools.

Mother considered a moment, then she turned to me. "You'll have to call upon Lady Diana straightaway and extend the invitation."

I gulped down the rest of my tea. "As I've said, I have a meeting."

She ushered me to stand. "Hurry off, then. It won't take long. And you, Miss Wood, can accompany Margaret to a few houses as well. Get word out that you, too, are looking for a match with the duke's blessing."

"A . . . a what?" Georgiana blanched, and something in my chest hardened. That hadn't been the plan. Not by far. "Your Grace, with all respect—"

"I know just who to visit," Maggie said, standing. "Mrs. Johns is *the* matchmaker of the ton. She knows every eligible gentleman worth his snuff. We shan't be gone long. Grab your bonnet!"

"But I have no interest whatsoever—"

Maggie drew her up from her seat. "Of course you do! You must marry eventually, so why not incite their interest now? I'll have Toole call for the carriage, and Marlow can take the gig!"

Georgiana clasped her hands together. The crease between her brows returned. "But, I—"

"Nonsense!" Maggie turned her toward the door, and in a flutter of skirts, they were off.

I watched the empty doorway until the foyer grew quiet.

For once, I regretted the silence.

I thought back on my morning—of all that had transpired in the space of only a few hours—and felt the weight of it settle heavily upon my shoulders. Toole, I could manage. Gabriel—I wasn't so sure. I needed to talk with him. Perhaps over dinner at White's later this evening. He was angry with me. He often was. But this time felt different. This time felt like a shift between us, causing a break that might not easily be mended, and I hadn't the wisdom to decipher a way forward. Father always seemed to know exactly what to say and how to say it, and I . . . I was not him.

And then this business with Lady Diana. I felt little urgency, though I knew I should encourage her. For the dukedom.

I thought of last evening with Georgiana and fought a smile. How had we managed to not only scheme the *ton* into believing our friendship but an intimate one at that? It hadn't all felt like a pretense. Neither had seeing her this morning.

"Thank heavens for that." Mother settled back in her seat. "You'll need your hat."

I placed my empty cup on the tea tray. "Mother, I do not have time for this. Any of it."

Mother took a deliberate sip. "There will *never* be enough time, Marlow. We must make time for important things, and marriage is perhaps the most important of them all."

"On the contrary, an heir is the most important."

She nodded. "Either way, Lady Diana is a worthy choice."

And, so, to Lady Diana I went.

Chapter Twelve

GEORGIANA

Contrary to this year, my first Season had felt like a dream.

Peter had touted me around proudly. I'd met many handsome, eligible gentlemen, but I'd never felt nervous because I believed my future was secure. The only man I'd felt like I needed to impress was Sir Ronald. Indeed, I hadn't given a second thought to any other male acquaintance no matter how often we'd danced or dined together.

Mrs. Johns remembered them all.

Her memory was like magic, her light-brown eyes wise and thoughtful. When Maggie had introduced us, to my utter astonishment, she'd instantly recognized me.

"Ah, Miss Wood. What a surprise you've graced us again this Season with how your summer fared in the country."

She was not one to mince words.

"Only for a short time this year," I'd managed.

"Yes, but in excellent company. Once again, you have tongues wagging. To what do I owe this great pleasure?"

Maggie leaned forward. "The duke would like to help Miss Wood make a fortuitous match, and we had hoped you might have advice on the matter."

"Advice on . . . to whom she might set her cap?" Mrs. Johns's lips curled into a smile. "How intriguing. Do you mean to tell me that the whispers are *untrue*? That the duke is not himself interested in her?"

Heat crept up my neck. Of course he wasn't! Of all the rumors that had spread of me, this was certainly the most absurd. How little these people must know the duke if they thought for a second I might turn his head. He, who drinks the nectar of the gods. Who sits on his throne of gold, amusing himself with the foibles of people like me. Certainly not admiring a scandalized country girl. He'd played his part well, made me feel like a queen. Indeed, his quick wit, his humor, his boldness and confidence had made me forget just how inadequate I'd become.

Who was I compared to a woman like Lady Diana?

"We are truly only dear friends," I told her.

Mrs. Johns's clear eyes watched me. "Smart girl. He is not your equal by far, is he?" She tilted her head and smiled, watching for my reaction.

I gave her none. I could not disagree with her, but I wouldn't let her wound me in the process.

"Lady Diana is a good match for the Duke of Marlow. I've told Her Grace as much. I even gave a second and a third match as well, should he need it. But you . . ." Her old lips wrinkled as she pursed them. "You come from a good family, and yet, where is your mother? Why is she not here, guiding you through London?"

My heart dropped into my stomach like an anvil. This was why Mrs. Johns was such a renowned matchmaker. She could see things others could not. Things kept hidden and buried.

"My mother has kept herself very busy since my father died. But I assure you, she would be here if she could." Lies, and I was sure Mrs. Johns knew as much. But what good would come from speaking the truth? *She's removed to France; I haven't heard from her in an age, and I am not certain she ever truly loved me.* I couldn't see how that knowledge would help Mrs. Johns match me with a suitor. No, it would only serve to tell a deeper truth, one I rarely let myself consider—that I wasn't good enough for my mother to return for. Not good enough for Sir Ronald to save.

Certainly not good enough to tempt a real suitor of any substance on my own.

Mrs. Johns harrumphed and settled in her high-back chair. No, she did not believe my claims about my mother, but she did not press me further. "You need a good family to marry into then. Perhaps someone who might understand your tendency for impulsiveness." She looked to Maggie, frowning in thought. "If the duke wishes for my help, it will be done. But I need time to think."

Maggie straightened in her seat. She stared at Mrs. Johns with a tight smile. "He would like a suitor encouraged soon."

Mrs. Johns raised a solitary brow. "I see."

"Thank you, Mrs. Johns, for your help," I said.

She looked to me. "I make no promises. But for my efforts, thank your host."

A polite way of saying her matchmaking was a service to the duke.

I was the service.

My face was a mask. I'd come to play my part in this little scheme to make the duke look better to his prospects. I hadn't any real hope for a match, though her disapproval stung. "Of course."

Mrs. Johns stood as we made our way to the door.

When we reentered the carriage, Maggie chatted all the way home about potential suitors and her anticipation of watching me find a match, as though I truly could.

Mrs. Johns certainly had the connections; she knew *everyone*. She would tell a gentleman of my mistakes, of my flaws, even the purported ones that were worse than anything I could or would ever do in my lifetime. If someone of standing heard all that and still sought me out . . . well, that would be a shock.

By the time we returned to Ashburn Abbey, it was time to dress for dinner.

"The men have left for White's," Maggie told me in the drawing room. "Just us and Her Grace tonight."

Thankfully, Her Grace was bolstered by Maggie's retelling of our visit with Mrs. Johns.

"Lady Diana accepted Marlow's invitation to Drury Lane at week's end. I think he is starting to come around to the idea." The duchess dipped her spoon into her brown broth.

Maggie nodded thoughtfully. "Do you suppose he would tell us what he truly thinks of her? Or would he just one day decide to propose, and that is that?"

Her Grace's laugh was a lilting, regal sound. "He is not as shy as he was as a boy, but he still struggles to express himself. I would not be surprised of the latter."

"The duke, shy?" I interjected. "I can hardly imagine it."

"He was always very quiet and kept to himself as a boy," Maggie said from across the table. "Always with his nose in a book. His tutors loved him."

"And, yet, if you put a violin in his hands, he could bring the whole room to tears. Even his father. And that boy *loved* his father." Her Grace lifted her wineglass, hesitating as memories passed behind her eyes. She smiled ever so gently.

"I lost my father too." I couldn't say why I shared it. I rarely talked of Papa. But I understood that smile . . . the memories behind it. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Her Grace sipped from her glass, then set it down and looked up. "Tell us about your family. You live with your brother? I do hope his wife is well."

And so I told them about life after Sir Ronald's party at Lakeshire Park. How Amelia came straightaway for the wedding. How simple the morning had been, but perfect for them. Amelia had looked absolutely beautiful. Not just because of the dress she wore—though it had been lovely—nor her carefully arranged hair or the light rouge on her cheeks.

It was the way she had looked at my brother, and how their hands had joined

so tightly as the vicar spoke.

I wasn't sure either of them realized how lucky they were.

The ache I'd felt upon leaving Mrs. Johns's home returned, and I hated it. I wanted to be back in the barn with Mercutio, lost in a book and decidedly avoiding my future.

As it turned out, taking your own future by the reins was exhausting, emotional work.

After dinner, I took the grand staircase up to my room, my hand trailing the smooth mahogany banister. We'd dined late, and I was tired, but not too tired for *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. I needed the escape of a good book. I needed to forget where I was and everything Mrs. Johns had said about my potential for matchmaking failure a second time round. Tonight, I wanted to fall into someone else's thoughts for a change. And I had found the perfect reading spot, far cozier than the barn with Mercutio.

I had the final half of the last volume to read, and I could hardly wait. I'd stay awake all night reading, for I had nothing to wake early for.

I told Jane my plan, and she helped me into a robe to cover my thin nightdress. I took my time brushing out my own hair and securing it back in a loose chignon at my neck, and, since no one would be about, I tugged on some warm wool stockings too.

Then, I waited.

Waited until the hour grew very late, so there would be no chance of running into Her Grace. I wrote in my diary. Watched the stars appear one by one. Examined my face a little too closely in the mirror.

My cozy spot was but a few doors down in the library, a cozy settee with wingback chairs opposite a warm hearth, the night sky twinkling out the window to the left. It was an utter dream.

When the clock struck eleven, I tiptoed down the hall, book in hand.

The house sat still, sleepy and unhurried.

An orange glow radiated from the cracked-open door to the library, and quietly, I snuck inside. Jane must have told the servants to expect me, for they'd stoked up the fire and . . . was that a tea tray?

Cheesecakes, strawberries, sweet buns, and similar sandwiches from this afternoon waited on a two-tiered platter alongside a little pot and teacup, and it all smelled utterly divine. Having a duke for a friend was luxury indeed. Sighing, I sank into the warm, cushioned chair, tucking my feet behind me, my book to my side, and poured myself a cup.

After a few sips, I picked a sweet bun and leaned my weight against the right

arm of the chair to get comfortable. I opened my book to the marked page, and, after a bite, started reading, losing myself in the pages.

In the mysteries of Udolpho.

Then, though I earnestly believed this evening could not get any better, I heard a distinct purring and looked down.

The whitest, fluffiest, roundest feline I had ever seen sat at my feet and flicked her bushy tail lazily from side to side. Her green eyes looked up at me with blank expectation.

“Well, good evening. Who are you? And just where have you come from?”

She mewed. Commanded, more like. I missed Mercutio fiercely. I scooted over and patted my chair.

Immediately she jumped up. She wore a diamond-crusted collar and was obviously beloved. She must belong to the duchess. Cautiously, she raised her nose at me, placed a paw on my hip, and looked over her domain—the tea things.

“Milk?” I reached for the small creamer. She mewed again. I held it for her as she drank. Then she lay at my side, warm and heavy, and nosed my hand.

“Mercutio loves when I do this.” I scratched between her ears. Like magic, she closed her eyes and rested her chin on my thigh.

I grinned and smoothed out her soft, fluffy coat. With my free hand, I opened my book and continued to read.

I did not hear the door open. Nor the footsteps approach, until a voice said, “I beg your pardon?” and I startled upright.

His hair was mussed, brow furrowed, lips parted until he recognized me, and I him.

The Duke of Marlow.

But disheveled. For he’d neglected his jacket. He’d loosened his cravat. A shadow had formed across his jaw. He almost looked . . . comfortable. And it suited him.

My heart started to thrum. What was he doing awake at this hour? I’d thought for certain he’d come home from the club and straight into his bed.

I’d been wrong.

His piercing blue eyes bored into mine with surprise, like he’d locked me away and caught me out of my quarters and was trying to decide what to do with me. Unfortunately for me, he was standing in the doorway, blocking any escape.

The cat stood lazily, half on my lap, and stretched out her back. Then she hopped down, brushing through and around his legs.

“Your Grace,” I breathed, acutely aware of the sugar crumbs on my lips as

his gaze washed over me. I looked down at my stocking feet.

“Miss Wood,” he said with a little bump in his voice. He looked at the cat, who mewed loudly at him. Like she wanted something from *him* too. “You are sitting in my chair.”

Well . . . yes. What, was I supposed to sit on the floor? This was *my* night. Gads, he ruined every good thing. But as far as I could tell, I was doing nothing wrong. Her Grace had told me to enjoy the many rooms in the house, and here I was.

I made a show of surveying the room. “Is there a chair in this house that *isn’t* yours, Your Grace?”

He raised his brows as though to say *what nerve you have*, his eyes dropping to the sweet bun in my hand. “This is where I sit in the evenings.” His voice was low and raspy from the hour. “I just stoked that fire myself.”

And then, like a puzzle, it all clicked together. “This is your . . .” His chair. His fire. His tea tray. My lips parted, and I could not have been more humiliated. I grasped the arms of the chair. “You sit *here*. But I told my maid—”

He gave me a tight smile. Then, he crouched to pet the cat. *His* cat.

Jane hadn’t said anything to anyone, had she?

I could have thrown myself in the flames and felt the same burning.

I stood, sweet bun in one hand, snatching my book with the other. “Your Grace, I am *mortified* to say the least. Let me just”—I quickly swiped the crumbs from the armchair, balancing my used teacup atop my book—“call for another cup of tea.”

He cleared his throat, stood, then shook his head. “Do not trouble yourself. I will find another place.”

“No trouble. No trouble at all. Just a moment.” I spun around, desperately praying he would not look at my feet, nor my hair, nor my *face*. I searched for anything I’d left behind or done that might further inconvenience him. His cat, sensing my distress, bounded from the room, which only served to make me feel a hundred times worse.

“*Georgiana.*”

“I think I have it all—”

The teacup started to slip, and I dropped the sweet bun trying to free a hand, but the duke was faster. He reached out, catching the saucer and cup before it fell. “I insist.”

“It’s your chair,” I insisted. “I should retire, anyway, as the hour is—”

“*Sit,*” he demanded, and with that tone, I quickly obliged. My back was ramrod straight, book clutched to my chest with crossed arms, as I desperately tried to hide my feet.

“Read your book.” He dropped down to pick up the sweet bun from the floor.

He set the teacup down nearby, and I watched with bated breath as he stalked to a far corner, lifting another chair like it was air, and carrying it to my right, nearer the hearth.

He meant to stay.

I glanced to the door, which was still open, though certainly not enough to satiate propriety at this hour, and back as he took his seat and reached over for a sandwich. His eyes were fixed on the fire, and then they flicked to mine.

Heart jolting, I looked away, thoughtlessly opening *Udolpho*, not that I had any mind to read. My thoughts were anywhere but the page. He sat a few feet away, across the little table between us, and yet, I could hear every sound he made—his quiet chewing of a sandwich, the bobbing of his throat as he swallowed, his shirt sliding across the armchair when he rested his arm and again when he reached for another bite. He stretched out his legs, and we sat together, in silent companionship. Alone.

The feeling was decidedly different when we weren’t arguing.

I absently turned a page I had not read just to *do something*.

When he’d finished eating, he stood, and I watched his back as he moved toward a little cabinet by the window. He pulled out a bottle and a glass and poured himself an amber drink. He turned round and leaned against the cabinet. I pretended to be absorbed in *Udolpho* as he lifted his cup to drink. His large hand engulfed the glass.

Marlow was the sort of man women whispered to each other about behind their fans. Unaccountably handsome, and not because of any singular feature. *Mysterious*, they’d surely say. *Rugged and strong and would fight for your honor with his bare fists*.

Exactly the sort of man I meant to avoid. The sort that beckoned and tempted and made a girl trick herself into believing.

He cleared his throat. “I’d like your opinion on a matter.”

I looked up again, flushed, and found his gaze straight on mine. He quickly looked away, lifting his glass again for another swig of his drink. The set of his jaw made me wonder if he often asked for another person’s thoughts, or if this urge was against his nature. Either way, I was intrigued. I closed my book and sat up straighter.

“Very well.”

“How many times would you give someone money—decent sums of money, which they inevitably squandered—before you cut them off?” He watched the liquid swirling in his glass.

I pondered his question, wondering if it was in any way aimed at me. “That

question is too vague. There are far too many factors that might influence my answer.”

“Such as?”

“What is your relationship with this person? How are they using the money? And is there any investment in it for you should this person eventually succeed?”

Our eyes locked once more, and I found surprise reflected in his features. When he wasn’t deliberately trying to hide his feelings, he was rather easy to read. “Family. Personal gain. And, no, no investment for me.”

I touched my bottom lip. Interesting. “Are you close with this person?”

The duke nodded slowly. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Gabriel. I could almost guarantee it. How I loved a mystery. “Last question, then. When you say ‘personal gain,’ do you mean gambling or business endeavors?”

He rubbed a hand across his jaw. “Likely a little of both, but primarily business.”

I nodded. “Then I should think, as his family, you’d strike one of your infamous deals. You give him money, and in return, whether or not he succeeds, you turn some sort of profit. Then, when he *inevitably squanders* it, you don’t feel the loss so acutely, while he feels supported and learns something along the way.”

“You would still give the money, despite the previous losses?” He pushed off from where he leaned against the cabinet and meandered toward his chair.

“I was not under the impression that you were at a deficit currently. Unless the sums he is asking for are quite exorbitant.” I sat back in my seat as he took his. “If he is *trying*, then I see no reason why you, in your position, oughtn’t to help him. Strength of the whole is better than strength of the one.”

Marlow’s jaw worked. He was quiet. Thoughtful. He downed his last sip in a quick tilt of his glass. His chest moved with his next deep breath.

“I’ve told him no. He thinks I am cruel.”

“Are you?”

We locked eyes again. His attention felt like an arrow pinning me to the spot. My heart thrummed against my chest.

“Do *you* think I am?”

I thought through our acquaintance. How rigid he’d been when we’d first met. Was he capable of cruelty? Most certainly. But deep in his bones, was he cruel?

“I do not think you’d be asking my opinion on the matter if you weren’t bothered by the question yourself. That alone tells me you are not cruel, Your Grace.”

He set down his empty glass and rested his arms along the chair, his head leaned back, eyes closed. And I supposed that was the end of that.

I opened my book and found the page I'd left, still too distracted to read. My gaze wandered the words.

"What did Mrs. Johns say this afternoon?"

I looked up again. It seemed a single glass could loosen his tongue. That, or the duke was in a chatting mood.

"Thanks to your cousin and Her Grace, I'm to expect a parade of callers in the coming days."

His eyes remained closed. "Are you not pleased?"

I shifted in my seat. Was I? I should be. "In truth, I feel more anxious than anything."

"Over what?" He blinked awake, frowning.

Forward of him to ask. I tilted my head. If he were any other person, I'd—well, why shouldn't I call him out? "That is a touch too personal, Your Grace."

"Forgive me." He looked down, his features shifting into a smile. "Though by your own account, we are such good friends."

I rolled my eyes. My own trick played against me, and fairly done. Though I doubted he actually cared about *my* feelings. Sitting before me was a man bored, in his cups, needing a distraction. I'd met such men before in many of Peter's friends. Doubtful he'd remember half our conversation by morning. I sighed and closed my book.

"I fear I am too changed since last year to incite true interest from suitors. Perhaps I might secure a proposal, but if I do, is it really mine? When all pretenses are dropped, Your Grace, I am still and will always be the girl on the hay reading books with her barn cat."

His chest started to shake, then his shoulders. And he coughed out a laugh. He was *laughing* at me.

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, cross.

"Forgive me." He chuckled. "I am imagining you in a hay barn with a stray cat, and I—well, I can see it perfectly."

"And that is humorous to you? My loneliness?" My tone sobered him.

He frowned like a child chided, though his eyes were still alight. "On the contrary, I find it rather endearing."

My cheeks grew warm. I looked down at my book. Whyever would he say something so ridiculous? He must feel sorry for me. *He*, the naturally harsh-natured, unfeeling duke.

"He is not a stray. He is a mouser named Mercutio to whom I tell all of my secrets."

Marlow sat up straighter, lips turning upward again. Eyes more alert. “My apologies to Mercutio. I am unacquainted with the social hierarchy of cats, but I assure you I meant nothing by it.” He dipped his chin.

Heavens, he was handsome. He did not often smile, but he’d given me several tonight, and they lit up his face. I hadn’t noticed the dimple in his left cheek until this moment. It begged my attention.

“He is the only good thing I’ve had these past many months.”

A clock on the mantel chimed. The house was otherwise completely still. Painfully quiet. I looked toward the empty doorway. I should leave him. What if someone found us here? Duke or not, the last thing I needed was *more* rumors and *more* reasons for his mother to be upset with me.

“Tell me the story,” he said, quiet.

I blinked and turned my book over in my hands, tracing the golden lettering on the leather binding. “*Udolpho*?”

His brows furrowed, half covered by a wave of thick, rowdy curls. “No. Tell me what happened that night. What you did to lose the *ton*’s favor, in your own words. I want to hear it.”

That night . . . with Ronald? “You want to know why I . . .” *Kissed him?*

“Yes.” He turned in his seat, angling his body toward mine. He rested the left side of his face against the back of his seat, his long legs loosely crossing. He waited with measured confidence, like a man who needed only ask, and I’d respond exactly to his desire.

Mine wasn’t a story I wanted to continually repeat. And it certainly wasn’t mandatory to our contract.

“Why?” Why did he care *now*?

He looked around, shaking his head, then shrugged. “I am curious.”

I didn’t like that answer. And in truth, I did not *want* him to hear the whole of it. I wanted to keep some measure of control between us, and if he knew everything—how foolish I’d been, how I’d thought myself in love only to be rejected in the most public and humiliating way—he’d think less of me. I found I did not like that either.

“No.”

“No?” He started to laugh, then grasped his empty glass from the table, looking down at the last few drops of amber liquid swirling at the base. I wondered if the duke had any *real* friends. He did not seem to know how to treat one, pretend or otherwise. “You won’t tell me.”

I stared hard at him. “I do not think you truly care. I think you wish to belittle me.”

He set down the glass firmly, meeting my gaze just as unyieldingly. “Did you

try to ensnare him? Sir Ronald.”

Hearing that name aloud didn’t hurt like it used to. I felt regret, but not affection. Not since I’d seen him with his new wife and how different he was with her. Perhaps how he’d been all along, but I’d been too blinded by my own false hopes to see it.

In truth, it was embarrassment that kept me from revealing myself to the duke. And I had already embarrassed myself enough tonight. Sitting in his chair in stockinged feet, spouting off about lying in the hay with a barn cat. I could not abide him laughing at me again. I had enough regrets. I wondered if he felt any at all after what *he’d* done. His admission was far worse than mine would be.

He *had* admitted to it, hadn’t he? More, he’d faced Mrs. Winston and her husband head-on. I supposed, like it or not, I owed him the truth. Then we’d be square.

I huffed out a little breath and looked down at my hands as I spoke. “Sir Ronald is my brother’s closest friend. When I debuted in London, I was certain he’d court me. He needed money, and we had enough to share. My brother said to be patient. But that is a virtue I have had to learn the hard way.”

I felt the duke’s unrelenting gaze, saw his hand grasping the armrest of his chair. He said nothing, only listened.

“I should have seen sense much earlier . . . the way he looked at *her*, the way he attended *her*, even the way he *spoke* to her was different than with anyone else. But I was so blinded by this future I’d planned in my head, so certain that he’d see it too, if only he’d give it a chance.

“We were dancing that night, and I stopped in the middle of the room. He thought something was wrong and cradled my arms to keep me upright. And I made the decision in an instant—I’d force his hand. I’d *make* him see the future I saw. So, I kissed him.”

The duke’s brows raised. “Bold.”

“Foolish,” I disagreed. “I shall never forget the look on his face when he pulled back. It was utter betrayal. I had shocked and disgusted him. And he hated me instantly. I never want to see that look on someone’s face, not ever again.”

The most painful part of recalling the truth was admitting rejection. That I hadn’t been good enough. That something had been *wrong* with me. Something that invited people to take a critical look.

I supposed Marlow could understand that feeling too, having been rejected by Miss Newbury. Worse, really, because *he* was a duke and what sort of woman rejected a duke as wealthy and secure and, dare I say, handsome, as he? We both had made grand mistakes. We both had tried to force the other’s hand.

“Perhaps a conversation would have been the better choice,” he said, standing with glass in hand. He strode back over to the cabinet and pulled out the bottle.

I watched his careful movements. “You don’t say,” I muttered.

The duke glanced over his shoulder with a half smile on his lips as he poured. “Leveled by the *ton* for it.” He started to laugh as he turned round, lifting the glass to his lips. “I hope it was a deuced good kiss.”

I tucked my feet closer and crossed my arms around my middle. I ought to be scandalized by his loose tongue, and yet, being around Peter and his friends I’d heard one too many slips over the years to care. Besides, with the duke, I needn’t pretend to be all sweetness and innocence.

“It was my first,” I admitted miserably. “And it was terrible.”

He laughed harder, slowly returning to his seat and settling back in. “Gads, I actually feel sorry for you.”

I started to smile despite myself, surprised at how much lighter I felt admitting the truth. Marlow did not seem to care. Did not seem to look at me any differently. I felt relief. Like life could carry on. Like I could have friends to jest with. Like, perhaps, one day, all my sorrow and mistakes would be but a distant memory.

“I wish I could make everyone forget. Myself included.”

The duke reached for a sandwich. “I shall see about getting a bill passed in Parliament.”

I rather liked this side of him. Rough, still, but playful. “What a good friend you are.”

He took a bite, then said, “A shame, though. To never be decently kissed.”

Warmth spread up my neck. I *had* wondered since the attempt if I’d done it wrong. Despite Ronald’s reaction, kissing hadn’t felt as earth-shattering as others made it sound. Marlow’s eyes flicked to mine, and the force of his gaze was too much. I felt exposed, my every thought laid bare.

“Did you kiss Miss Newbury?” I regretted the words as soon as they’d tumbled out of me, seeking something, *anything*, to redirect his attention. Perhaps a challenge to prove that I was not the only one who felt this way about kissing.

“No.” He sat up again, stretched out his legs to get more comfortable, like he wanted to stay a while. Perhaps it was the hour. Or the drink. “But I did have this one unforgettable kiss. Nothing else has quite measured up.”

The drink to be sure. I shouldn’t ask him to elaborate, but he seemed so confident. It was maddening. I wanted to be proven wrong. It couldn’t have been *that* thrilling.

“And what made that kiss so *memorable*?”

He rolled his eyes but humored me between bites. “If you must know, we were in the sitting room. Alone.” He caught my gaze, seeming pleased by my surprise and by the way I surveyed the empty room. “And she was teaching me French.”

“She was your *tutor*?” I leaned over my armrest toward him, book folding into my lap. This was the best story I’d heard in an age.

He reached over and grabbed a sweet bun. “Brilliant Frenchwoman. Not much older than my seventeen years, which was a mistake on my mother’s part. She treated me like I was normal, talked to me like I was just any other pupil. That afternoon, she made me read this passage about forbidden love, and something in me just . . . snapped.” He bit into the bun and smiled. “I took her hand first; it was very romantic. Poor thing was stunned silent, but I drew her in, and she was . . . enthusiastic, to say the least.”

I gasped and covered my mouth. Something fluttered wildly in my stomach, burning up into my chest.

My eyes dropped to his lips.

He took another bite of his sweet bun. That dimple reappeared. “Haven’t felt anything like it since. And not for want of trying.”

Good heavens, how my face burned with embarrassment. “You, sir, are a cad.”

“Heartsick, to hear my mother tell it.” His eyes had changed. They were lighter, brighter. “Don’t act all blushing and proper, Georgiana. Not after the story *you* just told. You are no better than I am.”

Perhaps not. Though I’d like to think I had better moral standards since defaming myself. “I may have kissed a *friend* without permission, but I have learned my lesson. Have you?”

He eyed me sideways. Again, with that haughtiness that seemed to say he was above mere mortals’ rules. “What are you reading?”

I turned my book over in my hand. I’d almost forgotten it. “*The Mysteries of Udolpho*.”

He nodded once, then said, simply, “Tell me.”

“If you ask nicely,” I said, reaching for a cheesecake and taking a bite.

He watched the motion. “I am the Duke of Marlow. I do not have to ask nicely.”

Who had taught him such a falsehood? I scrunched my face. “For me, you do.”

He drew a long pull from his glass. We stared each other down our respective noses.

Then he clinked his empty glass down on the side table. "Please, Georgiana." I grinned.

I told him about *Udolpho*'s heroine, Emily St. Aubert, and how she meets the heroic and handsome Valancourt and quickly falls in love. How her father dies, and she is sent to live with her terrible aunt, who marries a horrible husband, and then forces Emily to his castle Udolpho, where she is nearly forced to marry a man—who is not our beloved Valancourt!—she does not love. Mysteries abound. Hearts pound and quake, and Emily is out of her mind with worry and fear and uncertainty. Thank heavens for her servant girl Annette! She risks her life to venture where Emily cannot, answering Emily's curiosity about Udolpho and its surroundings.

Marlow settled back in his chair while I told him the whole of Annette's findings. His attention jolted when I told him about Emily's aunt dying at the hands of Signor Montoni, how Emily gives him his ransom but he still keeps her locked away at Udolpho.

He sat at the edge of his seat while I explained how Ludovico led them to the dungeon to discover . . .

"Who was down there?" he whisper-yelled, and I laughed. I wondered what would happen next. How it would all conclude.

And I could tell Marlow wondered too.

Between the two of us, we'd eaten everything on the tray. We slouched in our seats, both too comfortable by the fire than we ought to be.

Reluctantly, he stood. "I should leave you to your book, then. For both our sakes."

He wanted me to tell him how it ended? As though we might continue this easy comradery tomorrow. Not likely.

"Thank you for letting me stay."

He waved me off as though he disliked my saying that. Then he lifted a little square box from the side table and shook it. It sounded like bells.

A moment later the cat reappeared.

I grinned. "I've stolen your night, too, haven't I?" I reached out my hand, but she went straight to the duke. He crouched beside her, giving her exactly the affection she wanted. Then he nudged her toward me.

She trotted over dutifully. I patted my seat, and she jumped up, looking again over my person for the creamer.

The duke . . . well, he smiled. "Her name is Cleopatra, but Cleo for short." Affection softened the usual roughness in his voice.

"Good evening, Cleo." I rubbed her back as she lapped up the milk.

"She stalks the halls at night," he explained. "Takes her rests in here with me."

I saw her here when I found you . . . I assumed—that is, I imagined perhaps you might like her company now.”

Cleo looked up at me and licked her lips. “Mercutio is not nearly as elegant and well-bred as Cleo, but I miss him all the same. Sharing her is very thoughtful. And appreciated.”

He nodded once. Watched us for a moment. Then, he said, “What are friends for, if not sharing their beloved cats?”

He was acting too kind. Too gentle. His offering prodded my hardened heart, as though looking for a weak spot to wriggle into. I couldn’t let him in. I could not afford to entangle myself with a handsome friend again. Heavens, we were hardly *friends* at all.

“Good night, Duke Marlow.”

“Just Marlow,” he corrected me. “Good night, Georgiana.”

Chapter Thirteen

MARLOW

I'd slept until ten, and still felt like I'd been thrown against a tree. Every limb of my body ached, and I was slow-moving, sore from sleeping half the night in a wing-backed chair, and, still, hours later, every swallow felt full of cheap, scratchy wool.

Gabriel still wasn't speaking to me.

Toole avoided looking me straight in the eye.

Maggie had gone out with her family.

Mother had gone out on calls with Georgiana.

And I had stayed up until two in the morning reading volume one of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* that I'd found in Mother's personal library.

The house felt as it did out of Season. Quiet. Calm.

Lonely.

But at least I was getting work done. I had outlined a request for work to be completed on the estate, as well as a few full-time positions we needed filled for farming.

The estate I'd reclaimed from Mr. Newbury was now workable and needed new tenants. Finding them would be like closing that chapter in my life.

Cleo wandered in and jumped up on my desk.

"Down," I told her, pointing to the floor. She made a mewling sound and slowly sauntered off.

And then it hit me—a waft of apples.

Georgiana's perfume.

She'd held my cat last night. I'd no idea how long she'd sat in my chair or when she'd eventually retired for the night. This morning her teacup, the empty plate, and my whiskey glass had been cleaned and taken away as though the two of us had never been there.

And yet, the evening was burned into my memory.

Gabriel and I had gone to White's. He'd refused polite conversation. Gambled for hours after dinner. And when I'd tried to force him home, he'd

thrown off my hand and stalked down the street alone. I'd had to hire a man to trail him and ensure his safe return.

Then the only thing I'd had to look forward to all day—my chair and my fire and my tea things—had been stolen when I'd returned from the water closet.

Georgiana had settled in like she belonged there. Her stockinged feet tucked in, hair in a loose chignon at her neck, her thin robe a temptation a lesser man might not have borne.

She would have left. I should have let her. Perhaps the night would have been easier to bear.

But of all the people in all of London, my family included, hers was the only company I did not feel the need to dismiss. And if she'd needed the same reprieve I did . . . I wanted her to stay.

I'd wanted to hear her opinions. I'd wanted to know her reasons. Then, I'd simply wanted her to keep talking.

All night I'd felt like I was reaching. Like I could not keep the pace. Like the answers I sought were just beyond my grasp. But Georgiana . . . she made me feel capable. She empowered me to reach even higher than I'd imagined for an even better outcome.

She was brave and honest. Bold and determined.

And I . . . I'd said too much.

Then again, so had she.

And I could not keep myself from staring even as we'd finished afternoon tea.

I'd asked, "Did you finish your book, Miss Wood?"

And she'd answered, "No, Your Grace. I was quite distracted."

I'd reveled in the telling smile that reached her eyes. "Try again this evening. I will tell the servants to see to your comfort."

She'd grinned. "Thank you, Your Grace."

So again, that night I dressed for White's. I followed Gabriel inside the carriage and waited for him to speak as we drove toward Town.

Silence.

I cleared my throat. "About that loan you asked for . . ."

His frown deepened, gaze pointed firmly out the dark window. "You have made your point very clear. There is no need for further conversation."

If only he knew how I'd rather do just about anything else than this. The carriage swayed from side to side. "On the contrary. I have given your request further thought."

He lifted a single brow, attention still turned out the window.

"If it's not too late, I have a proposal for you."

Arms crossed, he tilted his head slightly toward me. “Is this how you make your little bargains?” He scoffed, but his voice betrayed his interest. “Offering proposals of every kind?”

I had half a mind to rescind it. The man was too emotional. Too easily bruised. “I will give you the money you need,” I started, and his jaw slackened in surprise. “But in return, should you turn a profit, I want five percent for the first five years.”

He was silent. Completely still. “And if I do not turn a profit?”

“*Until* you turn a profit, you will work for me in management until the loan is repaid.”

He swallowed hard. “Management? You hardly trust me with managing the estate I live on. You would trust me with another?”

“The Newbury land is ready for ownership. I will oversee your work. But you will take charge of its upkeep, hiring the necessary labor and reporting back to me. When your debt is paid, you will find and train a new manager.”

He blinked and stared and waited. “Why this sudden change of heart?”

I immediately thought of Georgiana, sitting in my chair like she belonged there, thoughtful as she’d said the words I now repeated, “Strength of the whole is better than strength of the one.”

Gabriel nodded once, smiling to himself. “Perhaps to your chagrin, I will prove that right, Duke Marlow.”

“I truly hope you do.”



After leaving Gabriel to his vices, I returned home with a renewed bounce in my step. I gave my hat and overcoat to Toole, then took the stairs two at a time. I swapped my jacket and waistcoat for a comfortable brown robe to match the hour and the mood—*I hadn’t waited all day, hadn’t anticipated this very moment; I’d just come for my normal routine*—then hurried to the end of the hall, where warm light flickered from within the open doors of my library.

I slowed my steps on the blue-and-green patterned carpet, lifting a hand to tame my unruly tufts, and wished, for the first time all night, for a mirror to gauge my reflection.

The absurdity.

Rounding the doorframe, I froze. For there she sat in my chair, reading. She

wore a light-blue dress of soft muslin with her hair loosely twisted at the nape of her neck, and Cleo purred in her lap.

Half of me hoped to prove I'd been too drunk last night to perceive her clearly. That perhaps I had created a version of this woman in my mind who did not exist. It had taken me exactly five seconds to see that the reality was even better than memory served.

My heart thumped hard and fast against my chest. A refuge that felt like home now also felt as terrifying as being alone in a dark field in the middle of the night. And yet I wanted nothing more.

A quick glance at the clock told me the hour—forty past eleven. How long had she been here? Had I come too late?

She lifted a steaming cup of tea, holding it between her lips and the page her gaze was trained upon. After a sip, she exchanged it for a sweet bun, which she suspended in the air, squeezing with her fingers as her lips parted. She drew the book closer.

I took a forward step, and the floorboards—dash them—gave me away.

She looked up, frightened. Then sighed. “Marlow. Thank heavens. I thought you were a ghost.”

I fought a smile as I strode toward the chair beside her. “What sort of ghost?”

She looked pleased as I took my seat, and I reveled in her attention. “The kind that haunt young ladies behind veils in castles.”

“*Udolpho*?”

She touched her bottom lip. Embarrassed? Then nodded her head. “Have you never read a book with mystery before?”

I wouldn't tell her I was currently reading the very same book as she. I thought hard. “Perhaps in my youth.”

She tsked. “What do you read now?”

Other than *Udolpho*? History, business, agriculture . . . “Books that would put your imagination fast asleep.”

To my surprise, she closed her book. “Where were you this evening? Not at dinner.”

My chest tugged. She'd noticed my absence. “White's. With Gabriel.”

“And did you speak with him?”

She knew I'd been talking about him last night. She was too clever by half. “I did.”

She waited, watching me. The silence spread out thick, and normally I didn't mind it, but with Georgiana, I hated it. I wanted to fill every empty space with her voice.

“He agreed to my business terms, and I shall give him the required funds in

the morning.”

A full grin lit her face, so contagious, I did not realize how painfully I was trying to keep my own at bay until many moments had passed. “Well done. We should celebrate. Shall I pour you a drink?”

Ah, that. She’d seen me in . . . not my best light last night. I rubbed the back of my neck.

“In truth, I do not drink all that much. I prefer a clear mind. But yesterday was particularly vexing, and the hour was particularly late.” I thought back to the work, to both Toole’s request, which I’d yet to consider, and to Gabriel’s, which I’d granted, to visiting Lady Diana, and . . . to Georgiana visiting Mrs. Johns. All had led to my needing an evening to myself. The drink had undoubtedly clouded my judgment. “Forgive me for overindulging in front of you.”

She nodded, her eyes soft. “Forgiven. I am glad today is a better day.”

It certainly was now. “How were calls with my mother?”

“Long.” She crossed her legs and pursed her lips and tried to look cross.

“Many introductions made. Many excuses given for my behavior toward you.”

I thought of her hand on my arm. Her musical laugh in my ear. The cut of her neckline. My stomach flipped over itself. I wouldn’t mind a little more of all of her, to be frank. “What sort of behavior?” I took a teacup from the little cart behind the table and poured myself a cup from the pot. Georgiana handed me the cream.

“How familiar you and I are with one another. How comfortable and easy our friendship. Your mother assures them all we are more sister and brother than friends.”

“And you agreed?” I sipped, looking at her over the rim of my cup. I wondered not for the first time how exactly she felt about me. What she thought.

She shrugged. “We cannot have Lady Diana thinking otherwise, now can we? Indeed, I suppose if the *ton* still hates me when I leave here, I could audition at the theater for how well I’ve been believed.”

I did not like that one bit. Nor the thought of her leaving without my saying so. “I do not think you’re all that great an actress.”

“No?” She sounded irked, and I loved it.

“You are too genuine.” I shook my head, playing both the tease and the innocent. “I hate to say it, but I think for once the *ton* is right. It is simply too easy to be your friend.”

A breathy laugh of surprise escaped her lips. “Are you admitting that you enjoy my company, Marlow?”

I set down my teacup and pretended to come to a surprising realization. “Yes, Georgiana, I think I am.”

Her smile faded. She bit her bottom lip and looked down at the open book in her lap. “Thank you,” she said softly. “I could dearly use a friend. And I shall feel less a liar among Society now.”

Had it been weighing on her? Telling falsehoods to regain their good opinion? I hadn’t even flinched at the idea. I hadn’t thought she cared.

Quite fragile, her brother had called her. Perhaps she was. Perhaps Georgiana’s greatest flaw was that she truly did care. “Society will never know the difference.”

“But your cousins. Your mother. I will always be burdened knowing how I’ve deceived them.”

I shrugged. “Then simply tell them the truth. What does it matter? The present truth is more important than the past.”

She eyed me warily. “Are you trying to get your ring back early so you can send me on my way?”

I scoffed, laughing. Admittedly, I was pleased to know she still had it. That it was safe and nearby. But I’d hardly thought about our bargain today. All I’d thought about was ending my day exactly here—taking tea by the fire—with her.

“You still owe me two outings, *friend*,” she said, her delicate brows lifting.

“Georgiana, I will take you wherever you want, whenever you wish it. Yes, I will need that ring back eventually, but I trust you will give it to me in time.”

She didn’t believe me. I could see it on her face. The way she pressed her lips together. How she tilted her head to one side. I wondered if she had trouble trusting me specifically, or if her distrust was based upon her past experiences.

“I am not some villain in your novels.” Not toward her at least. I offered what I hoped was a convincing smile. “Nor a ghost hiding behind a veil.”

Her lips ticked upward. She leaned over her armrest. “Do you know, that is exactly what all the villains say.”

“Ah.” I nodded, playing along. “And then they rush off to their dark villain tunnels and do unspeakable villain things?”

She squinted. “You would know better than I.”

“I do have dark hidden tunnels, so I suppose that does make me a villain.” I leaned back. Took another sip. The interest in her eyes fed me new life, so I continued, “And one in particular is *very* haunted.”

Her lips parted, eyes blinking wide. “Here? At Ashburn Abbey.”

I nodded and slowly set down my cup. Ashburn Abbey wasn’t *that* old, but where could I fool her? Where could I scare her? “There is a hidden tunnel in the floor.”

She frowned. “A servants’ stairway?”

Just the same. She likely had them at her brother’s estate. But mine would be

longer. Dank. "It is unused by servants, for it leads to . . . well, I suppose it would not be wise to reveal."

I had no idea where it led.

"You're being ridiculous." She sat back. "Poking fun at me."

"On the contrary," I insisted. "This place is very real."

"I am sure it is. Some servants' stair that leads to a cellar." She opened her book and sighed. "You won't scare me with such nonsense."

Her eyes washed over her page as she settled back in her chair. As much as I loved watching her read, seeing her comfortable, I did not want to simply sit by her. I wanted her attention. Like a petulant child, I wanted to poke at her until she looked at me again.

"I will take you there." I shrugged. "You can see for yourself."

Her eyes flicked over to mine. Curious. "Now?"

There were many passageways beneath Ashburn Abbey to allow servants to move throughout different areas in the house. All would be unused at this hour. One led *from* the house to the outside. Perhaps, if I weaved a good enough story, I might be able to entertain her.

"Put down your book," I said. "Are you wearing your slippers tonight?"

Her cheeks flushed warm in the low-lit room. Drat, I'd embarrassed her. Brought notice to the fact she hadn't been wearing them last night.

"Yes," she answered almost defensively.

"I do not care whether or not you wear them in this room," I clarified. "Only for the journey."

I stood from my seat, mind racing. All the aches and pains of the day vanished for the purpose of creating this experience for Georgiana.

She set her book on her chair. "Come alone with you in the night?" she said. "This does not sound wise." And yet she stood from her seat.

It mattered very little to me if we were seen alone. What could anyone say that I could not speak above? "You do not trust me."

She thought about it. Looked around the room. "I want to."

I took a lit candle from the hearth and handed it to her before taking another for myself.

"Then, come, friend, and meet the ghosts that haunt the servants' passageways."

Chapter Fourteen

GEORGIANA

My heart thrummed fast against my chest.

Marlow led me outside the library and down the dark, empty hall.

By logic, I knew this venture was a grave mistake. Poor judgment in the past had taught me that the eerie feeling now filling my stomach meant I should do the opposite of what I was currently doing, and yet, the overpowering thrill of a secret passageway, of ghosts, was too good to fight against. And Marlow took his part as my guide very seriously.

He held his candle under his chin so shadows would fall upon his face.

“Through here,” he whispered, leading me into a room a few doors down.

I couldn’t help but grin at how ridiculous and impulsive he was acting. So unlike him, and yet, exactly fitting. There were three windows on the far wall, letting in just enough moonlight to illuminate a large pianoforte, a harp, and several tables and chairs. Paintings lined the walls. I hadn’t time for a closer view, for Marlow was on his knees, peeling back the pale-blue carpet in a dark corner to reveal a hidden trapdoor.

My pulse raced as I crouched beside him.

He pulled on the latch, and the door creaked as he lifted it up. Dark stone stairs led down, down, down into shadowy depths.

“Are you certain you are brave enough?” he asked me with serious, raised brows. Gone was the lordly duke. In front of me was a man—still half a boy—letting his imagination take the lead.

My heart flipped over itself, and I realized how badly I wanted this. I wanted to be here, with him, chasing shadows just for the thrill of it.

I did not believe in ghosts, but Marlow made me want to.

“I assure you, Duke, I am far braver than you.” I sat, one hand holding my candle in the cold, damp air, and swung my feet onto the first few steps. They were gritty and steep under my slippers. I had to push myself down to get started, and then I was up, descending into the darkness with no idea what awaited us ahead.

I heard his movements behind me, then the creak and swing of the door.

Total and complete darkness. If our candles expired . . . well, we would see who was the bravest between us then. My feet touched flat ground, and I stumbled a step and hit the right wall. The walls were mud and stone, the same sort of material as the stairs, rough but not too unsteady. The passageway narrowed until we could not walk side by side. And with every step, the air grew colder and danker.

“Careful,” the duke said from behind. “Watch for bends in the path. If you hear anything—”

“The ghosts of your ancestors?” I teased.

“I was going to say perhaps a large spider or a rat—”

I sucked in a breath, stopping in my tracks. A rat? I envisioned red eyes, massive, pointed teeth, and a worm tail and shuddered. I’d seen field mice in the barn on occasion but never rats!

“—but perhaps the ghosts of my ancestors,” Marlow finished, his voice decidedly gleeful. “Is something the matter?”

“No,” I hurried to say. I took a few slow steps forward. “Just gaining my bearings.”

“I could walk ahead.”

“And leave the beasts at my back? No, thank you.”

He chuckled. He was enjoying scaring me far too much. And I was letting him! *Be brave, for heaven’s sake, woman.* If Emily St. Aubert, fictional or not, could face her fears, so could I. I drew in a few steadying breaths through my nose and lifted my candle high. *See? Not a rat in sight.* Nor spiders on the walls despite the few cobwebs.

I quickened my pace. Wherever we were, I’d make quick work of it. There was a doorway, he’d said, so the faster I made it there, the faster I’d be out of this place and to wherever it led. Apparently, I preferred reading about mysteries to living one.

Where was he leading me? If I endured all this only to be led to the kitchens—or worse, someone’s bedchamber!—I would ensure he reaped some sort of consequence, duke or not.

A scattering of rocks sounded ahead, and I stopped dead in my tracks. Marlow bumped hard into my back, and I tripped forward. His arm wrapped around me, and we swayed, candles in hand, breathing hard. My body tensed and tingled where his chest met my back, where his arm brushed my shoulder, then steadied my waist. I could hear the thrum, thrum, thrum of my heart pounding in my ears.

“What was that?” His voice was a whisper in my hair. Slowly, his arm

released me.

“Did you throw something ahead to scare me?” I breathed.

“You give me too much credit.” He did not laugh. “I’ve never done this before.”

I held my candle high, looking ahead for any sign of movement in the darkness. I could not see far enough to know for a surety that we were alone.

“What, take a lady down your secret villain passageway?”

“Certainly not a live one,” he muttered at my ear.

I swatted backward at him, and he caught my hand and laughed.

His warm hand engulfed mine. I turned halfway, the glow of our combined candles like an orb in the darkness encircling us. I parted my lips to say something, to give some witty retort to his continued attempts to scare me, but I found his gaze set upon our joined hands. Despite being cramped in this narrow passageway, he looked at ease. Untroubled. As though the burdens he so often shouldered had no place here.

With the air perfumed with spice and oranges, warm from the light of our candles, I felt it too. The ease. “You don’t look like a villain.”

His features were too smooth. His eyes too warm. And when he smiled one of his rare, genuine smiles, I felt his heart in mine. And it was good.

“Looks can be deceiving.” He swallowed. His gaze washed over my face.

I let him look, feeling the smallest bit shy at the open way he studied me. I hadn’t yet washed my face for the evening, nor had I done anything special with my hair.

“I shouldn’t trust you, then? To save me from what lies ahead?”

Marlow stroked my palm with this thumb. He looked down at our hands.

“What lies ahead is far less dangerous than what is here, right in front of you.”

I swallowed, still as a statue. His lips pursed, left dimple creasing. And then his gaze flicked back up to mine.

He held my hand, my attention, my very breath. And I gave it to him willingly.

My cold heart stuttered back to life. The way it had so long ago in those ballrooms, and at Lakeshire Park. But this time it felt fuller. Stronger. Wiser.

This time my heart spoke to me.

I had done this once before—given myself too willingly. I would not make the same foolish mistake twice. If Marlow wanted something from me—and I was not a fool, his very gaze beguiled me—it was not the whole, and I could not afford to give myself in pieces.

I turned from him, facing the darkness once more. I took a step forward. His

fingers unwillingly released mine, and our hold broke. “Whatever lies ahead, I shall have to face alone as all brave heroines do.”

I took another step. I could feel his warmth at my back, heard his long pull of breath and a heavy exhale.

“We must be nearly there,” he said.

There was a turn ahead, and I navigated it. We walked in a series of weaves left and right.

“Where does it lead?” I asked.

“Certain death.”

I huffed. “Marlow!”

“Georgiana.” His voice was a tease. “You shall have to trust me.”

We had to be getting close. “Trust *you*?”

“Close your eyes,” Marlow said, and the urgency in his voice compelled me to instantly obey.

“What is it?” I stopped walking.

He put a hand on the small of my back and urged me forward. “Nothing. Just keep your eyes closed. A few more steps.”

“*Tell me*,” I insisted, too scared to open them.

“You . . . just passed a rat.”

“What!” My eyes snapped open, and I dashed ahead, pushing off the wall, rounding another bend, and there—the door! The passageway narrowed to a single set of stairs leading up.

“Wait!” Marlow laughed, rushing behind.

I slowed as I reached four small stone steps leading up to a square wooden door overhead. I felt around blindly for the latch, only illuminating it with the candle once I found it. Marlow was at my back, surrounding me. I lifted the metal piece, and, together, we pushed up. The door raised high and then fell open to the ground.

I climbed out first.

And into a quiet, sleeping stable that smelled of horses and hay.

Like home.

Marlow closed the door behind us and latched it as I straightened. Our breaths met the cold air in little wisps. He set his candle on a little ledge in the wall behind us.

Leathers hung on hooks. Pails and brushes and tools waited on little tables and shelves. Marlow watched me take it all in.

“Your villainous hideout?” I motioned to the peaceful quiet around us.

“Indeed.” He frowned. Hands on his hips, he took in this space, which was lit

only by the moonbeams trailing in from high windows lining the walls.

“Honestly, I had no idea that passage led here. I was hoping for a dark cellar.”

I laughed aloud, and Marlow’s delighted eyes met mine. And we wandered. The stable was composed of a dozen or so horse stalls, half along each wall, each lined with hay. To my right, I looked in on a black stallion sleeping while standing. Then a gray mare lying down next door; she barely rustled as we passed.

“This is much better than a dark cellar.”

He smiled.

I thought back to the look he’d given me earlier. The touch of his hand. And my chest tightened. “Though I think I’ve had enough dark passageways.” I trailed my hand along the smooth, polished wooden doors of each stall. “I much prefer the moonlight.”

“It suits you better.”

I looked back and found him not too far off. Studying me again. Still smiling. “Was there really a rat?”

He did not immediately answer. “. . . Yes.”

I wanted to crawl out of my own skin. I imagined something skittering up my spine and tried to shrug the feeling away. “I am *not* going back through there.”

He chuckled, stopping beside me at the end of the row. “We can return through a side door of the house. I have a key.”

“Thank heavens,” I breathed. I leaned against the door to the stall of a beautiful white mare.

“Her name is Flora.” Marlow leaned opposite me, his body angled toward me, but his gaze on his horse.

“She’s lovely.”

His eyes met mine, thoughtful. “Would you like to take her out tomorrow?”

I hadn’t ridden a horse in ages. Not since last summer with Peter before both our lives changed. “I would love that. If I am able.”

Marlow lowered his chin. “I told you, Georgiana. You can do whatever you please here.”

Not that again. As though I was untethered and free from all responsibility. “Your mother might have plans for—”

“She can wait.”

Make the Duchess of Marlow wait? What world was he living in? “Don’t say that.”

“What?”

“‘Do whatever you please.’ Like I *can*. Like I *should*. I cannot walk around

your estate like I have free rein. Especially now, with your mother angry with me after Mrs. Waymont's party. I must be reasonable and responsible."

He looked utterly baffled. His lips parted as though to speak, and then he promptly shut them. Then he raised his hand to the back of his neck and stretched out his fingers. His forehead scrunched. "Tell me, then, in what way could I have made the offer more reasonable for you to accept?"

He seemed truly interested in my answer. An earnest question that felt rare from him.

I thought for a moment. "Perhaps phrasing the offer more like, 'If you have the time, you're welcome to take Flora on a ride.'"

Marlow nodded his head slowly. "Is not that exactly what I said?"

I sighed dramatically. "You said it with such demand, though. Like I am a piece for you to move around in a game of chess. Do this, do that, whatever you want because ultimately *I* am in control."

Again, the quiet contemplation. "But I *am* in control."

I turned round and lifted my candle toward the sleeping Flora in her stall. "You are never in control of another person, Marlow. No matter how much you wish it. No matter if you are a duke or even a king. Our minds and our hearts are our own. And beyond that, a person's choices define them. It is unwise to insist I do whatever I want, without either of us giving thought to the consequences."

Flora's foot jerked in her sleep. We watched her together in a moment of shared, quiet contemplation. Just when I thought he would not speak, he shifted toward me.

"How old are you?"

I could not decide if he was in earnest or somehow teasing me. And for some reason I felt defensive. "Twenty. How old are you?"

"Thirty. And yet I feel you are markedly older than I. Wiser, certainly."

Why was he being so kind to me this evening? Wise? Me? "Funny, because I gauged your years at least forty for how cantankerous you are."

"*Forty*, deuces." He laughed, and I marveled at the way it brightened his otherwise serious expression. "You need spectacles. I am not so aged."

I smirked, admitting, "No, you are not."

He lifted his aristocratic chin. "In fact, I am told I'm rather handsome."

His gaze searched mine. For what? A reaction? A compliment? Ronald and I had never spoken like this. If anyone else had tried, I'd never paid attention. Oh, I could bat my lashes, smile coyly, offer hollow compliments. But this sort of back and forth, this searching each other's mind, teasing out truths to get to the heart of someone else's opinion—that was foreign to me.

And dangerous ground, coming from the Duke of Marlow who had Lady

Diana to think of.

Perhaps all he wanted was a little confidence. A stroke of his ego for Drury Lane tomorrow. He knew the truth, anyway; he just wanted to hear me say it. So, I leaned in as though sharing a secret. "You are very handsome, Your Grace . . ."

His eyes widened as though in pleased surprise, and he leaned in closer too. Close enough for me to see the freckle under his bottom lip. And even though we had ample space around us now, I felt the same as I had in the passageway. Like it was just us, the duke and me, enclosed together in a narrow space. I worried he might touch me again.

I worried that I wanted him to.

His gaze dropped to my mouth, weakening my knees.

My lips parted with a breath. ". . . In an evil villain sort of way."

A grin split his face. He bit his bottom lip. "Ah, yes. I'd almost forgotten my titular role this evening. Shall I draw you out into a dark graveyard and let the ghosts whisk you away?"

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing, and the motion drew back his gaze. "I don't think you could stomach it. Your conscience would eat away at you."

His eyes moved around my face. "On the contrary, I am not yet forty. I have no conscience for another decade yet."

"Ridiculous man," I teased, giving my attention back to Flora.

I felt him tug gently on the fabric of my robe as though to draw me closer, but when I looked up, he was watching Flora, playing mindlessly with my strings.

He was no villain. Not really. Just an endearing man with a hidden heart and hopes for his future.

A good man who deserved the very best for his future.

I pushed off the stall door and nudged him playfully with my shoulder as I passed. Perhaps I'd see Flora tomorrow. Likely not, with Her Grace insisting I be present for morning calls and Drury Lane later in the afternoon and evening. With how scheduled she kept our time, there was a very real chance I'd never see Flora again.

I opened the stable house door and stepped down onto a dirt pathway and into cool, clarifying air. Overhead, glinting stars scattered around the full moon. It was beautiful. As good a view as London could provide. The great house was to our right.

Marlow, with candle in hand, followed me out. "You were not impressed with my passageway nor my stables." He drew up to my side.

I was, I just could not admit to it. Especially not with him looking at me with

such earnestness, such boyish hope. “Udolpho’s ghosts are better. And there are no rats.”

He rolled his eyes heavenward. “Udolpho, Udolpho. How can a man ever measure up?”

“No man can measure up to a good book.” I covered a yawn.

Marlow watched me with a curious look on his face, our feet pattering together on the dirt path. “I’ve kept you up far too late. I apologize.”

I glanced sideways at him. “There he goes again. As though I couldn’t have left earlier if I’d wanted to.”

Marlow huffed. “*He* is trying to be kind. But perhaps *he* is out of practice and could use a little grace.”

I smiled. He was right. Clearly, I was tired. And irritable. And completely overwhelmed with this man. A little grace—couldn’t we all use a little grace?

“Forgive me. Perhaps I am being too critical.”

He bowed his head, thoughtful. “I know I can seem a little . . . forceful at times. But I only mean to make you feel comfortable, to say that you are welcome here, and free to do as you please, whenever you please, however you wish. Because I want you to be happy here.” His eyes watched mine. His hand touched the lightest pressure on my arm. “I do not aim to control you, Georgiana. I only aim to please you.”

I swallowed hard, my body still, save for the drumming in my chest. No man had ever spoken so generously to me before. Never cared so much for my happiness.

His hand trailed down my arm, brushing against my little finger before dropping.

I wasn’t sure what to do or say. Should I continue on to the house? Would he follow me? A chill in the air seeped through my robe and dress. “Th-thank you.”

“You’re cold.” He started to shrug out of his robe. Underneath, he wore only a thin shirt and waistcoat with trousers. He’d surely freeze. Not to mention the picture I’d make in *his* robe.

“No, no.” I stepped back. I couldn’t take the Duke of Marlow’s robe. “We are almost returned. If we just—”

“Georgiana. Take my robe. You are cold.”

Reason warred with comfort in my mind. I wanted it—though I most certainly should not—but not because of the cold. “It’s too intimate a gesture, even for a friend.”

“Any gentlemen would offer his coat,” he argued. “How is this any different?”

“Sir Ronald never did.”

“Well, that”—he started to laugh, but it quickly turned frustrated—“just confirms to me that the man is an utter dolt. On this subject, I will not hear your arguments. It is taking all my patience to hear them this evening as it is.”

“I cannot.” I stepped back again. Perhaps I could make it to the door before he did. Then again, I had this wretched candle in my hand.

Marlow lifted one brow. “Don’t you dare run.”

I smirked.

Then I bolted.

I made it all of three bounds before he had me with one arm, both our candles held high. Mine flew with the force, extinguished, and broke in two.

“Drat it all,” I murmured under my breath as a line of smoke dissolved in the air.

“Language, Miss Wood,” he teased at my ear. “Gads, you *are* freezing.”

Gently, he wrapped his thick robe around my shoulders. Oranges and musk and leather.

Instant warmth.

“Better?” His gaze softened as I pulled the robe close.

I felt more than better, but I would never admit it. “Without a flame, I am dependent on you now. Happy?”

“Yes.” He grinned. Then he held out his arm.

I groaned. I shouldn’t. How silly could a girl be in one night? I had already grown too close with the duke since staying with him, and tonight had made everything worse. For I did not dislike him anymore. I did not think him a horrible beast of a man. Yes, he was rude. Yes, he could be callous and unfeeling and forceful.

But he was also so much more than that.

He was generous and kind. Witty and thoughtful and spirited.

Ambitious with his future. Hardworking and hopeful.

Did he show this side of himself to Lady Diana, too, when he called upon her? The woman must be beside herself with wanting.

He huffed. “I am seconds away from taking your hand myself.”

I quirked a brow, daring him to try.

I looked around. There was only black and the moon. Distant lights. Lanterns closer to the house. Sighing, I lifted my hand and laced it through his arm.

His warmth felt like a comfortable, well-worn glove, and despite my anxiety, I quickly relaxed in his hold. He drew me nearer to his side and lifted his candle ahead of us. Together, we walked. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You are very warm,” I admitted. And he smelled so, so good. Like spicy oranges.

“Because I’ve come straight from the furnace of the underworld.”

Caught off guard, I laughed aloud and bumped into his side. How different he was out here, just the two of us. I much preferred this duke. This man.

“For someone who doesn’t read fiction, you have quite the imagination. Heavens, I haven’t laughed so much in an age.” And it was true. I couldn’t remember the last time my stomach ached as happily as it now did.

“I think you, Georgiana Wood, prefer a villain to a dashing hero, don’t you?” His voice was husky and low.

We were halfway to the house, nearing the gravel drive. I thought of Sir Ronald, a hero to his core. Had I had half this much fun in a single night with him?

No. Not once.

Ronald and I had laughed, but it had never felt as real, as *natural*, as this. Perhaps, all along, I’d been looking for the wrong sort of man.

“I suppose we shall see what Mrs. Johns comes up with.”

Marlow groaned, somehow tightening his hold even more. He made us slow our steps.

And then lights appeared to our left. Moving lights.

Lanterns. And the pattering of horses’ hooves.

I froze, yanking him back a step. “Who—”

“Gabriel must be home at last.” Marlow started to walk toward the house.

I dug in my heels, tugging him backward before blowing out his candle. “We cannot be seen!”

“Georgiana,” he protested, laughing, but it was a half-hearted chiding. He tossed his smoking candle and silver holder in the gravel ahead. He let me tug him back and toward a tree to the right. We moved around the wide, old trunk until I was satisfied we were hidden.

As though we could be seen this far from the house in the middle of the night anyway. But the candle had illuminated us some.

And if Gabriel found us out here in the dark alone, he’d tell Maggie, and Maggie would—heavens, what would Maggie *think*? She would certainly tell the duchess, who would have my head regardless of what Marlow said. I had promised her I’d play my part.

Marlow needed a wife—a nice, well-mannered lady of good standing and wealth. He certainly did not need to be spending his evenings wandering around with me. Not that I was presumptuous enough to think that anything I did or said would keep the Duke of Marlow from marrying the woman he wanted to marry.

I poked my head around the trunk as the carriage slowed in the drive. The driver did not so much as peek in our direction.

Then Gabriel stepped down. We watched with bated breath as he took the stairs to the front doors. When he reached the top, he turned and looked out in the darkness. Straight toward us.

He lingered for a long moment. Then he turned and entered the house.

He knows.

I didn't know how. I didn't have any reason other than a feeling deep in my gut.

But I had already wagered that Gabriel was far more intelligent than the duke gave him credit for. I suspected Gabriel knew something about the nature of my relationship with Marlow—that it was not based entirely upon truth.

“Come,” Marlow said, urging my hand back in the crease of his arm. “Before you catch your death out here.”

“Before you catch *yours*,” I muttered.

His laugh was deep and infectious.

An hour later, I was safe and warm in my bed, no one the wiser for it, and drifting to sleep to the scent of spice and oranges still lingering on my skin.



The next morning, I awoke late to Jane placing a tea tray with pastries, fruit, and lavender tea on my bedside table.

Beside it sat my copy of *Udolpho*, which I'd forgotten in the library, with a little note attached.

From the ghosts of Ashburn Abbey's passageways.

The Duke of Marlow hopes you are well-rested. He reminds you that the stables are yours, at your leisure, should you wish to explore them, as is the rest of the house and grounds. At your leisure. Should you wish. (Not a command.)

Enjoy the day.

My cheeks ached from how hard I grinned. I read the note three times over, tracing the slanted scrawl with my fingertips.

Against my better judgment, I felt his words take root in my heart and expand. I shouldn't let them. I should dig them out and toss them aside before they took hold of me. Before they grew. I had let such feelings take root before, and it had ruined me.

I'd let myself feel things the other person hadn't. I didn't want that to happen

between Marlow and me.
I feared it already had.

Chapter Fifteen

MARLOW

My body groaned as I rolled to my side.

I'd fallen asleep with Cleo in my lap and the second volume of *Udolpho* on my chest, again awoken in the chair to a *thunk* when it fell to the floor, and moved in a haze to my bed. Usually, the sun persuaded me to rise every morning, but the clock struck ten, and still, I burrowed into my covers.

I did not want to rise and have to work and wait all day to see Georgiana again.

Vision still blurry from sleep, I had an idea grand enough to wake for. A reason to talk to her that wouldn't seem out of the ordinary to a friend. Out of bed, I scribbled a note about the ghosts we'd chased last night, sent it with *her* copy of the book she'd left in the library, and a tea tray.

Then I dressed for exercise.

Mr. Portland sat waiting for me in the fencing room.

"Well rested this morning?" he teased as I strode into the room, an hour later than normal. He stood from his chair and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

I took my foil in hand and crossed the room. "I couldn't sleep."

He smirked. Nodded his welcome. "Nice to see you too. Should we talk about what has you losing sleep? Or should I say *who*?"

I blinked and Georgiana was there, in my mind's eye. Racing ahead of me in the passageway, her skirts billowing behind. Taking my hand. Laughing with me under the moonlight.

No, I would not speak of Georgiana. She was *mine*. My secret. I raised my foil at him in answer. "En garde."

He arched a brow, still smirking as he raised his own foil and rounded me. "As you wish, Your Grace."

We clashed foils for an hour, rushing and retreating in a winding dance, my mind a blank slate, until my muscles ached and sweat saturated my shirt.

He threw a towel at me before he left. "Good work today. You ought to *lose sleep* more often."

“See yourself out,” I said to his back, for he’d already turned.

He waved a hand over his shoulder.

Perhaps I would lose sleep tonight. If Georgiana felt like reading.

Had she awoken yet? I wouldn’t blame her for sleeping well into the afternoon after how late we’d stayed out.

After eating breakfast, a cool bath awaited me, and, alone in my room, I sunk into it. At this rate, I’d be working at my desk until dinner.

No, that would not do. Perhaps I could task Toole with some of the less important business.

Shaved, I took my time dressing, stopping in the mirror a final time to smooth my hair. Something was lacking. Smooth jaw, starched cravat . . . perhaps a little more scent?

Saints, I sounded like Gabriel.

Enough.

I barged out the door just as the clock struck one in the afternoon. I descended the stairs, heading toward my study as soon as my boots touched the ground, and went to work.

I tried to read the paperwork in front of me. Once, twice, even a third time. Squirrels jumped around out the window. Birds sang merry melodies. Cleo stalked in and out, over my boots.

I only made it halfway through before a knock sounded gently on my door.

Georgiana? My heart drummed against my ribs. No, it wouldn’t be her. What reason would she have to seek me out here? What would she possibly need of me?

I imagined her sauntering in. Wearing that pretty blue gown she’d worn to the Waymonts’ party. Hair pinned up, cheeks rosy . . . lips painted red. She’d come in slowly, watching me with that clear, golden-green gaze. I’d sit back in my chair as she stopped just above my desk, her hip leaning against the oak, lips parted as she drew in that full, bottom lip—

Tap, tap, tap.

I blinked and swallowed hard. Devil take it, what was wrong with me?

“Come in.”

I cleared my throat and raked a hand down my face. I’d overslept. I’d read far too late in the evening, and then I’d overslept. My mind was still a little fuzzy, that was all.

“Your Grace.” Toole stepped into the room. “Her Grace and company plan to walk Hyde Park in an hour. Your presence is requested.”

Blast and bother. What, now? “Who—” I cleared my throat again. Gads, something was stuck. “Who is expected to join?”

“Yourself, Her Grace, Mrs. Drexel, Mr. Brennan, and Miss Wood.”

Georgiana. She’d walk with Maggie because the whole point was to keep our distance. But seeing her at all outside of our evenings sounded appealing, even though it shouldn’t. I shouldn’t be thinking about her at all.

“Very well, thank you.”

Toole nodded and started to turn, and I suddenly panicked. I didn’t want to be alone in this room with only work to divert my mind from thoughts of the wrong woman. For that was what she was—wrong for me. For the dukedom. And yet the more time I spent with her, in every way she felt exactly right. I couldn’t explain it.

“Toole?” I called him back on impulse.

He stopped at the door and turned round expectantly. “Yes, Your Grace?”

I wasn’t even sure what I wanted from him. Answers, certainly, but I wouldn’t tell him the whole of my current problem, my inability to control my own mind. My *weakness*. Perhaps, though, he could give me a window into his. Understanding his feelings might help me sort out mine.

“That woman—the one you are hopeful to marry.”

His eyes brightened. “Mrs. Page, Your Grace.”

Mrs. Page. The widow. How to say it . . . “You said your feelings haven’t changed since you were younger, and I wonder—how can you be certain what you feel now is affection and not just responsibility? Something more than a desire to protect this woman you once knew and cared for.”

Toole looked surprised. He turned thoughtful for a moment, clasping his hands behind his back. He smiled to himself. His lips parted, then closed. Then he looked me straight on. “I’d be wise to invent some grand revelation in answer, Your Grace, to convince you to allow the marriage. I assume you are still considering it. But the truth is simple: loving her was easy. It still is. As effortless as breathing. Not that she is without flaw or has never made me unhappy or upset. No, she simply fits with me in a way no one else ever has. I understand how she thinks and feels, and she, likewise, understands me. After all this time, I have never stopped loving her. Never stopped thinking about her. Now that she is back in my life, I simply want to be near her. Whether or not the marriage is to my detriment, I am incomplete without her. And I do not wish to live another day that does not end with going home to her.”

I watched the man, two decades or more my senior, his heart overfull for this woman in a way most men would die for, and dash, if I wasn’t halfway taken with emotion. I certainly didn’t feel an inkling of that for Lady Diana.

I envied my butler. Badly.

“What does it feel like? This love you speak of?”

“Sweet.” His gaze softened. “Painful.”

I nodded, looking down at my desk. *Distracting?* I wondered.

“It will change you. Perhaps even come as a surprise. Make you question everything. And you’ll never be the same.”

One moment, he made the idea sound like pure bliss, the next, like a disease. I could not fathom it. “Thank you, Toole.”

He bowed, stepping back. Then, before he rounded the door, “Your Grace?”

He looked determined. Perhaps he’d ask for my decision on his marriage. I’d have to make one soon. In truth, I’d only been thinking about myself asking after the whole arrangement. He made a dashed good argument, but could I let him follow this folly potentially at the expense of the dukedom?

I met his gaze. “Toole?”

“Do not make the same mistake I did. If you find yourself fortunate enough to find such a love, follow it the first time.” A nod, and he was gone.

Something flickered in my chest. Desire, perhaps. Hope?

I harrumphed to myself. Folly. That was all love was. A fool’s errand. A fiction.

No matter, for I had a duty, and that duty came above all else.

I realized my legs had started to bounce, and quickly ceased them. Whatever these strange new feelings were—likely some minor infatuation from having a beautiful woman in my home—I determined not to let them distract me from my duty. No woman was worth that.

“Work,” I muttered to myself, lifting a stack of correspondence I’d neglected.

The hour passed quickly, and just as quickly, I dressed and made my way to the drawing room to assuage my mother’s nerves. A short walk in Hyde Park several paces away from Georgiana ought to quiet the *ton*’s rumor mill.

I didn’t need to look in the mirror. Didn’t need any extra polishing. I took the stairs with renewed confidence in finding a proper wife. Perhaps she’d be out walking Hyde Park. Perhaps, I thought as I descended the last step and crossed the foyer, she’d even be distracted by *me*. I was the Duke of Marlow, after all, and any woman I had any intention of courting would—

I stopped in the drawing room doorway.

Georgiana was laughing at something Gabriel was saying. Her eyes lit up, her smile so wide her entire face changed. I watched her, mind utterly blank, in some sort of trance. I *felt* the sight of her.

The soft ringlets of her golden hair pinned back were an ache in my fingertips. Full lips glossed with the slightest rouge, just enough to draw a man

in, were a hitch in my breath. And her eyes . . . her light, green-and-gold-speckled eyes were a rampant beating in my chest.

“There you are!” Mother called, stalking toward me from the settee. “You are late by a quarter hour.”

Maggie moved closer. “Are you unwell, Marlow? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

Georgiana’s lips twitched. Our eyes locked, and her smile was an arrow soaring through my chest.

I stared.

Mother took my arm and spun me toward the foyer. “We are already pushing the Fashionable Hour as it is. Come, now! Let us depart at once.”

I let her lead me to the carriage steps. I helped her up, unseeing, unfeeling. Gabriel helped himself.

My every sense was trained on Georgiana. Her footsteps. Her exact distance away.

Maggie took my arm, then my hand, and stepped up. Then Georgiana stopped at the foot.

Apples.

She smiled up at me, and time stopped. “Visiting hidden passages this morning without me, are you?” she whispered. *You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.*

I tried to smile. My muscles tightened as she took my hand for support. I felt a strange sick sensation in my stomach.

Undoubtedly, I was taking ill.

Overwarm. Sweaty. Heart drumming in my chest. I could almost swear something was lodged in my throat.

I said nothing as she settled on the far side of the carriage, between Maggie and the window. Nothing as we drove the short distance to Hyde Park. As I helped them all down. As Maggie took Georgiana’s arm and hurried ahead down the walking path.

Gabriel offered his arm to my mother, who seemed humored and pleased to walk with him, and I took a moment to compose myself.

It was *her*. Georgiana. She had done something to me. My mind was no longer my own. I couldn’t keep my eyes from following her, no matter how many times I commanded them.

It took precisely three minutes for someone along the walking path to stop us.

Mrs. Renworth and her eldest daughter, both with gaudy, overadorned hats atop their heads.

I smiled and nodded and clasped my hands together as the women conversed with my mother, glancing every so often ahead to see if Georgiana had stopped.

She stayed ahead for the whole first hour. Try as I might to bridge the gap between us, every few steps it seemed someone needed my attention. But as soon as the conversation stalled, my attention wandered . . .

I *wanted* to watch Georgiana. She was, perhaps, the most interesting creature on the planet. Especially when she did not think anyone was looking.

I had to bite back my humor with every glance.

The way she stooped low to smell a flower, then scrunched her nose in distaste. When a bee got too close, she jolted forward, bursting into laughter with Maggie when the danger had passed. When two gentlemen had interrupted their laughter, she'd bolted ramrod straight as though nothing had happened at all. She spoke with her hands at her sides, but when she had something to say in earnest, they were used as half the story themselves.

I said "Pardon?" so often in my own conversations, that when Mother finally frowned at me, I made a concerted effort to be present.

The afternoon would never end—

The sun was too hot.

The company too loud.

Too slow.

Too boring.

My jaw ached, and I realized I'd been gritting my teeth.

"You aren't yourself," Gabriel whispered at my side. A warning as good as one of Maggie's looks.

I grunted. "There is much to do at home."

"Leave home *at home*." He nodded toward Lady Diana and her mother heading straight for us.

Blast and bother.

I glanced ahead at Georgiana, standing with a few young ladies, apart from Maggie and an older woman. She looked small among them.

I could've sworn she was frowning.

"What fortuitous timing!" Mother trilled. "Marlow, look who I've found!"

Chapter Sixteen

GEORGIANA

My hands were fists at my sides.

What did she just say?

“We won’t tell a soul,” Miss Grandy whispered. Her friend, Miss Spellman, grinned like a cat. “Just tell us the truth.”

I glanced sideways, but Maggie had stepped out of earshot. I’d conversed with both of these women at the Waymonts’ party. They’d called upon me at Ashburn Abbey. I’d called back with Her Grace. I’d thought we were making progress. I’d thought we were . . . friends.

What did you have to do to earn the duke’s favor? was the first question they’d asked when they had me alone.

“Are you inferring that I have loose morals?”

The girls drew back, laughing as though we three were privy to some inside trickery. Miss Spellman squeezed my arm. “Come, now, Miss Wood. You are so good at pretending. We know what you did to try to force Sir Ronald’s hand. What did the duke require? Was it quite the chore? We won’t judge you for it, will we, Rachel?”

Miss Grandy pursed her lips. “But we would like to know how you’ve managed it.”

Emotion boiled in my veins. Anger for their horrible assumptions, fear that I’d act on that anger, and sorrow that what I’d hoped for seemed farther out of reach than ever. These women hadn’t believed my friendship with the duke for a second. They’d seen it for what it was—a means to an end. They were wrong about the *how*, but they were not wrong about the pretending.

Foolish of me to hope that they would ever see me as anything more than the one grand mistake I’d made.

Might as well shock them. It was what they wanted, wasn’t it? I tilted my head at them and forced a smile. “Let me assure you, ladies, it wasn’t a chore at all. The man came to me.” Their jaws dropped as they gasped, and I turned on a heel. “Mrs. Drexel, I am overtired. A headache ails me.”

Maggie tsked and squeezed her friend's arm. "Please excuse us, Mrs. Grandy. Farewell, girls."

"Please take me home," I whispered as Maggie laced her arm through mine.

"That bad, is it?"

I nodded, rubbing my temples. Maggie did not want to interrupt the duke and Lady Diana, so we tore Gabriel away and the three of us hired a hackney.

Ashburn Abbey felt like a refuge. But it wasn't home.

The closest I'd felt to home was in the library with Marlow. And in the stables. He'd become a truer friend to me than anyone else in London, but he was the last person I could talk to. The last person who would want to hear my self-inflicted grief.

Gabriel had the hackney take him back into Town, though he didn't say whereabouts.

Maggie sighed heavily and gave her hat to Toole with mine just as her husband, Thomas, came out from the drawing room. "Darling?"

She fell into his arms.

My heart ached for a similar reprieve. Someone, anyone, who cared for me as much. I could think of only one place to go. I backed up a few steps and slipped right out the front door.

The air was warmer in the stables. In daylight, though the sky grew more golden as the hour turned, the space seemed magnificent in size. Details I hadn't noticed before—ropes, harnesses, feed buckets, tools—drew my attention, distracting me every few steps. Half the stalls were empty. But Flora was there. I didn't say a word. I sat on the floor just outside her stall, watching her through the slats. She watched me, too, settling on the hay.

I lay my head against the wooden wall and squeezed my eyes shut. I would not cry. Not over this. I'd already spent enough tears.

I missed home. I missed Mercutio. I missed Peter, and heaven help me, but I even missed Amelia.

My gaze landed on a bucket of oats, and I scooped up a handful, offering it to Flora from under the high door. I moved closer, petting her nose as I fed her.

What do I do now?

Would Society ever forgive me for what I'd done? I doubted it. There would always be questions in their minds—*What kind of person is Georgiana? What more has she done?*

Time might prove my character, but the truth was, even with the duke by my side, their opinions were unchanged. They simply acted as he expected them to. That is, until he was out of sight.

"—take whoever is available." Voices sounded just outside, and the door

scraped open against the stone floor.

I jumped up, patting the dust off my skirts and straightening them.

Marlow.

He startled when he saw me. His eyes washed over me, brows knit together. He'd forsaken his top hat. "Geor—M-miss Wood."

The young stablehand looked between us, then down to his feet.

"On second thought, later, perhaps," Marlow said to him, and the boy quickly hurried out the door. The stable house quieted once more.

I faced him, unsure of what to do, and wrung my hands together. Again, I felt the instinct in his presence to follow the rules of propriety. To leave before we were seen alone. Before something happened I might regret.

I already had enough regrets.

Marlow's chest rose, then he exhaled. Perhaps he mulled over the same thoughts.

I surely looked a fearsome sight. Dusty, unkempt, sitting with his horses. I should excuse myself, have Jane rush a cold bath for me, and ready myself for dinner.

But a stronger instinct trumped reason. A desire to stay. To have him pull me close, wrap his arms around me. To hear him say that everything would be well soon, if only I'd be brave and keep trying.

Folly, for if I acted on that instinct, he'd certainly freeze and push me back.

"You left early." His deep voice rumbled through the space.

I shrugged a shoulder. "Headache."

Hands behind his back, he took a few aimless steps, closer, as though inspecting the stables. "Better now?"

I nodded. "Just a little out of sorts."

He stopped a pace away at Flora's stall and rested a hand on her door, watching her. "I am glad you came here, then."

I leaned my shoulder against the stall door, facing him. "You know how dearly I love hay barns."

He squinted. "This is a stable house."

Details! I waved a hand in the air. "It has the same effect."

Marlow nodded. "Hay in your hair? Dust and dirt on your hands?" He fought a smile.

I took a deep breath of hay and dust and dirt and fought the urge to cough. "Calming to the soul."

His gaze bored into mine. His smile faded. "Anything I can do to sort you out?"

Sort me out. My heartbeat flurried within my chest. I wished I could lay

every worry, every sorrow at his feet and ask him to carry them all away. “Same old problems, I am afraid. Even a duke cannot fix them.”

He leaned back, still holding onto the stall door. He huffed at my disbelief in his abilities. “Despite two whole outings?”

I tilted my head at him. *One*. “Hyde Park does not count. Your mother planned that. And we were hardly seen together.” Not that being seen together would do any good. Today had proved that.

He smiled, nodding at my reasoning. Flora shifted in her stall, lifted her head, and then settled again. We watched her together.

“Did someone say something to you?” Marlow asked nonchalantly.

Had he heard something? Had the girls gone to him after I’d shocked them with falsehoods? My cheeks burned, remembering.

“Tell me.” His voice was gentle, but commanding. And this time, I did not chide him for it.

I wanted to tell him. I wanted him to care. But unfortunately, his name was involved. I worried he’d be angry with me. “I was asked earlier . . .” I swallowed a lump forming in my throat. I’d been managing the opinions of others for months now. I shouldn’t care, shouldn’t let their words affect me so. Admitting them to Marlow was both humiliating and painful. “I was asked if to earn your friendship, I’d done to you something like I’d done to—”

Marlow held up a hand to stop me. A muscle popped in his jaw. “Who? Who said this?”

I shook my head, looking down at my slippers. “Just some women from earlier.”

He shifted his feet, then reached out to lift up my chin. “Name them.” His eyes were fierce, his voice firm. “Please.”

As though he’d rush to defend my honor. My heart tugged toward him. “They are only repeating what they hear. I shouldn’t let them bother me.”

“Tell me their names, Georgiana, and I will ensure they never open their mouths with falsehoods ever again. I will spread the ugliest rumors, and they can see how it *feels*—”

I barreled into him so hard, he lost his breath, his very speech, as my arms flew around his neck. Face buried in his jacket, I choked, coughing out the rising emotion demanding an escape.

Slowly, his hesitant hands wrapped around my waist, and I let myself cry for a moment. Just a moment.

“What can I do?” he whispered into my hair. “Please, do not cry, Georgiana.”

I sniffed. “I’m not,” I lied, pulling back to wipe my eyes with my sleeves. “So sorry. I lost myself.”

“Don’t apologize. Let me help you.” He kept me in his hold, tightening his grasp. “Indeed, I refuse to release you until you’re smiling again.” He raised his brows, expectantly. “And let me be clear—there is absolutely no rush to smile.”

My lips quirked, and I tried desperately to bite down my humor. “No, I mean it. You have helped me so much already. Whilst I fear I have only made your life harder.”

He reared back, still holding me, shaking his head. “Not by half.”

“I have, Marlow. Indeed, just this afternoon I said something I shouldn’t have, and if word got around . . . these women, they irritate me to no end.” I sighed and grasped his arms, thinking I should pull them off, but he took one of my hands and lifted it to his chest.

The right side of his mouth lifted playfully. “What, pray tell, did you say?”

My gaze hung on his. It was warm and inviting, and I felt far too at home in his hold.

I flushed. I could feel the warmth spreading from my neck to the top of my head. He would likely laugh, but it would be mortifying to admit, all the same. I cleared my throat and raised my chin, meeting his gaze with a confidence I did not feel. “I told them earning your friendship in such a way was no great chore.”

His lips parted, and was that a tint of pink in his cheeks?

I bit my grin. “Forgive me. I’ve slandered you just as much as I’ve slandered myself.”

He made a funny noise and looked to the side, laughing. “Georgiana Wood. You are . . . dash it all, woman, if that gets out, my mother will have my head.”

I winced, laughing, and he was still reeling enough that I broke free of his hold and stepped back a safe distance. I immediately regretted it.

“The words flew out of my mouth, and I wished I could rescind them. But you said you do not care about Society’s opinions. Do you?”

“I do not care.” The humor in his voice calmed my nerves, but I still felt awful for dragging his name through the mud with mine. Upon our first meeting, I wouldn’t have thought twice about it.

So strange how fast life can change.

His eyes warmed. He watched me with a serious look from beneath his lashes. “Walk the gardens with me?”

“Now?” I looked around to the cracked open doorway behind us that led outside.

“We are quite alone.” Marlow rubbed his jaw, then tucked his hands behind his back. “And I think it’s best—I do not think I should be left alone with you just now.”

I raised a brow. He hadn’t worried overmuch about propriety before. Perhaps

I'd finally worried him with how careless I could be with words. "I'm not sure my reputation can get much worse."

He gave me a look that shot straight down my spine. "I'm quite sure it can."

My throat went dry.

"Shall we?" He held out his hand, palm up.

I hesitated. Was this *too* familiar? Friends walked through gardens together, did they not? I slowly placed my hand in his. He weaved it through the crook of his arm and pushed open the stable house doors.

Rays of sunshine fell happily upon us. A gentle breeze brought sweet, floral scents, and a hint of warm, spiced oranges. We stepped around the stable house and together took in the view.

The grounds were beautiful. The gardens were at the back of the house, down a western walking path that led through a little gate. Marlow pointed out a patch of purple flowers. "I would not recommend smelling those."

Those were the ones from Hyde Park! "Awful things!" I shook my head. "Nothing so lovely should smell so terrible."

Marlow laughed. We walked several paces in silence, and I couldn't help but look back to the house. What would Maggie say, seeing us together like this? We were within view. A gardener worked within sight. But, still, I had an inkling Her Grace would not be pleased, especially after the talk in Town.

"You're quiet," Marlow said. "What are you thinking?"

"I am worrying about that gardener over there." I said it playfully, but Marlow's brows furrowed. "And wondering who else might be watching us."

Marlow tsked. "Why do you care so much about what other people might think?"

I frowned at him, and he frowned back. Only he could ask that question, because only he would struggle to understand.

"I do not care what they *think*, Marlow. I care what they say. And how it looks unfavorably on me. Without Society's good favor, I am uninvited, forgotten, whispered about. Alone. It is not a good feeling."

He looked ahead and took a few solemn breaths. "What you seek is not worth all that worry, I assure you."

"Says a man who could not lose favor if he tried." I gave him a sideways glance. We walked under a trellis of pink roses, sweet-smelling and full. I looked up and touched a few velvety petals as we passed underneath.

"These people, they are—" He stopped himself, then lowered his voice.

"They are like caricatures. They pretend. They exaggerate. Indeed, I may have their favor, but their company?" He looked at me with something akin to sorrow.

"I can tell you how it feels to have the full attention of the *ton*. To have their

favor, their invitations, their calling cards tossed on my tray by the dozens. It is *lonely*, Georgiana. Lonelier, perhaps, that having no one at all.”

I loosened my hold on his arm and faced him, measuring his expression only to find him sincere. Lonely? This man? I could hardly believe it. He, whose heart was pure gold. A fierce protector of all he loved. A man who fulfilled his duty to the letter, who worked above and beyond what was necessary, who cared for his family regardless of whether or not they cared about him.

We stopped at a fork in the path. One way led toward the house. The other, toward a lovely green gazebo.

“That cannot be true. You are beloved. Indeed, in Society’s eyes, you can do no wrong.”

“*Precisely*,” he said with fervor. “And yet they do not know me at all. They have no idea the mistakes I’ve made. How hard I’ve worked. How I would trade it all and then some just to have one more day with my father alive and well.” He swallowed hard, and I wanted so badly to pull him into an embrace as he had embraced me. “I am a fraud, Georgiana, if you want the truth. I make decisions that are far above me, and I hope for the best. But I am no one special. Just a boy born first in line to a man who happened to be a duke.”

I reached out and took his hand. “You do not give yourself enough grace.”

Our fingers laced together, and Marlow’s eyes softened. “Nor do you.”

“You have your cousins. Your family.”

He looked down and nodded. “Sometimes I wonder if they come round only out of obligation.”

“No.” I shook my head firmly. “No, they love you. I can see it in their faces. They’d do anything for you.”

“And your brother?” He squeezed my hand and tugged me toward the gazebo. “He loves you very much.”

I looked over my shoulder toward his tall, quiet house where not a soul was in sight, and leaned in closer. “I miss home,” I admitted. “I miss the countryside. Peter says I should try harder to befriend the girls there, but they look at me with disdain, and I cannot bear it. And now, I am a burden to him. He has a new wife, a baby coming—”

“You could never be a burden.” Marlow shook his head. “And if anyone makes you feel that way, they are not worthy of your affection.” He led me up the few steps to the center of the gazebo, surrounded by flowers and buzzing bees. “And I do not mean to discount your feelings”—he gave me a sheepish look—“but perhaps if you stopped *encouraging* these rumors, and instead—”

I huffed an annoyed breath, and he laughed.

“—spoke more seriously and showed them all the type of person you truly

are . . .”

I pursed my lips at him. “You think I am foolhardy, is that it?”

He froze his expression. He drew in a silent breath, then parted his lips and tilted his head. “I—no . . . this feels like a trick.”

I added furrowed brows to the pursed lips. “You think I encourage the rumors.”

He tilted his head and paused. “What was the phrase? *It was no great chore.*” His ears pinked, eyebrows raised, with humor curving his lips.

“And what would you have done, had an acquaintance said the same to you? Insinuated that *you* were a . . . trollop.” Speaking the word out loud almost made me laugh. The absurdity! How positively wretched to call someone such a name, especially without knowing them at all.

Marlow considered a moment, his jaw moving. “I’d have called him out and stabbed him straight through.”

No doubt. “Honorable for a man. But a woman?” I tsked, crossing from one side of the gazebo to the other. “I do not *mean* to encourage the rumors, but reason abandons me entirely. I cannot prove them wrong, so why not make a farce of it all?” I puffed out my cheeks and blew out a breath. “Perhaps I *am* foolhardy.”

Marlow paced the gazebo, then leaned around a column. He disappeared for a moment, his arm stretched out, then reappeared with a single white daisy in his hand. He twirled the stem between his fingers as he crossed the stone floor toward me, watching the petals. When we were an arm’s length apart, he handed it to me without a single word.

I brought it to my nose. Sweet, simple, beautiful. My heart squeezed at the gesture. “Thank you,” I said with feeling.

“You are not foolhardy, Georgiana,” he said. “You are clever and kind. Thoughtful of others’ needs. Your wit is . . . unmatched.” He chuckled, shaking his head as though in private thought. “You are the exact opposite of foolhardy. You are singular. Remarkable. Brilliant.”

His eyes softened, and I felt his words move through me like warm tea, swirling and settling at the base of my stomach. “You do not have to say that.”

“No,” he said, shrugging. “I do not.”

I should thank him. I should tell him that I thought the same of him—that he was just as singular. Just as kind and brilliant. I admired his bravery and ambition to bolster the dukedom.

I would miss him greatly when I left.

His smile. His unruly mess of hair when he was home and unbothered.

His touch.

The way he looked at me—*really* looked at me—as he did now.

I had a terrible feeling that he felt exactly what I did. That his feet danced in time with mine to a song only we could hear.

“Sit with me?” he asked, meandering over to a little bench tucked between two columns.

I twirled the daisy’s stem between my fingertips and slowly nodded my head.

We talked for an age, knees angled toward each other from either end of the bench. He asked about my family, so I told him about Peter and Amelia and how things had changed at home since they married. Why I felt like I was always in the way, even if it wasn’t true.

He told me about Maggie’s wedding to Thomas. How good of a man Thomas was. How their children had completely changed the dynamic of the whole family but for the better. And how he wanted to be a better uncle to them—more present.

We spoke of regrets, of hopes for the future. We laughed at each other’s foolishness and grinned to think of what might come next.

Marlow walked me through the rest of the garden until the sun started its descent, and the air chilled, and then we took the grand staircase together. He left me at my bedroom door, and we dressed for dinner.

We joined the family—Maggie, Thomas, Gabriel, and Her Grace—around the table.

We laughed until our stomachs ached on stories from times past. Apparently, Marlow had had an affinity for worms as a boy, much to his mother’s distaste, and would attempt to sneak them into the house at all hours.

“Gabriel, the snitch, never let me get away with it,” he laughed.

Gabriel’s face scrunched in protest. “Why couldn’t you have liked butterflies or ladybirds?”

Marlow looked at me and shook his head as though to say, *Do you hear this? You would have helped me, wouldn’t you have?*

Afterward, we played cards in the drawing room, even Gabriel, retiring only when our eyes were heavy with sleep.

I didn’t let myself worry about the morrow.

I could only hope, for the first time in a long time, that it would come.

Chapter Seventeen

MARLOW

My habits were changing, and not for the better.

Typically by noon, I had all my affairs in order for the day. Of course, with Parliament in session, I had much more than usual on my plate, but I wasn't needed for another few days, so my late mornings were forgivable. For now.

We hadn't played cards as a family in *ages*. Maggie had played the pianoforte while Gabriel and Thomas had opposed Georgiana and me in whist. It had felt like old times. Like . . . a family.

I'd lain in bed last night, candle burning to the quick, lost in thought. I now knew exactly who'd said those terrible things to Georgiana—the women Georgiana had spoken to alone. I'd asked Maggie for their names. I wouldn't say anything, but I certainly wouldn't entertain them.

Gads, the way Georgiana had clung to me. How she'd tried to stifle her emotion, her tears. It had taken everything in my power not to lose my head and make promises I wasn't sure I could keep. I wanted to protect her. Wanted to give her *everything* she needed to be safe and secure and happy.

The problem? Georgiana was not in my plan.

Which is why I'd tossed and turned, paced until my feet were sore, and finally slept for a precious few hours.

I awoke still unsettled.

I wasn't sure the plan felt *right* anymore.

Because what would my life look like when Georgiana left?

And, the more pressing question, what could I do about it? Never fulfill our bargain, and keep her hidden in the passageways forever?

I fenced to clear my mind, then dressed, then took the stairs down two at a time to the foyer. Time for work.

At the bottom, I rounded the staircase toward my study.

A peal of laughter echoed past me.

Georgiana? My attention turned toward the drawing room at the opposite end of the house.

She laughed again. What the devil was so amusing? I found myself smiling as I turned, following the echoes of her voice, remembering how just last night I'd made her laugh like this. How her face had brightened, her smile reaching the corners of her eyes.

Just a quick word.

I couldn't stay. But I could see her, wish her a good day, and perhaps she'd get that look in her eye that was half cross, half amused. The space between her perfectly shaped brows would crease, and she'd try to keep from smiling while chiding me for sleeping late.

The doors were open. I heard my mother's voice too. Maggie's. And . . . someone else.

“. . . seen a show before?" asked a man's voice.

My jaw clenched.

"No. Can you believe it? I'd dearly love to," Georgiana was saying as I entered. I found her on the settee in an airy, soft pink dress, her hair curled and arranged with ribbons atop her head.

Sitting beside Lord Stephen Reynolds.

London's most notorious rake. The fop was as close as he could possibly get to Georgiana without touching her, and my family *allowed* it.

Mother stood from her chair opposite the settee. "Your Grace. We did not know you were at home."

Ah, but she did. She knew I never joined for calls. She simply hadn't alerted me. Had she, Reynolds never would have been invited in.

Maggie, at the window, gave me a pointed look—the one that told me I needed to readjust my mood.

"What are you doing here?" I directed the question at Reynolds.

The man had the audacity to look directly at Georgiana. Leaning, were it possible, even closer to her. "I've come to pay a call to Miss Wood, Your Grace. I am delighted to make her acquaintance through our mutual friend, Mrs. Johns."

Georgiana leaned back and smiled up at him. Not her *true* smile, but a smile of encouragement all the same. She did not know of his reputation because if she did, the Georgiana I knew would not be sitting so closely.

"Join us." Mother motioned toward a chair at her right.

I stood as stiff and still as a tree. Mrs. Johns. This was all her doing. This was Maggie's and my mother's doing. I had trusted them to find someone worthy, someone to distract the rest of the *ton*, to help Georgiana's reputation, and *he* was their best option?

Devil take them all.

Georgiana's smile faded. "Are you well, Your Grace?"

“Quite.” In truth, I felt as though I’d overeaten. I felt weak and worn.

Georgiana did not seem to believe me. She frowned, and I hated myself for being the cause of it. “Won’t you join us for tea? Her Grace has just sent for a tray.”

“I love those little sandwiches . . . ham and cheese?” Reynolds practically leaned his head next to hers as he spoke. My jaw clenched so tight my back teeth ached. “My cook at home makes a berry tart unlike anything you’ve ever tasted. Sweet and sour all at once.”

“Mmm.” Georgiana smiled back, but her eyes found mine, questioning.

I hadn’t answered her. Did I want to stay for tea? What I wanted was to toss Reynolds out on his backside. Then, perhaps, take tea. “I—”

“You must have so much work to finish, dear.” Mother retook her seat. “But I daresay there will be plenty of time for conversation later.”

“What are you implying?” I heard the bite in my voice and felt the room tense.

“That you might wish to finish your work now and renew your friendship with Lord Reynolds tomorrow at Drury Lane.”

Tomorrow? Drury Lane? Had everyone gone completely mad? “I am unaware of anything happening at Drury Lane.”

“*Hamlet!*” Mother hid her bitter tone with sweetness. “Lord Reynolds has generously offered to escort Miss Wood. You will have gone to fetch Lady Diana. The four of you, along with Margaret and Gabriel, can reunite later in the evening.”

“A sound plan.” Reynolds nodded his approval.

I fisted a hand. There was no version of any evening of mine where Reynolds, who’d spent more time in brothels and gaming hells than at home with his ailing father, took Georgiana anywhere alone. “Absolutely not.”

“I beg your pardon?” He sat up straighter, mercifully moving further away from Georgiana.

“You are not permitted to join us.” As though we’d go anywhere at all. I hadn’t thought about Lady Diana since Mother had made me call upon her. I had no desire to take her to Drury Lane, or anywhere for that matter.

Georgiana frowned.

“Marlow, darling.” Mother laughed. “You’ve forgotten the plan.”

The *plan* was to show Society that Georgiana and I were merely friends. The problem was in the definition of the word. Perhaps because I had never had a friend quite like Georgiana. A close friend of the opposite sex. Was it normal to think this often of her? To imagine her in ways that made my chest feel like exploding?

None of it signified, for the plan never involved pawning her off on the worst possible creature in London. Georgiana's chest rose and fell, gaze set upon mine with indignation. She did not understand. Perhaps she'd been charmed. But she was under *my* protection, and I would not allow her to be taken in by this scoundrel. Out of respect for her brother and as her friend, I would see her to Drury Lane myself. When she learned the truth about Reynolds's character, she'd understand.

"Miss Wood, a word."

"Your Grace, I have a guest." Still, she sat straighter. She'd obey me. She, like everyone else, had to.

"Come."

Begrudgingly, she stood. "Please excuse me," she whispered. Without raising her gaze, she strode to me, and I turned from the room. Her pattering footsteps behind were a relief, and I led her down the foyer a few paces and around the grand staircase to a quiet corner.

I drew in an easy breath and exhaled. "Forgive me, Georgiana, but you—"

"How dare you."

I drew back. Examined her fully. Her cheeks were bright pink, and her eyes looked almost . . . pained. She'd been angry with me before, but this was different. This was unaccountable. "How . . . dare I?"

She scoffed, folded her arms around her middle, and glared at my chest. "That man came to call upon me, brought me flowers, and you treat him with callous regard and then uninvite him to an evening we had already arranged?"

She had no idea. No wisdom on the matter. She ought to be *thanking* me. "That man is a filthy scoundrel. He is wealthy, yes, but marred by greed. His appetite, his vices, know no bounds. I cannot allow you to be associated with a man who—"

"I am aware of Lord Reynolds's reputation." Her jaw tensed. Still, she would not meet my eyes. Her refusal to hear and trust my opinion in this matter created a bubble of frustration in my chest that very well might explode. Did she not see that my only aim was for her good? No, for she continued, "He spoke at length of his desire to change. His hope for a wife and family. The vices that you speak of—he has abandoned them this Season entirely."

Codswollop. Reynolds, a changed man? Not a chance. The man was too far gone. Especially for Georgiana, who'd barely scratched the surface of sin. "And you believe him?"

Her lips parted as though to chide me, but she thought better of it. She blinked, then slowly raised her gaze to mine.

I wished she hadn't. Her golden-green gaze cut through me like a sword. I

lost half my strength trying to hold it as she said, “You have no idea what it is to feel penitent for wrongdoing, do you?”

What the devil was she talking about? Penitent? For what? So far everything I’d done resulted in someone else’s happiness. Often I tried to be wise, to thwart their efforts, but when did my thwarting ever actually scratch deeper than the surface?

My temper started to flare. How dare she insinuate that my vices were anywhere near the level of *Reynolds*’s. I despised the gaming tables. I neglected, sometimes with great difficulty, seeking out pleasures. And this was what she thought of me? That I was no better than a man who made his bed in her worst nightmares. For what? Making demands of those who wronged me? Managing accounts and deciding with whom to entrust business matters?

She had *no idea*— “You think so little of me?”

She raised her chin and swallowed. She seemed at war with her own emotions, feeling something she did not wish to feel. Second by second she grew stronger in resolve. She took the smallest step forward and pointed her finger at my chest.

“I think you live your life without thought to the consequences. You say and do whatever you please, and you make everyone bend to your will. At the drop of a hat you might change your mind, your heart, and the rest of us must adjust. It is absurd—”

“I am the Duke of Marlow.”

She dropped her hand, her fury abandoned in an exhale. “Rest assured, we are all aware.”

The woman spoke in biting riddles aimed straight for the core of my lifeblood. She made me sound like some villain in her novels, and perhaps I was, but I had reason.

“I have a responsibility for your well-being until your brother returns, and I am using my best judgment. My only aim is to help you, to guide you where you deserve to be.”

She shook her head, unseeing. “Whyever do you *care*? Why do you care what happens to me? Or with whom I associate? It can mean nothing to you whether or not Lord Reynolds wishes to escort me to Drury Lane.”

Her words were a twist of the sword in my wounded heart. For I realized, in that moment, it meant everything to me.

She meant everything.

“*Nothing to you,*” she reiterated, frowning. “But it could mean *everything* for me once you’ve proposed to Lady Diana and I am gone.”

Gone? No, I could not fathom it. Why would she say such a thing? Did she

want to leave? Perhaps in my lack of experience, I had misread her. I had thought only of myself.

“Is that what you want? My proposing to Lady Diana?” It was childish and aimed at the heart, but I wanted her to argue with me. I wanted her to tell me she felt as conflicted as I did.

She drew back, again shaking her head. Her eyes found mine. They searched and searched and seemed to come out wanting. “What I want has never been at play, Marlow.” She swallowed hard and frowned. “Did you not say only yesterday that I should prove them all wrong? Speak against the rumors?”

“This is different,” I insisted. My heart started to thrum a steady beat in my chest. The space between us suddenly felt excruciatingly important. How could I find the right words to explain that I could not lose her?

“How so?” Her fiery gaze stared into mine, lips parted. She was exasperated, and it was all my fault.

“Things between us”—I motioned with my hand—“are different than they were. We—”

“Miss Wood?” Maggie called.

Her eyes did not stray from mine. “We, what?”

“We . . .” I felt it. I had since we’d met, and it’d only grown stronger the more time we spent together. The space between us breathed like a living thing connecting us. Unexplainable. Indescribable.

At some point, I’d become tied to her. My very soul had been etched with her name.

“There you are.” Maggie’s voice carried from behind. “Lord Reynolds is leaving. He is clearly uncomfortable, and you both must fix this *immediately!*”

“Is he upset?” Georgiana peeled her gaze from mine.

“Noticeably. I think he fears the rumors concerning the two of you are true. We must douse them, now! Come!”

Georgiana looked to me, as confused and conflicted as I felt.

No . . . I was not confused. I knew exactly what this was.

I loved her.

I love her.

The plan had gone to rot, and it was all my fault. I needed time to think through a new one.

“Marlow!” Maggie snapped, and I jolted to attention.

Reynolds? The briefest thought of him putting his hands anywhere near Georgiana, let alone for an entire evening, made my jaw clench and my every muscle poise for the lunge.

But I did not enjoy her feeling cross with me. And she was right—I *had*

encouraged her to speak against the rumors, to fight for the truth of who she was, and if Georgiana wanted to stand beside a man like Reynolds, then who was I to stop her?

Regardless of what she thought of me, I would not force her hand.

It was one night. Perhaps, afterward, I could persuade her into feeling something more . . . for me. I cleared my throat, too cowardly to look her in the eye. “Is this what you really want?”

Her feet shifted their weight. It was the longest moment stretched out in history. Her voice came out small. “For our second outing. Yes.”

I felt as though I’d lost a fortune at cards. The feeling rooted itself like a heavy rock at the bottom of my stomach. *Not good enough*, I remembered. Not for someone as brilliant as Georgiana. But neither was Reynolds. I wrapped the dukedom around me like a shield.

“He cannot take you alone. On that regard, I will not bend.”

Surprise writ across her face. My chest constricted at the hope in her eyes, a hope that I wished had been aimed at me. “Meaning . . . ?”

I wiped my face with a hand. “If Lord Reynolds wishes to be generous with his carriage, he can escort you all to Drury Lane.”

“All of us?” Maggie cut in. “And you will fetch Lady Diana alone?”

I frowned. What choice did I have? Apparently, Mother had already arranged for me to escort the lady. I’d assumed Georgiana would ride with Maggie and Gabriel. Now they’d have Lord Reynolds, but not for long. “We will find you among the crush.”

Maggie exchanged a look with Georgiana, who nodded once. “Very well. Come, Georgiana, let us arrange with Lord Reynolds. He asked to bid you farewell.”

Georgiana spared me a quick glance, one that I could not measure for better or worse, then followed Maggie back to the drawing room. Their footsteps pattered like rabbits across the black-and-white-checkered marble floor.

I sank back against the wall, wishing I could lower myself to the ground, alone and unbothered with a strong drink in hand.

But I was the Duke of Marlow. I had people relying on me. Depending on me. Affairs to oversee. Paperwork to sign. Problems to fix.

So I counted to three. I took in a long, deep breath and released it. Then I paced to my study, and began to work.

Chapter Eighteen

GEORGIANA

Calls continued for hours after Lord Reynolds left. I could not think clearly, missing cues and questions at embarrassing moments. A stroke of brilliance bid me to claim a headache. I bounded to my room, closed the door, and sank onto my bed with nothing but my thoughts.

And, lands, did I have thoughts.

What was Marlow thinking? Pulling me away from a man who clearly wanted my attention, exactly according to the plan we had made with Mrs. Johns. A plan he had fully agreed to! The man teetered as uncertainly as a loose board. I wasn't sure *he* even knew what he wanted. I, unfortunately, did not have the luxury of sitting around and waiting.

One moment, he was conversing with every amiable and beautiful young woman in the *ton*, and the next he held me in an embrace, walked me through his gardens, and picked me flowers in his gazebo. Dinner had felt like home. Cards, even better. I hadn't wanted the evening to end. I'd gone to bed in raptures, still grinning, excited for what the morrow might bring.

But a new day brought new reminders of just how ridiculous it was to indulge this dream.

I would not trick myself into believing he had any regard for me beyond mere kindness.

Marlow was a *duke*, first and foremost. Perhaps, I would say a friend. But anything more . . . ? Impossible.

His mother had taken great pains to remind me of that truth this morning as we ladies broke our fasts alone.

"*Hamlet* is playing at Drury Lane tomorrow night. Lady Diana *loves* the theater. Would you all mind terribly to go? Perhaps aid Marlow in conversation? I think his boyhood shyness is keeping him from truly opening his heart to her."

"Does Marlow like the theater?" Maggie had asked, brows knit.

"Men make sacrifices for the women they love. Or *will* love." Her Grace had smirked.

The jest had been lost on me, or perhaps I simply hadn't slept well.

But it had made me rethink how open I'd been with him. For clearly, I'd grown attached. Heavens, I'd latched myself onto him in the stable house like a blasted leech.

My cheeks burned with the memory. I'd fabricated our relationship, our *friendship*, all in my head. Just as I'd fabricated things with Sir Ronald. Marlow had set his aim at Lady Diana, and I would do well to remember that as soon as he'd secured her, any hold I had on his heart would be promptly cut loose.

Which was why I had needed Mrs. Johns in the first place.

Lord Reynolds truly seemed amiable. We had many things in common. Most importantly, we were both looking for a new start.

He'd said, "I used to think happiness in the moment was true happiness. I would seek it out, crave it, feel empty without it. But now, seeing my family settle and thrive, I wonder if I have been wrong all along. If it is not happiness I desire, but . . . peace. Rest. The feeling I get when I am surrounded by my nieces and nephews, my siblings, and my parents, who are still alive and tormenting me, by the way."

I'd laughed. "Peace. That sounds wonderful. How might I find this peace you speak of?"

"That is the thing, Miss Wood." He'd leaned in close, his voice a whisper. "You stop searching for it altogether."

I hadn't liked that answer, but perhaps there was wisdom in it. Perhaps, if I stopped searching for something *more*, if I stopped focusing on *my* happiness, I might find it in the process.

Lord Reynolds had given me hope.

It now swelled within my breast, and for the first time in an age, when I thought ahead weeks, months, and even years, I did not feel alone. I saw promise. Perhaps there were others like me who had simply made a misstep, in whom I could find friends. And, one day, when someone younger and less wise, foolish with unrequited adoration, chose a similar path to the one I'd chosen that night so long ago, I could be there to guide her through the aftermath.

Lord Reynolds had learned from his mistakes. He was making changes for the better. And all the while we'd sat together, he'd looked at me so fervently. He'd *listened*. And he hadn't cared about my mistake.

I ought to have charmed him. At the very least, I ought to have fluttered my lashes. Grinned more at his conversation.

But I hadn't *wanted* to.

He stirred nothing in me. Not even a tint of pink in my cheeks.

I lay back against my pillow, too exhausted to puzzle it all out, and let my

worries fade.

I slept for an hour, waking only when Jane opened the door with a letter on a little tray.

“So sorry to wake you, Miss Wood.”

I pushed up to my elbow. “What is it, Jane?”

“A message from home.” Her grin widened. “I did not think you’d want to wait.”

Finally! I sat up and quickly unfolded the letter written in Amelia’s familiar scrawl while Jane tidied the room.

Georgiana,

I am well. The baby is well. Peter, as usual, worries too much. The doctor says my bruised hip will soon recover, but that is the worst of it.

If you have any fear for the baby, rest assured, he is unharmed.

Thank heavens. Peter must be so relieved.

He moves like a wave in my stomach, and it is the strangest, most foreign sensation I have ever felt. (I say “he” because Peter is convinced of it.) And speaking of Peter, I am trying desperately to return him to you.

Every morning he finds some new delay, and as much as I love him, I might go mad from having him on my heels. I beg you, when he eventually arrives, keep him occupied. Your brother’s newfound anxiety needs purpose.

I am pleased to hear from you, Georgiana. Ever more pleased to hear you are finding your way. How brave you are.

Whatever you need, I am here. You need only write.

Your sister,

Amelia

I set Amelia’s letter on the table beside my bed. Peter, finally returning? I wondered if he’d left yet. I hadn’t thought to miss my brother, but knowing he might be in London soon made me yearn for him. My family. My lifeline. Perhaps I ought to write to him to hurry him along.

When he returned, I’d have no reason to stay at Ashburn Abbey.

My heart dropped into my stomach.

Soon, I’d leave the library. The chair. Evenings with Marlow.

After Drury Lane, there was only one more outing owed. It pained me more than I cared to admit. Would that be the end? Would I ever see him again?

I shouldn't. Spending time with Marlow alone had never been the plan. Becoming earnest friends had been out of the realm of possibility, and for good reason. Marlow needed a wife, not a friend. He wanted his ring back, not a new burden to carry.

Which was why, after dinner under the darkest evening sky, when I looked up to find him hesitating in the doorway of the library, perhaps a little worried that I might not want him here after our argument earlier, I said, "No hidden passageways. I want to read tonight."

He nodded and pressed his lips together. A few moments later, he sunk into his chair with a pamphlet.

We read in silence for a time. Eating, drinking tea, enjoying the warmth radiating from the fire. Perhaps this was how things were supposed to be. How we'd started, and nothing more.

Then he harrumphed and shook his head at the page.

I shouldn't ask. I should pretend I hadn't heard his reaction and keep reading, for engaging with Marlow would do neither of us any good.

He shook his head and grunted.

"What?" I asked, peering at him over my book.

"I am wondering if this author has ever experienced a fencing match in person." He flipped a page. "He's got the stances all wrong. You'd never put your hand in front of yourself like that."

"You fence?" I sat up straighter, adjusting in my seat.

Eyes still on his page, Marlow smirked like he'd caught me in a trap. "I do."

I sat back, annoyed at myself for giving him more of my attention than I'd planned. Clearly, he wanted something from me. But after his behavior earlier, I had no plans to play along.

"Perhaps you should send in your edits to the paper, then."

Marlow laughed. The room quieted again.

I read a page. Half of another.

He shifted his legs. "The footwork is all wrong too. It's like he's describing a boxing match. Fencers don't *move around* this much. We are poised, yes, but not dancing about. The motion is in the arms, tension in the legs. Back and forth, back and forth."

I glanced at him from over my book. He was clearly annoyed, shaking his head as he read across a page. "At least *try* to get it right. Perhaps this particular event was written by a woman."

My jaw hit the floor. "What did you say?"

Marlow's lips twitched. "Nothing."

"No," I demanded. "What did you say about a woman writing that? Do you

think women are incapable of understanding the rules of fencing?”

He glanced lazily at me over his page. “Do *you* know how to fence?”

“I have sat in on my brother’s lessons. Even practiced with him a time or two.”

“Then you’d know the difference between a lunge and a parry? Technically as opposed to theoretically.”

I scoffed. “Of course.”

He raised his brows and looked back at his page. “Prove it, then,” he muttered under his breath.

“What was that?” I asked through my teeth. He was baiting me, I could guarantee it, but the more he opened his mouth to speak, the more I wanted to jab a saber straight through him.

He cleared his throat and looked nonchalantly in my direction. “Care to prove me wrong?”

Do not rise to him, Georgiana. The hour was late enough. And fencing was *not* a woman’s sport. Arguably not a sport at all!

“I don’t feel it necessary. I have already told you I am knowledgeable on the subject.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Very well, then.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You don’t believe me?”

He tilted his head. His growing smile mocked me. “What does it matter if I believe you or not?”

Saints, he was infuriating! I groaned. “Get up, then. Have it your way! Give me a sword.”

He smirked. “I think you mean a foil?”

I threw my arms out wide. “Hurry on before I change my mind.”

“I have a few in my room. I shall retrieve them.” He stood, watching me, and then he vanished out the door.

Not my smartest move by far.

I’d regret this.

I had no idea how to truly, properly fence. I’d seen Peter lunge at his tutors, keeping one hand back, one leg bent in a wide stance. My part in his practicing had always been acting. Mimicking.

I was going to make a fool out of myself.

I gritted my teeth.

Perhaps then Marlow would worry less about who I spent my time with.

He’d definitely been teasing me when he said a woman wrote that excerpt. He’d known his words would ignite my fury. Perhaps he was bored.

Well, I’d teach him not to dismiss women so easily. I might not be an expert,

but I could jab a man with a sword.

Indeed, after how he'd treated me earlier, I *wanted* to.

Chapter Nineteen

MARLOW

I snatched the foils from a shelf above my bed, tucked two gloves under my arm, and checked my face in the mirror. I looked tired. It *was* rather late. So, I splashed some cold water from the basin on my face and grabbed a mint leaf from my plant by the window.

Not my smartest move, teasing her this way, but I had her attention now, did I not? And if there was one thing I was good at—one thing I could impress her with—it was fencing.

I could best Reynolds blindfolded.

At the end of the night, Georgiana would fall asleep thinking about *me*.

In truth, it wasn't a fully formed plan, but it was a start.

I checked both directions before rushing out of my room and back to the library.

Georgiana was pacing by the window. She'd moved the chairs and table, opening up a space for us in the center of the room. Her eyes followed my entrance, and she looked over the foils with that distinct crease between her brows.

I grinned. "Ready?"

She tightened the ties of her robe and held out her hand.

I gave her a glove that she swiftly pulled on.

"You might want to wear a mask," she added, accepting a foil.

The way she said it made me think she worried that she might accidentally hurt me, but then she taunted me with a confident raise of her brows.

"No need." I twisted my foil in my hand. "Whenever you're ready."

She cleared her throat, watching me turn the handle over, and took a similar grip on hers. Then she planted her foot back firmly and lifted her free hand behind her in a confident stance.

"*Pret.*" Ready.

Her perfect French drew me up short. As did her stance. She was . . . impressive.

And she seemed to know it. She smiled. And for the first time in my entire life, I felt that ping in my chest old men talked about. A fiery feeling, spreading. It was like her smile was sunshine shooting straight through me, and all the water in the Atlantic could not have extinguished it.

I let myself feel it fully. Reveled in it.

Love.

My gaze washed over her a final time, and I swallowed hard, mimicking the stance.

“En garde.” My voice broke on the word.

Georgiana waited. She watched me for any movement, but I’d thought to let *her* lead. I did not want to make a sudden move that might hurt—

She lunged at me, foil aimed straight for my chest. My instincts took over in time to parry back. *Clink, clink.*

The force sent her teetering, and I froze, terrified I’d hurt her. Regardless of what she wanted me to believe, she wasn’t accustomed to this. She was off-balance. Her footwork was all wrong.

“Just your arm. See?” I clinked my foil on hers. “Push it forward. Aim here.” I pointed at my chest.

She quirked a brow.

“*Allez,*” I directed her. *Come.*

I waited. And waited.

She stomped her foot, and I twitched just enough that she grinned at having startled me. Devilish woman, distracting me like a professional. She stared. Her arm must be getting tired. I thought perhaps she was seconds away from quitting, when suddenly she attacked.

Once, twice, and thrice, she thrust her foil. There was no strategy behind it—all madness—but I found my way around her jabs all the same. She knew the basics. She knew to keep her head back and intimidate me with surprise movements. She had seen a tutor before.

I liked it all a little too much.

We watched each other from behind the X of our locked foils. Her chest heaved from exertion. Mine heaved from another feeling entirely.

“You are very good,” she said between breaths. The fire crackled beside us. “You’ve studied longer than my brother.”

“All my life,” I told her. “Every morning.”

“Do you regret what you said about women and fencing?”

A slow smile crept upon my lips. I could play this one of two ways—concede and satisfy her, or deny and incite her wrath. I tried for a middle ground. “Your footwork needs direction.”

She stepped back, and our foils fell. “My footwork was never in question. Once more,” she directed, finding her footing. “*Pret.*”

I fought my humor, mirroring her again. “*Allez.*”

This time, she was quick. Her focus was on my foil, matching me parry for parry. This was no “sitting on the settee with her needlepoint” sort of girl. No. Georgiana had been raised in the country alongside her brother, and as polished and proper as she was, there was fire in her.

And I was battling more than just a foil. Devil take it, she had me in pieces. I started to parry harder just to see what she could take. I stepped forward, and she moved back. Back. Back. Her forehead scrunched in concentration, lips parted as she focused.

I let her have a few wins. Then I lunged.

She parried.

I lunged again a full step. Then another.

Her breaths came faster. I’d backed her almost entirely to a wall.

“Enough,” I breathed, thoroughly amused. “You are decent . . . for a woman.”

She widened her stance, but her back foot hit the wall. “Believe it or not, I know the difference between parry and lunge,” she said. Then under her breath, “*T’es relou!*”

Annoying, hmm? I grinned at her French. Her perfect accent. “*Je t’ai coincé.*” *I have you cornered.*

She answered by lunging, but I’d expected that. Our foils crossed, and I stepped forward, well and truly cornering her.

“I can see you know the difference well.”

Her eyes locked on mine. Her little hand buried within my old, worn glove pleased me far more than it should. Her breaths labored. Then her eyes dropped to my lips.

My heart flew to my throat. Dash it all, it would be heaven to kiss her.

She swallowed hard. “You are distracting me from my book, Your Grace.”

Your Grace? My humor faded. I did not like that at all. *Marlow*, even, did not seem quite familiar enough. “Lucas, please. And to be fair, you were distracting me first.”

“*What?*” Her brows lifted high, whether from the intimacy of my given name or the fact I’d called her a distraction. Either way, I dared her to call me out. Our foils lowered, but only just, and she took the bait. “May I ask how *I* have distracted you?”

I pressed my lips together. Everything about her had become a distraction.

“When you read, you get this serious look on your face. You gnaw your lower lip. Drives a man a little mad, Georgiana.”

Her forehead scrunched. I could see thoughts racing behind her eyes, softening them. Then she frowned. “You cannot say such things. This is not how friends speak to each other.”

She pressed the X of our foils to my chest, releasing her grip, and I grabbed it as she turned away.

“You asked me, did you not?”

She tugged off my glove and tossed it on a chair. “I shouldn’t have. I’m to bed.”

“So early?” Where was Cleo? The only creature who might make her stay.

Georgiana stopped by the door. “We both have a late night ahead tomorrow.”

Ah. Drury Lane. My shoulders sank. “Looking forward to it, are you?”

“Our second outing,” she said softly. “The third, not long after. Then your debt will be paid.”

“I told you, I do not care about that ridiculous contract. Not anymore.” I cared about Grandmother’s ring, but the rest of it was meaningless to my current desires.

“It is not ridiculous to me.” She raised her chin. Her arms hugged her middle. “Your friendship means a great deal to me, and I am happy to have it. But if anyone heard you speak like *that* to me, Marlow, they would judge me harshly.”

“Lucas. If you please.” I took a step forward. “And I thought we decided we did not care what other people think.”

She retreated under the doorframe. “I wish I did not have to.” Her eyes found mine, and I hated the pain in her eyes. “Nevertheless, I came here to restore my reputation, not to distract a duke from his duty. If you’ll excuse me.”

She turned from the room.

In the silence, among the scattered chairs, the table, and her discarded glove, I stood alone and faced the truth. Georgiana might feel an inkling for me of what I felt for her, but she had set her mind adamantly against it.

She *wanted* me to court Lady Diana. As though it was my duty.

And about the *ton*, she wasn’t wrong. If I abandoned Lady Diana, and the *ton* saw us out together, the rumors would spread wider than they had already. No matter my name, nor my title, even I could not stop them from becoming as angry and nasty as they had when she’d first arrived. They’d say far worse than that she’d seduced me. They’d say that she’d take me for my title and my wealth, that she’d ruin my family’s name with her conquests.

They would hurt her.

In time, the rumors would fade.

I needed Georgiana to believe enduring the *ton*'s harsh judgments was worthwhile.

That *I* was worthwhile.

I needed her to believe that we could withstand it all, together.

But, first, I had to endure my own personal purgatory—Drury Lane with Lady Diana.

Chapter Twenty

GEORGIANA

“Which dress for tonight, Miss Wood?” Jane opened the armoire. She fingered the dresses hanging there, so many different shades.

I’d slept hardly half the night after fencing with Marlow, and the following day had passed in a blur.

Lucas.

I shook my head. I’d heard his Christian name spoken by his family, but to use it myself?

That felt like crossing a line I oughtn’t ever to cross. Not if I wanted to keep control of my heart. He drove me mad, the way he spoke with such intimacy. It was fortunate I’d already learned my lesson about kissing a man, for I had almost fallen for his charms. Again.

I’d had half a mind to march right up to him and return his grandmother’s ring just to see if he’d still look at me the same way. Would he send me away if I gave back what he wanted most?

It did not matter. If anything happened between us, an embrace, a kiss, even if we were seen together amongst the *ton* again as we had that night at Mrs. Waymont’s, then ugly, harmful words would spread. Lucas—*Marlow*—hadn’t argued with me about that. He knew the *ton* as well as I did.

He loved his dukedom. He wanted the best for his future and his father’s legacy. Whatever he wanted from me, it would be fleeting. I could not give him what he truly needed, what the dukedom needed—a worthy, suitable match.

It was better that we continued on with the plan we’d set out. He, with Lady Diana. And me with Lord Reynolds, who would arrive to escort me in a few hours.

Jane turned from the armoire with a questioning look.

I hadn’t yet answered her. My gaze landed on the red gown farthest to the right.

Peter had insisted on buying me something new after my disaster at Lakeshire Park. It was lovely and expensive and carefully tailored. I supposed he

wanted to lift my spirits. I *had* felt better—fleetingly—but then I hadn’t any invitations worth wearing it to. After scandal had ruined my last favorite dress, I had learned to wear them each carefully. I’d burned the one I’d worn that fateful night not long after returning home. I could not bear to look at it.

What a waste. The fabric alone would have made a generous gift, and the dress itself could have been retailored to fit someone new. Clearly, I’d only been thinking of myself.

The thought now rankled.

“The red, I think. Thank you,” I told Jane. “And perhaps a little rouge on my cheeks.”

She nodded, and before I knew it, a new reflection was staring back at me in the mirror. A beautiful girl. She was bright and pink. She looked as hopeful as a fresh start. As radiant as a debutante with no real notion of the world’s cruelties.

I could almost pretend—for a moment, at least—that nothing bad had ever happened. That I’d never chosen wrong. I’d never had to bargain with the duke, and we’d become friends on our own. I hadn’t needed Mrs. Johns to persuade a suitor; he’d come simply because he’d wanted to.

“He’s here, Miss Wood,” Jane said, reentering the room. She was all nerves, from the purse of her lips to the fumbling of her hands. And I remembered—I wasn’t the beautiful woman in the mirror. I was the woman they’d all be gaping at. The one they either shied away from or spoke to so they’d have something to discuss later.

I followed Jane to the stairs, to the voices carrying from below. Lord Reynolds was dressed in a sharply tailored black jacket and a doubly knotted, diamond-studded cravat. He was the very picture of a clean-shaven and polished gentleman. Elegant Maggie stood by her husband, the quietest man I’d ever met, and Gabriel, who looked just as handsome and refined.

“Beautiful!” She clapped, and the men turned as I descended.

Lord Reynolds collected me at the bottom of the stairs. “Worth the wait by far.”

I shook my head and grinned at his compliment, but it felt more playful than anything. Gabriel watched us like a dutiful guardian while Maggie kissed Thomas goodbye.

“Enjoy yourself.” Thomas smiled into their kiss. “But miss me.”

“I always miss you,” she whispered back, threading her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. Good heavens. My stomach flipped with envy just watching them.

Gabriel coughed, shaking his head like there was a foul taste in his mouth. “Shall we?”

The ride went smoothly. Lord Reynolds was polite, and Maggie was attentive and quiet in contemplation.

I wanted to ask her how she'd known Thomas was the right match. How she'd felt when they met. Was it instant, their connection? Or did it take time to develop into the love I'd just witnessed?

Before long, we arrived at the front of Drury Lane.

Large domed gaslights illuminated the front side, which was swarming with guests. Their eyes darting to mine, and around.

All wondering the same thing I found myself wondering—

Was the Duke of Marlow among the crowd?

Chapter Twenty-One

MARLOW

Lady Diana.

Lady Diana, Lady Diana, Lady Diana.

Focus, Lucas, you idiot. The woman deserved my attention, regardless of whether or not I meant to pursue her. But I could not focus. All I could think about was the sound of Georgiana's laugh, the look she'd given me last night. How she cared about everything and everyone, even Gabriel's happiness. How she fit so seamlessly among us.

I checked my fob watch. Lord Reynolds should have collected her by now. Dash that man.

The carriage pulled to a stop at its first destination, and Lady Diana's mother ushered me inside their drawing room. I wondered about *Georgiana's* mother as I followed her. Did they look alike? What had kept her from London, and did her absence bother Georgiana?

As I complimented Lady Diana's golden evening gown, and her mother's faint blue, I wondered what color Georgiana had chosen for the evening. Something bright? Perhaps an apple red?

Lady Diana asked after my morning, and I blanched answering, for I hadn't the slightest clue how *Georgiana's* had gone, and that made everything a little lackluster as I helped both ladies into the carriage.

"Will anyone else be joining us at the theater?" Lady Diana asked as we settled on opposite benches. Her mother sat beside her.

"My mother, of course, and my cousins. As well as Lord Reynolds and Miss Wood. She is a friend of ours," I reminded her.

Her mother, Lady Rush, frowned and said, "Do you know her well? Indeed, Your Grace, I am surprised to hear of your family's connection after reading about her in the papers."

I cleared my throat, jaw tense. No matter how many times Georgiana reminded me of the rumors, I simply could not understand why they were still

floating around. “The papers do not always print the full story. I would encourage you to form your own opinion, Lady Rush.”

“I believe the duke’s intention is to heal his friend’s good name,” Lady Diana said with a smile. “A heroic cause. And not the first time he’s endeavored to help a friend.”

Goodness, what had *she* been reading? If she spoke of Mrs. Winston, she had no idea what I’d actually done, and no idea that I would never have looked twice at Georgiana if she hadn’t been in possession of my grandmother’s ring.

What did that say about me?

I swallowed hard. I did not care to think overlong on that.

“I’m sure she’s lovely.” Lady Diana smiled at me as though she and I were together in redeeming Georgiana. It felt . . . odd. “If the duke feels there is more to the story than what we’ve read in the papers, then perhaps we ought to listen.”

Her mother harrumphed and pursed her lips.

Drury Lane was lit and bustling when we arrived. Lady Rush quickly found an acquaintance to engage in conversation, and I searched the faces of the crowd ahead.

I locked eyes with Georgiana.

No matter that she was on Reynolds’s arm. That she’d dressed so carefully, given so much effort to her appearance knowing he’d be watching her all night.

She was smiling at *me*.

Chapter Twenty-Two

GEORGIANA

The Duke of Marlow certainly made an impression.

Everyone looked up as he approached the throng gathering at the entrance, and I could have sworn their voices lowered.

He had Lady Diana on his arm. She wore gold that glittered under the lantern lights. Her skin was porcelain. Her dark, heavy curls were so perfectly arranged atop her head and pinned with pearls, she looked like a painting. She was beautiful. Marlow would be mad not to think so.

“She is perfect,” Maggie whispered at my side.

There was a pang in my chest. An emptiness. “Yes,” I admitted. “She is.”

Gabriel waved them over, and Marlow’s eyes softened when they locked with mine. The older woman accompanying them hurried off to greet someone else.

A moment later, they were in front of us.

Marlow, stiff and regal and all formality, said, “Lady Diana, have you been introduced to my cousins, Mrs. Drexel and Mr. Brennan?”

She nodded and smiled. “Yes, Your Grace, we’ve met.”

“Lord Reynolds and Miss Wood,” he continued the introduction.

Lord Reynolds bowed. “A pleasure to see you again, Lady Diana.”

She smiled but tilted her happy gaze back to Marlow. He didn’t seem to know what to do with her. Maggie seemed to catch on first.

“Shall we? The box is waiting, and I’d dearly hate to be late to a show.”

After handing in our box tickets, we followed an attendant up the red-carpeted staircase. Marlow led with Lady Diana, and I pushed away every bad thought, every hope that perhaps she’d trip on that magnificent skirt and have to retire early. Perhaps she’d lose her voice halfway through the night. Or a smuggler might come and steal her away.

Maggie marveled at every detail and new painting on display, and I tried to pay attention. Lord Reynolds and Gabriel walked a step behind us. I slid my hand along the smooth, bronze banister, only aware of the passersby when I

looked up and caught a group of women staring. Their gaze flickered away instantly, but lips were moving. Quirking. Whispering.

I looked back at Lord Reynolds, who was already watching me and smiling. I could do this. I could find my own place and be brave. There were more people like me. I simply needed to find them.

At the top of the staircase, antique bronze lamps lined the walls and lit the pathways leading in either direction. Our company turned right.

I kept a careful facade as we walked past the saloon, until the attendant opened the door to the correct box.

Marlow thanked him, then entered after Lady Diana. The rest of us followed, quickly greeted by Her Grace, who'd been waiting alone.

"There you are! I'd started to worry."

"Your Grace," Lady Diana cooed, dipping low to embrace her. "Lovely of you to share your box with us this evening."

"It is hardly an inconvenience, having you here. But where is your mother?" Her Grace looked behind us.

"She said she'd find us. But, heavens, this isn't your usual box, is it?" Lady Diana frowned and looked back for Marlow. "She might have trouble."

"We needed something larger to accommodate us all. Come, you and I shall find her." Her Grace took Lady Diana's arm. They clung to each other, already like mother and daughter, as they brushed past us for the door. "Marlow, darling, call for tea."

He grunted, falling into one of eight chairs in the box. The first chair on the first row. Maggie sat behind him and gestured for me to join her. We were situated close to the stage, though high above it. People were everywhere.

I glanced at Lord Reynolds and patted the seat beside me. Gabriel ushered us all down a seat so he could sit beside Maggie. The five of us sat still in the box. Marlow didn't so much as turn round in his seat.

Maggie huffed. "I'll call for tea myself."

"No," Lord Reynolds insisted, standing. "Please, allow me." He smiled at me. "I'll return in just a moment."

"Thank you, Lord Reynolds." The door closed behind him, and I blew out a breath.

Maggie grinned, leaning into my side. "Lord Reynolds cannot keep his eyes off you."

Marlow's leg started to bounce.

"That is quite enough," I chided her. "Let me have one moment of freedom, won't you? Before he returns."

"So kind of him to fetch tea. And Lady Diana"—Maggie leaned forward,

closer to Marlow—"is so polite and thoughtful, is she not?"

Marlow spoke over his shoulder. "Maggie, are you in need of purpose?"

She scoffed, falling back in her seat. "You're in quite the mood."

"Leave him be," Gabriel said.

But she was right. Marlow was jittery. He was unfocused. Tense. I blew out another breath. Perhaps he needed a friend. As painful as it was to watch him court someone else, I cared for him enough to put aside my own feelings.

I leaned forward in my seat. "Are you anxious?"

His leg immediately stilled. "No."

"He's *nervous*. She might well be the one," Maggie said. "Finally, after that disaster last summer."

His shoulders tensed at the mention of Mrs. Winston. At failure. Did he fear the same with Lady Diana? The woman could not keep her eyes off him. All he had to do was encourage with one or two flattering words, and she'd happily take the bait.

I knew *I* would.

"You needn't worry," I said to him. "Lady Diana will make your interaction comfortable. You need only smile and be yourself."

Maggie leaned back in. "These things are much simpler for the man."

"It depends on what he wants out of the arrangement," Gabriel argued, shifting closer. "An heir? Any old girl will do. But a wife? A true companion? That requires some carefully laid snares to catch the right one."

Maggie made a face.

"Thank you all." Marlow turned round to face us, without the slightest bit of gratitude. "So helpful."

I couldn't hide my smile. Nor the urge to tease him alongside Gabriel. It felt better, pretending not to feel affected by a woman as beautiful and accomplished as Lady Diana. "Tell her she has lovely eyes. That ought to do it."

"So cliché," Gabriel groaned, but still, he winked at me. "Tell her she has a lovely *mouth*."

Marlow stood, scowling down at us, and Maggie covered her laugh with her hand. "Hush, now, both of you, or he might end the night early just to spite us."

"Should I take her hand while I'm at it?" Marlow leaned against the railing, and his eyes burned into mine. Just mine. "Would that make you happy?"

I was instantly on alert. Had I angered him? He'd never looked at me like this, not even before we'd had a proper conversation. My heart flew into my throat. I felt as though I'd been chided, but I couldn't account for why.

"Or should I go even further—should I *kiss* her?" His nostrils flared, and he swiped a hand down his face. "How would you feel about that?"

“Depends on where I’m sitting, if I’m being completely honest,” Gabriel muttered.

As warm as it was in this box, I went cold. Marlow’s words were meant to bruise, and they were ice to my heart. I was certain I’d upset him.

“You’re acting strange,” Maggie said, scrutinizing Marlow.

“Not what you were expecting? I am sorry to disappoint.” He turned then, his hands on the railing as he peered down at the stage.

My eyes pricked with heat, cheeks burning. “I can tell you what *isn’t* attractive in courtship.” I tried to keep my voice even. “An unaccountable temper.”

Gabriel focused on his boots. His jaw popped, but I could have sworn he fought a smile.

A moment later there was a knock on the door, and Marlow straightened, cursing under his breath. But he quickly strode over and lifted his arm to welcome Lady Diana back. Her mother beamed. So did his.

“Whatever does he mean?” I whispered to Maggie, eyes set on Marlow.

She leaned close, her expression between worry and hope. “I suppose he does not want us to interfere. Curmudgeon.”

Gabriel leaned over, all seriousness. “Leave it alone.”

Maggie tightened her lips into a smile as Marlow led Lady Diana to the seat in front of us. I had a perfect view of her flawless profile. Sweet perfume permeated the box.

“And, you, Your Grace,” she said in a soft, airy voice, touching Marlow’s arm. “Are you excited for *Hamlet*?”

“No Kean this year,” Marlow said, gruff.

Lady Diana responded with a small smile. “Indeed, he will always be the truest Hamlet to me.”

Lord Reynolds returned, and tea was served. The show began, and I tried to pay him attention. I tried to listen to his conversation, react appropriately, laugh at his side remarks. I even let him touch my arm during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes.

But I also saw Marlow smile down at Lady Diana when she whispered something close to his ear. I felt her laugh like a press to an open wound in my heart. And when the show concluded and Marlow stood, his trousers and jacket wrinkled, and his eyes puffy and tired from a long day of work and duty, it was she who asked him, “Are you well, Your Grace?” And him giving her assurances that he had enjoyed the play.

“I promised to take you straight home after this,” Lord Reynolds said,

holding out his arm for mine just outside the box. The others started down the wide hall. "And I am terrified of Duke Marlow enough to oblige."

I laughed and took his arm. Lord Reynolds reminded me of Peter. Witty, sweet. In truth, he felt like Sir Ronald had. Only now, even that wasn't enough.

"Though, if you aren't opposed . . . I'd love to see you tomorrow." He swallowed, his eyes hooded as he waited for my reply.

Marlow walked ahead with Lady Diana on his arm. Maggie said something at his side that made him laugh, and Gabriel was talking to Her Grace.

As much as I wanted to belong among them, I didn't. And as soon as this bargain was through, no matter what Marlow said, I wouldn't truly have a place here. So I squeezed Lord Reynolds's arm and playfully said, "So soon? You cannot bear to part?"

He chuckled. "Am I playing my cards too openly? Do you need more suspense?"

He had humor; I'd give him that. And he was genuine, it seemed. I felt entirely the fraud. "Should we walk Hyde Park?"

"I thought Kensington Gardens?"

I nodded my approval. "I am a guest at Ashburn Abbey. So perhaps you should ask my hosts, first?"

"Of course. I will arrange the whole thing."

Marlow would join us. Perhaps he'd bring Lady Diana. And Maggie and Gabriel, perhaps even Thomas, too. Kensington Gardens would be the last and final contracted outing.

Time had flown by.

I wished I could do it all over again and pay better attention. I wanted to commit every moment to memory. The glint in Marlow's eye when he opened the trapdoor in the floor to the hidden staircase. The way his voice sounded so close to my ear. How he had taken my hand and it hadn't felt strange but rather warm and strong and comfortable. I missed him already, and he was only a few paces ahead.

Lord Reynolds and I parted at Ashburn Abbey. Maggie drew me away while he spoke with Her Grace. The drive had been otherwise empty. Marlow had escorted Lady Diana and her mother back home.

After undressing, then tugging on my favorite wool socks, I was still wide awake. I'd left my book in the library. So I crept with candlelight down the hall, toward the flickering glow of the hearth. The library door had been left open, as usual.

There was no tea. No tray. No food. Each chair and table had been returned to its spot. A warm fire beckoned, and Cleo slept on the chair.

I felt a twinge of disappointment to not find Marlow. Perhaps he hadn't yet returned, or had already fallen fast asleep, tucked away in his bed. He'd been out of sorts tonight. I shouldn't have teased him. Regardless of how I felt about his choice, Lady Diana fit on his arm, in his dukedom, perfectly.

No matter how painfully my heart protested. Nor how I wished I could claw her. Wine her dress. Smudge her perfect rouge. I huffed and smirked, allowing myself to imagine her flawless face in shock for a brief moment.

But if Marlow was happy, I could bear it.

I could try.

My book waited on the table where I'd left it only last evening, but first I went to Cleo. I knelt by the chair and stroked her long, soft fur. She purred in her sleep. For the first time all night, I felt as though I could breathe. I let my worries drift away with the smoke from the hearth.

"I missed you tonight," I whispered. Tonight had felt all wrong. Despite perfect seats, company I had more than enough reason to enjoy, and the envious eyes of Society washing over us, it had felt *lonely*. "I would have much preferred staying in, sitting exactly where you are."

Cleo's eyes barely peeked open. Her little fanged teeth poked out as she closed her eyes and purred under my hand.

I smiled. "Make room for me then. My body aches, but my mind is wide awake."

"You should be sleeping," his gruff voice came from the doorway. Marlow leaned against it, arms crossed. But he didn't look like *Marlow* anymore. He looked like *Lucas*.

Just a man. Just Lucas.

Cleo jolted awake, then hopped down and sauntered to him. She rubbed against his legs. His stockinged feet.

My heart jolted awake too. He'd kept on his waistcoat, half unbuttoned and without a jacket from earlier, and loosened his cravat. His golden locks had been mussed from their perfect formations. Just how I liked them. I let myself stare a moment too long.

"So should you."

He bent down and stroked Cleo's head. "My mind is awake too."

So he'd heard me. How long, exactly, had he been standing there?

Cleo made a few turns around his legs, then returned to me. She jumped back upon the chair and swished her head under my hand.

He—Lucas—uncrossed his arms, softening. "She likes you."

I grinned down at Cleo, her body half on my hand and half on the chair as I scratched between her ears. "I'm quite fond of her too."

I wondered if he'd come inside. Sit down, like he usually did. Perhaps pour himself a drink and watch the fire crackle and burn.

He'd been angry with me earlier tonight, but I dared not ask why. I dared not wonder what *he* was thinking.

So I stayed silent. In a moment, I'd get up from the floor. I'd reach for my book. I'd bid him good night.

In a moment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

MARLOW

I could not bear the silence.

Watching Georgiana with Lord Reynolds had been utter purgatory. I'd taken a tone with her, which I'd immediately regretted. But here we were, alone in the one spot where I felt more myself than I had in years, and I could not speak the words that might make a difference.

Because I wasn't sure they would.

Cleo would smell like her tonight, tomorrow, I hoped forever.

I wouldn't mind falling asleep to it. I was already miserable.

I truly hadn't intended on seeing her in here. The hour was well past midnight. I should collect Cleo as I'd planned and retire for the night. I shouldn't tarry.

But, deuces, I *missed* Georgiana.

And she wasn't saying anything.

Perhaps she hadn't missed me at all. Perhaps she'd enjoyed Reynolds's company so much she'd already forgotten about me and our stolen nights here. Likely for the best.

The silence stretched out, and I could not bear it. Was she angry with me for what I'd said earlier?

I'd had a moment in the box. Lady Diana wanted more of my attention than I wanted to give—she wanted the whole of it—and with Reynolds breathing down my back, and Maggie making light of every deuced thing, I simply couldn't hold it all in.

Georgiana had noticed right away. Only she'd read my misery as anxiety. How easily she'd encouraged me toward Lady Diana. As though I meant nothing to her. As though this past fortnight had meant nothing.

I hadn't exactly been kind, and I regretted my tone. But couldn't she at least have tried to look as miserable with Reynolds as I had felt with Lady Diana?

Was she pretending with him? Or with me?

I could ride for miles without stopping. I could endure endless hours of

debate in Parliament. But this silence might truly kill me. I rubbed the back of my neck. If nothing else, I owed her this: "I shouldn't have said those things to you earlier. Spoken to you the way that I did."

Her hand slowed down Cleo's back, her eyes lowered. "I think I provoked you."

"You were being kind. A good friend."

Georgiana looked up. "Truly, I only want the best for you."

My heart started a quicker pace. Gads, how I loved those eyes.

They lured me in, step by step, until I was hovering above her.

Silence.

She blinked. "Your mother showed me your old nursery this morning. Pulled out your baby things. Adorable embroidery. She says your wife must have an accomplished hand, among other things." She petted Cleo slowly, softly.

I watched her hand. Then her profile, which was as unreadable as Cleo's sleeping face. I bent down and sat on the floor near the opposite leg of Cleo's chair.

"Aren't most women decent with a needle?"

Her lips quirked up. "Aren't most men chivalrous and chaste?"

I buried my humor, but it was almost painful. I'd never met a woman with a mind quite like Georgiana's. "Yes, and we're honest too," I parried back.

She grinned.

I waited until her gaze locked with mine. "Forgive me?"

She chewed on her bottom lip, her hand slowing on Cleo's back, trailing down to her tail. "Of course. You seemed out of sorts."

I lifted my hand to the space between Cleo's ears and rubbed. Scaring Georgiana off was the last thing I wanted to do. I needed to move extremely slowly, so I said, "I fear I am making a mess of things."

Our hands were so close, brushing through Cleo's fur in tandem.

I hadn't admitted that fear aloud to anyone. Certainly not to the one person I most feared judgment from. "My father always had everything in hand. He was focused and steady. But he isn't here. I cannot ask his advice, nor seek his guidance."

"What do you think he would tell you?" She glanced at me, then back down to Cleo.

I puffed up my cheeks and blew out a breath. Remembering Father brought back all the good and the bad and the sorrowful. I had learned over the years to bury it all down deep to keep my head above water.

Tonight, with Georgiana sitting on the floor beside me, I let myself feel it all. I thought back to stories he used to tell about how he'd chosen my mother.

“My father met my mother through their parents. Their courtship was quick but easy. My mother was the daughter of an earl. Her family was extraordinarily wealthy, and my father needed the money. It was a very good match. And with a little effort, it worked out well for them over time.”

My neck burned, and I did not know why. My parents’ arrangement was not special. The embarrassing part was how desperately I’d tried to force a similar arrangement for myself. And how terribly and openly I’d failed.

“I thought I had that with Miss Newbury. A beneficial match. So, this second time round, I lined every necessity out from the beginning. I’ve been more particular. I did not want to fail again. I want the dukedom to—” I stopped myself. I’d said it a hundred times: *I want the dukedom to be strong*. Only I wasn’t sure what that meant anymore. I had started to change my mind over where true *strength* came from.

Still, she didn’t say anything for a long while. She abandoned Cleo’s back, grazing her tail instead. Thinking. Perhaps I’d said too much, been too open. But I wanted to explain my reasoning. To help her see why I acted the way I had when we’d first met. Why I’d been so blasted determined. And why, now, I wanted to change course.

She shifted from her knees to lean against the leg of the chair. Her gaze washed over me.

“My father married my mother because he was infatuated with her. Over time, my mother missed London living. She wanted to travel. Live abroad. But my father loved the countryside. They fought so often, I can hardly picture them otherwise. When he died, my mother fought with my brother instead, and he pushed her away. And now I rarely see her.” She swallowed hard and our eyes locked. “No one can say what the future might bring. But at least with Lady Diana you’d have more than what you started with.”

I had a feeling that was exactly what Father would say. I hated it all the same. “I did not know that about your mother. That she left.”

Georgiana smiled softly. “Peter and I are very close. He’s the only other person in the world who truly understands what my childhood was like.”

And he never left her. My estimation of the man grew. “It seems to me that your mother was never very honest. With your father or with herself.”

She nodded. “My brother would say she is a very good pretender. Sometimes I wonder if I am more like her than I care to admit. But mentioning my mother sends him into a rage, so we try not to talk about her.”

I tried to imagine Wood angrier than I’d already seen him over Georgiana’s welfare. “You know, I think your brother and I got off on the wrong foot. I do believe we’d get along smashingly.”

She laughed, and I felt the bright sound pang in my chest. Cleo raised her head, and Georgiana and I leaned forward to stroke her back at the same time. Our fingers caught, and she blushed the prettiest pink.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

We’d moved so close our knees were nearly touching. Cleo settled.

With no one to coax it, the fire dwindled low, darkening the room. I ought to be responsible. I ought to send us both to bed.

Instead, my mind flashed back to Georgiana, breathless from fencing. How strong she’d been. How it had felt to cross foils, to hold her attention. I could have sworn her eyes had wandered . . . that perhaps, she’d welcome my affections. I had wanted to kiss her.

I wanted to kiss her now.

She caught my gaze, and her lips parted like she could read my mind. Like she, too, remembered that moment.

“It’s late,” she breathed. “You should take Cleo to bed.”

I shifted my elbow along the edge of the seat in front of Cleo, closer to Georgiana. *Too fast*, my mind yelled, but my heart insisted. I whispered, “Do you want me to?”

Her hand stilled. She swallowed. Shook her head slowly. “I have no power over you.”

She truly had no idea. Could not fathom it. “You talk about me bending others to my will, but you have no idea the effect you have. I would do anything to please you. Even attend a play I don’t like with a woman I feel nothing for. Say what you want, *whatever* you want, and I will do it.” The backs of my fingers grazed the inside of her forearm, and she shivered.

She hummed and leaned into the chair too. “You cannot mean that. You use these flattering words to tempt me—”

“Am I tempting you?” My voice was too hopeful. Too bright for the moment.

She bit her smile. “I think I might be going mad.”

“Then let us resolve your confusion at once.” My fingers traced up her arm, entwined with hers. She did not pull away, and that was enough to bolster my resolve. “A little game of true or false? I’ll go first. You are interested in Lord Reynolds romantically. True or false?”

Surprised, she let out a nervous laugh. Hesitated for a moment. I watched her eyes change from worried to curious. I saw the moment she decided to play along. “False.”

My tense shoulders sank, and I fought a grin. “How dreadfully disappointing for Mrs. Johns.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was laughing in earnest now. Then she scooted a

mite closer, tilted her head back, and looked me directly in the eyes. “You enjoyed your evening with Lady Diana.”

“False,” I quickly clarified. “I was miserable, and my only respite was sitting in front so I did not have to watch Reynolds try to woo you.”

Her grin softened. Her eyes turned thoughtful as her thumb grazed mine.

I could stay here all night. “You think I am arrogant.”

That earned me a smirk.

“Next question, Your Honor.” She raised a brow. “The man on trial already knows my answer. And he would agree with me.”

I snorted. The sound was so abrupt, I tilted my head back, and the resulting laughter bellowed out of me. “How dare you!”

My hand started to release hers, but she pulled it back.

She. Pulled. It. Back.

Our laughter peeled through the library, and we both covered our mouths with our hands. She smiled widely as she put a finger to her lips. The door was open. I wished it wasn’t.

I knew what I wanted to ask next, but I almost lost my nerve. “You find me . . . handsome.”

Her humor faded, but her eyes were still bright as they washed over my face. “True.”

I waited for her to say more. To elaborate a little?

She drew my hand into her lap, and I watched as she pressed it between her two palms. “You wish I had a title.”

I wanted to quickly deny it, to pretend like position in Society didn’t matter to me or for the dukedom, but that would be lying. And I owed her the truth.

“True,” I said. “But your brother is gentry. Your family name is well-respected amongst the *ton*.”

She wouldn’t look up. So I ducked until she relented. “You don’t think that’s enough,” I murmured.

“True.” She held my gaze. “Because I’ve listened to you say it time and time again. What the dukedom needs. What you expect.”

I swallowed hard. “I regret that most of all.”

A crease formed between her brows. “You think your worth is tied to the dukedom. That if it isn’t good enough, *strong* enough, then neither are you.”

I let that one settle and took a few unhurried breaths. “I think that is true. But I don’t want it to be.”

Georgiana lifted my hand and examined every mark, every scar, every groove and line. She was solemn. Serious.

I wanted her to smile again. “You wish Valancourt from Udolpho was real so

you could marry *him*.”

Her eyes darted up to mine. “False.”

“Liar,” I smirked. “I bet you’ve marked up every line he speaks.”

Her mouth formed a perfect, surprised O, and she blew out a breath. “Mark in a book? You’re mad.”

“Perhaps if I read his lines aloud, you’d think differently of me.” I tugged my hand from her grasp, scooting backward toward the table, and she pushed up on her knees.

“Leave my *Udolpho* alone.” She started to laugh. “Lucas, I mean it.”

I froze at the sound of my name on her lips. *Lucas*. Not Marlow. Not Duke. Just Lucas.

But my outstretched hand had already snagged her book from the table. I scooted back further and opened to a page, laughing, reveling in the vibrations our voices created together, as I scanned the words for his name. Drat, if Ann Radcliffe didn’t droll on and on and on.

“Lucas!” Georgiana clambered over me, reaching for the book. “Give it here.”

I had to fall back to escape her, stretching out my arm as long as it would go. But she was adamant. Her neck flushed red all the way to her forehead.

I chuckled, trying to roll out of her reach. “My word, you *do* love this man.”

My words incited a fury in her, and in an instant, she had my outstretched arm in a hold and ripped the book from my hand. But she couldn’t roll away fast enough. My free arm twisted around her waist. My leg pinned hers.

“Please,” she begged, her breaths coming hard and fast and mingling with mine, half laughing from the sudden madness we’d created. She clutched *Udolpho* to her chest like her dying wish. “Don’t hurt him.”

I’d already forgotten about Valancourt. I leaned over her. Traced her jaw with my free hand. Our eyes locked for the longest moment of my life.

“You like me more than Valancourt,” I whispered.

Her chest rose and fell as she recovered herself. Her gaze washed over my face, then dropped to my mouth.

I thumbed her cheek. Silently begged for her to speak.

“True,” she whispered on a breath.

My chest was on fire. I was engulfed in flames.

She shifted beneath my hold until we were lying side by side. Our knees slid against each other, and our elbows clumsily bumped in the darkening room as we folded our arms and perched our heads upon them.

“You want to kiss me,” she whispered, so close the air between us was palpable.

“Very, very true.” I brushed her hair back, then threaded my fingers through the soft curls at her neck, drawing her nearer. “You’re scared to kiss me back.”

She nodded her nose against mine. Her sweet breath teased my lips in little puffs. “Lucas,” she murmured. “We shouldn’t.”

“But you want to?” I sounded like the weak, sodden fool I was.

Slowly, her fingers traced around my neck. She whispered, “True.”

My lips met hers on instinct, as though they’d been waiting for the word, for this moment, for a lifetime. A single brush of my lips against hers was like lightning rushing through me. She felt softer than flower petals. Tasted sweeter than honey.

She was hesitant at first. Slow and measured and gentle as we breathed each other in once, twice, again. I felt the moment her confidence took hold, followed her lead as she tilted her head and let me deepen the kiss.

How had I lived before this? I was consumed by her lips, her skin on mine. Altered by every fragment her fingers touched.

The story I’d told her about kissing my tutor was child’s play. *This* was a kiss. This was the feeling men sought, yearned their lifetime for, and I had it right here in my arms. I wanted this for the rest of my life.

Her fingers dug into the nape of my neck, urging me closer. I grinned into the kiss, and she did too. My hand in her hair moved down her back, pressing her close, pulling her closer, feeling her body against mine.

I took her bottom lip between my teeth, and she went utterly still.

“Ah. Well, I cannot say this is a surprise.”

Gabriel?

Georgiana shot up, leaving me cold and alone, and twisted around. “No, no—this is not what you think. We were . . .”

I sat up at her back, still dazed as Gabriel plopped into the seat nearest the hearth, darkened by shadows. “You’ve gotten sloppy, the both of you. Don’t you know half the house is still awake?”

“Gabriel . . .” I cleared my throat and ran a hand through my already mussed hair. Shifted my knees. “We—ah.”

“Yes.” He looked between us. “You were.”

I started to laugh at the irony of *Gabriel* catching *me* in this position.

“This was nothing,” Georgiana rushed to say. “You saw nothing. We were tired. That is all. Marlow meant nothing by it.”

“False.” I tugged on the strings of her robe. “But if you want to keep this a secret, he’ll oblige us. Won’t you, Gabriel?” I warned him with a look.

“Haven’t I for weeks now? You think you’re so secretive. I come in halfway through the night, and the hearth is still burning. Laughter, the clinking of foils.

The door wide open. The strangest of all was seeing candles moving in the forest.” He smirked at Georgiana. “I know it was you who convinced him to give me that loan. And I am grateful. So, no. I won’t say anything. But for heaven’s sake, do not act so foolishly with Her Grace three doors down.”

He was right. For once in his life. We were indeed acting like foolish children.

My heart worked to recover a normal rhythm, more so when Georgiana looked fearfully at me over her shoulder. “It won’t happen again,” she said.

My throat went dry. “Don’t say that.”

“Yes, please. Do carry on.” Gabriel sniffed, turning away. “I’ll pretend to watch the fire like a good chaperone.”

“I thought I heard voices in here.” Maggie stood in the doorway.

Georgiana stood. She wrapped her arms around her middle. Her cheeks were rosy. Lips, a little swollen. Her hair was a mess from my fingers. I could not keep my eyes from studying her.

Deuces, had Gabriel not come in first, and stopped us . . .

“Couldn’t sleep,” Gabriel told her. “You too?”

Maggie narrowed her gaze at me. “What have I missed? Are you up to something?” Her eyes darted to Georgiana’s.

“We were”—I looked to Georgiana, but she gave me a warning look —“trying something new.”

“Under my ample supervision,” Gabriel added.

Maggie still looked confused. She blinked. Then she sat in Cleo’s chair, scrambling when Cleo stood and jumped down to wind around Georgiana’s ankles. “Are you playing some sort of game?”

Georgiana cleared her throat, Gabriel smirked, and devil take me if I wasn’t blushing like a schoolgirl.

“I should go.” Georgiana started toward the door.

“No—” Gabriel started.

“Please, don’t,” I begged.

“If you’re leaving, then so am I.” Maggie stood.

“Everyone settle down.” Gabriel picked up the fire poker and prodded the logs. “Are we close enough friends that I could have a whiskey in front of our dear Miss Wood?”

“Yes, of course,” Georgiana said softly. Had she moved closer to the door? Cleo stalked behind some bookshelves. Out the window, the night sky shimmered with starlight.

Gabriel’s glass clinked against the jug as he poured himself a drink. “What a

night,” he almost cheered before taking a swig. “And all of us home at the same time.”

Maggie looked between us with a quirked brow. She sat back down in her seat. “Thomas went out with friends tonight. Apparently a fight broke out at the Club.”

“Typical.” Gabriel took another swig.

“Apparently one man asked the other’s wife for a kiss in exchange for settling her husband’s gambling debts. And she agreed.”

Georgiana’s brows shot up.

“That’s one way to do it.” Gabriel laughed. “I need a wife.”

“You need that investment to pan out,” I argued. “Then a wife.”

“Soon, then.” Gabriel held up his glass in salute, sure of himself. He leaned back against the cabinet. “Speaking of my investments. Do you remember that scientist who told me frog dung could heal fevers—”

Of course I did. “I remember he convinced you to fund his *breakthrough* discovery.”

Gabriel winced. “Turned out it was the willow bark it’d been sitting on, not the frog dung itself. But we were *so close*. That should’ve been the one.”

“Don’t act all innocent, Marlow.” Maggie crossed her legs. “Was it not *you* who assured us all that the next big scheme would be self-lighting candles?”

“I was fourteen,” I reminded her, “and they are coming. Wait a few years, and you’ll see.”

We all shared a laugh. I looked toward the door for Georgiana.

But she had disappeared.

Every good feeling vanished. “She’s gone.”

Gabriel threw back the rest of his whiskey. “She’s scared.”

“Of what?” Maggie asked. “What have you done, Lucas?”

“Nothing,” Gabriel enunciated. “Leave him be. We all need our beds. Tomorrow will bring clarity. Hmm?”

Wise words from Gabriel? Of all people. Though I doubted I would sleep at all.

“What?” he asked haughtily. “I have had my fair share of midnight regrets, Cousin. If there’s one thing I can advise on, it’s that.”

I had a solemn feeling I’d missed too much of his advice over the years. Anxious as I was to force him into line. To chasten him for ever stepping off of it. I never truly listened to the wisdom he gleaned from his mistakes.

Maggie scoffed. “I am too tired for your riddling. Good night.”

“Good night,” we said in tandem.

Gabriel poured himself another drink. Then pulled out a second glass.

“Trust me,” he said. “It’ll help you sleep this off.”

The only thing that would calm my mind was talking with Georgiana. But she’d left without saying anything. We’d acted impulsively, and she needed a moment to herself. I understood.

I didn’t need any more time to sort out my feelings. I did not want to waste another day without her. The dukedom would simply have to adjust. In time, Society would forget.

I would give Georgiana a night.

And then I’d make my intentions clear.

Chapter Twenty-Four

GEORGIANA

What have I done? I asked myself for the hundredth time since waking up.

Jane had sent a runner early this morning to Hampshire to deliver my plea—*Peter, I've made another grand mistake. Please hurry.*

If he hadn't already left, then two days at most, and I had no doubt he'd return for me. To save me from whatever fallout I'd incur from letting my heart loose again.

But that *kiss*. I had dreamed of such a kiss. Endless fire, burning all through me. I could still feel it now buried forever in my bones. His lips, the taste of sugar and mint. I wanted more.

I hadn't known such happiness was possible. I'd worked so hard against feeling anything for so long that locking away my feelings had become second nature. But last night, alone in the place where I felt most comfortable, I'd let my heart free from its cage.

I'd seen the truth of my feelings reflected in Lucas's eyes.

I loved him.

Lucas.

Loyal, sweet, playful Lucas, who understood me better than any other man ever had. Lucas, who just so happened to be the *Duke of Marlow*.

And who was I?

A country girl with her name in the gossip papers.

He'd said so many sweet things, I could almost believe his feelings in earnest, were it not for the many other times he'd spoken to the contrary.

His *needs* were not in line with his feelings. He needed a wife worthy of the dukedom, and I was far from it.

And Lucas loved the dukedom most of all.

My chest tightened. I wasn't ready to leave Ashburn Abbey. Or Lucas. Or our library. Our chair. The secret passageway and the warm, comfortable stables.

But I'd have to.

"Miss Wood, has your headache improved?" Jane asked from the doorway.

“The family is taking tea and would like for you to join them.”

“The . . . entire family?” Lucas never took tea with us in the afternoons unless forced to do so.

“Including His Grace, yes.”

My stomach tightened, heavy and anxious. I could only feign a headache for so long.

For better or worse, I had to face Lucas. It was time. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

Jane smiled and left the door open a crack.

Drat, drat, *drat*. What should I do? What should I *say*?

Something about having a lovely sleep. Feeling much improved since this morning. Nothing about having kissed anyone, or feeling anything afterward, and certainly nothing about wishing for another round.

Heavens.

I descended slowly, watching the foyer for any sign of movement. The house was still and quiet. Perhaps Her Grace was waiting in the drawing room. Or perhaps they’d already started tea, and I could sneak inside and settle without saying more than *good afternoon*.

I stopped at the bottom, looking round. And blew out a long exhale.

Pausing right outside the open drawing room door, I heard low, undistinguishable voices.

Slowly, I stepped inside.

Her Grace was at the window with Maggie, a sweet bun in her hand, reading a paper. Gabriel hulked nearby as though waiting for them to relay something.

Lucas sat on the settee facing away from them with a cup in his hand, his gaze focused somewhere ahead on the red-and-yellow carpet.

Gabriel saw me first. “Miss Wood. Feeling much improved, I hope?”

Lucas’s gaze jolted to mine, and for the briefest moment, I thought I saw fear in his eyes.

Regret?

I wouldn’t let the possibility wound me. I held my head high and smiled.

“Much improved, yes. Thank you.”

“Thank heavens,” Gabriel said. “He was moments away from calling for the doctor.” He nodded to Lucas, who set down his cup and pushed up from his seat.

“And you slept?” Lucas’s gaze washed over me like he was examining a patient.

I raised a brow. He was acting strange. Sir Ronald had been angry when I’d kissed him. He would hardly look me in the face. Lucas seemed intent on ensuring I was still in one piece.

“Very well. Thank you.”

“Tea?” he asked, retaking his seat and gesturing to the space beside him on the settee. He poured my cup just the way I liked it, then took a plate and started filling it with food—strawberries, sweet buns, little sandwiches.

“Thank you,” I said as he finished. His kindness was noted by Maggie, too, who watched me take the plate from him and set it on the table in front of us.

Lucas handed me my teacup, then took a slow sip from his. He sat back in his seat, angled toward me, then crossed and uncrossed his legs. “Did you sleep well?”

I paused with the teacup at my lips, watching his right leg start to bounce. “You just asked me that question, Your Grace.”

Lucas . . . flushed? His cheeks blossomed pink. “I did not.”

“You did.” I hid my humor behind my teacup. “And the answer is still the same. I slept well, thank you. Did you?”

His eyes flickered about the room, as though to ensure we were speaking privately, then leaned in as though imparting a secret. “It was the best night of sleep of my life.”

Our eyes locked. It felt like a dare, a tease—say something and see what happens next.

I had *no idea* what might happen next.

My heart drummed against my ribs, terrified. “I am glad to hear it.”

“You look well this afternoon.” His gaze washed over me, cheeks still pink.

My heart ached, absolutely ached for him.

I held his gaze, though being so near him in so intimate a conversation set my chest ablaze.

“I don’t deserve your kindness,” I whispered.

He tilted his head. His knees angled close and bumped into mine. “I don’t think care and affection are something anyone *deserves*, Georgiana. I think they are a product of forming attachments.”

Oh, I was done in. Done for. Completely mad for him and for the way he looked at me as though I mattered to him. It was too good to have his attention like this.

His fingers trailed over his knees until they grazed mine. All I did was open my hand, and he took it, entwining our fingers. The touch of his skin on mine spread like wildfire all the way down to my toes. His fingers were warm and rough. Encompassing mine. It felt like a homecoming. Like a hundred butterflies in my chest.

I wanted to feel this way forever.

“Whose carriage is that?” Maggie asked from the window, and I tugged my

hand free, twisting round.

He took my hand back, knocking our knees together. “Georgiana, what I said last evening—”

“Lucas,” I said his name like a warning. Not here. Not now.

“I meant every word.” His eyes watched mine, measuring my reaction. “I need to know if you—”

“Lord Reynolds to see you, Your Grace,” the butler said from the doorway, and we tore apart.

“What the devil is *he* doing here?” Gabriel stalked toward the window.

An alarm rang through me. Lord Reynolds? I’d *completely* forgotten. He’d wanted to walk Kensington Gardens!

Maggie smirked. “Is there something you ought to tell us, Miss Wood?”

Lucas had stilled. Drat, drat, drat. “Ah—well, I believe he’s come to invite us out for the afternoon.”

“How lovely,” Her Grace said, standing just as Lord Reynolds strutted inside.

He stopped a few paces away and bowed as we all rose to greet him. “Your Graces. Mrs. Drexel. Mr. Brennan.” Then he took me in, a slow grin curving his mouth. “Miss Wood. You look beautiful this afternoon.”

Throw me in the Thames. To be so bold! And in front of Lucas! “Lord Reynolds.” I curtsied. The earl had zero reservations. No doubt he had a reputation with women.

Lucas stood rigid beside me. “To what do we owe this great pleasure, Reynolds?” he asked with measured calm.

“I hope I am not interrupting your afternoon. I’m off to Kensington Gardens. Miss Wood and I had spoken of it last evening at the theater. I am hoping to convince her to join me.”

“Absolutely not,” Lucas enunciated.

My gaze jumped to his. And as though he felt it, he softened.

Maggie laughed. “Not without the rest of us, His Grace means.”

I had an inkling from way Lucas grit his teeth that was not at all what he meant.

“Of course! Please, do join us,” Lord Reynolds insisted. “The weather is fine, and I believe we’ll be early enough to miss the crowds.”

Lucas looked to me, studied me. “Would you like to walk Kensington Gardens, Miss Wood?”

I could see no way out of it. No polite excuse to decline Lord Reynolds’s invitation, especially since we had indeed discussed the outing last evening. I’d have to decline any further invitations or risk giving him the wrong impression. I

was dangerously close to misguiding him as it was. I gave Lucas a pained look. I'd love nothing more than to sit beside my friend until the sun fell low, but was that wise either?

"I think fresh air would do us all some good. Clear the mind. Shall we all go out as friends?" I asked.

"Well thought." Her Grace smiled, patting Lucas's arm. "Enjoy yourselves." Lord Reynolds grinned at me.

"Friends." Lucas scowled. "We'll take my carriage."

Chapter Twenty-Five

MARLOW

“What is all the fuss about?” Maggie held my arm as we trailed our party down the wide dirt footpath of Hyde Park Corner toward Kensington Gardens.

Georgiana looked over her shoulder at us. “Quite the crowd ahead.” She was flanked by Reynolds and Gabriel.

“We should certainly be in the middle of it.” Reynolds smirked at her.

The man was an utter dolt. If Maggie wasn’t holding me back a step, I might have thrashed him for the way he grinned at Georgiana.

She’d said last night she wasn’t interested in his suit.

Trusting that was harder now than it had been a few hours ago.

I hadn’t thought of myself as a man who needed reassurance of his feelings, but devil take me, I wanted to have it out with her! I wanted to tell her exactly how I felt, and I wanted her to return those feelings. I wanted her to return Grandmother’s ring so that I could give the thing right back!

I was fairly confident she felt the same.

But dash it all, a man needed to hear the words!

If Georgiana agreed to a courtship, Society would be shocked. Perhaps even scandalized. Georgiana Wood, the woman I swore I had no intentions toward.

Just a friend.

Not after that kiss. Not since that night at the Waymonts’ party, if I was completely honest with myself.

Little did Society know, she’d outsmarted them all by bargaining with me. Then she’d faced them with grace. She was brave, empathetic, intelligent, and strong.

What more could I want from a partner? What more could I want from the future mother of my heir?

Could she maintain the dukedom in my place if something happened to me? I could say with certainty that she would try. And she’d have her brother, who, despite his feelings toward me, was respectable and honorable and quite successful on his own. He would guide her through it.

In truth, my feelings for Georgiana were still new, but they *felt* old. Like I'd loved her for a lifetime already.

For the first time in my life, I could imagine a future—more so than I had with anyone else—of late nights and early mornings, a courtship of gifts and flowers and stolen moments. All the way to picnics on the lawn, our children chasing the wind and whatever it carried.

It was mad, and yet, I was old enough to know that this sort of match only came once in a lifetime. It was far more valuable than any title, any wealth, any *ring*.

Georgiana looked back at me again and smiled. Surely, she felt it too.

Just ahead, a gathering crowd stood at the end of the pond in Kensington Gardens.

The water glistened in the sunlight, reflecting the palace just across the way.

The crowd made room for us, a horde of young ladies and gentlemen and their ever-watchful chaperones along the sidelines. Three young bucks with their coats tossed aside skipped rocks across the pond.

"Four!" one young lady cheered. "The winner is Mr. Warwick."

A young man thrust his fist in the air. "Huzzah!" He strode to the young lady, who beamed and blushed, and with both hands, pulled her face to his.

A chaste kiss, but the crowd cheered all the same.

"It's a game," Reynolds told Georgiana. "They skip stones to earn a kiss from the most beautiful woman in the crowd."

"Heavens, in public?" Maggie's eyes widened.

"Let's move on." I nudged Gabriel, whose eyes were fixated on the young gentlemen.

"Anyone think they can beat four skims?" the most confident of the young men asked.

"I can!" Reynolds called out, hand raised.

I groaned. "Must we?"

"There! Come forward, sir!"

"That's Lord Reynolds," someone said. Watchful eyes studied our group.

"Don't." Georgiana winced, tugging his arm back.

"I am very, very accomplished in the art of skipping rocks, Miss Wood." Reynolds winked at her, and every muscle in my back tensed.

"Pick your rock, Lord Reynolds," the young man said, "and of the crowd, pick the most beautiful young lady among them."

In the space of a beat, he said her name, "Miss Georgiana Wood."

They knew her. All of them. They clapped and laughed, and two other men joined Reynolds to choose their stones for a chance to kiss Georgiana.

“No.” Georgiana shook her head, hands at her flushing cheeks. She waved off their attention. “Thank you, but no.”

“Come now, Miss Wood.” A young lady tugged her arm. Her friend took Georgiana’s other side. “Just a kiss. Just one!”

“We know you won’t mind,” someone older said from the crowd.

Georgiana looked back at me, panicked.

What could *I* do without making a scene? “She said no,” I told the girls. “Margaret?”

Maggie raised a brow like she thought it odd I’d want to intervene. “On the hand, then,” she directed them, and though the girls rolled their eyes, they led Georgiana to the front.

Reynolds had removed his coat, stone in hand. “Shall I try for five skims?”

“Six!” the crowd cried. The girls shrieked with delight, blushing for his attention. One threw her handkerchief out at him.

At once, the men lined up.

The first man’s stone went three skims.

The second’s, five.

Lord Reynolds turned and reared back his arm. With a smooth flick of his wrist, he released his stone, skipping, one, two, three—

All the way to seven.

The crowd cheered.

His eyes found Georgiana.

I knew that look.

“No,” she directed him. “On the *hand*.”

He bit his lip as he sauntered toward her, much to the glee of the crowd.

“Kiss her!” they called. “Here’s your chance! Kiss her soundly!”

The air shifted, cold. He wouldn’t . . . would he?

I started moving, pushing my way through the crowd.

Reynolds reached her first, and he swiftly snaked his arm around her back. His other hand cupped her neck, and his lips pressed against hers with fervor.

I froze, stunned into a stupor until Lord Reynolds pulled back, grinning at his cheering new friends as though he’d won some great prize.

Georgiana pulled herself free, her face apple red, eyes watery, and I felt her distress like a knife in my chest. She’d told him no.

She’d told him *no*.

My hands were fists. Feet frozen as I watched her rush away.

An older woman laughed. “What a pair, those two. They both love a public scene.”

Her friend replied, “Did you see how quickly she volunteered? *I* heard—”

Georgiana pushed past them all, and Lord Reynolds smirked, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

“Blast. I’ve embarrassed her,” he told his admirers.

Something in me snapped, and the boiling rage burst free. “Reynolds,” I seethed, pushing through the last of the onlookers until we were toe to toe.

He looked up, giving me the perfect open target.

I thrust my fist directly into his jaw.

Gasps sounded all around. Reynolds fell back, cursing and holding his face. “Deuces, man! It was a game!”

“*Touch her again,*” I bellowed, “and I will *end you* in front of everyone you love.”

“Marlow.” Gabriel stood between us, palms up, his expression one of shock and fear. “All is well, Cousin.”

“Step aside, Gabriel.” My breaths were coming fast, shallow. “Stand up, Reynolds.”

“I think we ought to leave now,” Gabriel said tersely. “You are causing quite the scene.”

“I’m bleeding,” Reynolds muttered, surprised as he touched the corner of his mouth. “Who the devil do you think you are?”

I reared back my arm again.

Gabriel hung his weight on my side, unbalancing me, and turned me round. “Our apologies,” he called over his shoulder as he shoved me forward.

Then, with a rush of air, Gabriel fell back a step and groaned. I turned round only to be knocked sideways by Reynolds in a whirl of frenzied hits. I recovered and caught one in the eye, another in the gut, but I gave as much right back. Gabriel pushed his way between us, hands up in surrender. Reynolds landed a blow to the side of his head.

I didn’t think. I pushed my cousin out of the way and broke Reynolds’s nose with my fist.

His blood sprayed over the grass.

“Now, we are leaving.” Gabriel pushed me hard. “Idiots, the both of you, and —*ahh*—my eye.” He pressed his hand over his right eye.

I struggled against him half-heartedly—I might’ve broken my knuckles on Reynolds’s face—then seethed over my shoulder, “Come anywhere near her, and I’ll—”

“We’ll knock out what’s left of your teeth!” Gabriel finished.

The crowd had dispersed, teeming with wide stares and flurried whispers, save the half a dozen men aiding Reynolds. I spun round, searching the

passersby for Georgiana. I tasted something metallic. Ah. My bottom lip. That buffoon *split my lip*?

“She’s gone. Maggie took her,” Gabriel said. His right eye was swelling. He led me to the far edge of the Park and lifted his hand to call a hackney. “That little scuffle will definitely make the papers tomorrow. Lud, Marlow.”

I couldn’t care less about the people, the papers. “Ashburn Abbey,” I directed the driver.

Gabriel tugged off his cravat and handed it to me. “Your eye.”

I pressed the cloth to my face, surprised at the wetness down my left side. “He will regret this day.”

“I am quite sure he already does. Over skipping stones, no less.”

“She told him no. You heard her.”

“I did.” Gabriel huffed. “He deserved the hit. But let us leave it at that, for Georgiana’s sake.”

I grunted my agreement. The only thing that mattered now was ensuring Georgiana was well. I’d seen her face as she pulled away. He’d hurt her in more ways than one.

He’d never come near her again.

Back home, Gabriel paid the driver with coins from his own pocket for once, and I rushed inside the house.

“Where is she?” I asked Toole.

“Upstairs, Your Grace. But you are bleeding—!”

I took the stairs two by two.

Chapter Twenty-Six

GEORGIANA

“Faster, Jane.” I pulled everything out of my armoire, my rampant heartbeat in my throat. The last trunk waited open on the floor. Already, she had all my shoes stacked in the bottom.

“Miss Wood, this is all so rushed. Are you *sure*—”

“I want to go home.” I felt ill, dizzy like I’d had too much wine. Rushed, to be sure, but it was better this way. No time to think. No time to *feel*. Her Grace had understood. After hearing the story relayed from Maggie, it felt almost like she *wanted* me to go. Like she agreed that I was doing more harm than good here. I placed the last of my face creams and hairpins in a little box, then set it in the trunk. Jane folded dresses furiously. “I never want to return to London again.”

“Her Grace said the carriage should be ready soon.” Jane laid the last gown on top. “She’s sending another maid and a footman to journey with us.”

I nodded, eyes watery as I looked about the room. I had already emptied drawers and filled the smaller trunk on my bed with trinkets.

I supposed I should be grateful Lord Reynolds had given me the excuse I needed to leave. I didn’t want to, but now, it was clearer than ever that I should. Lucas deserved better than a girl who courted judgment and whispers, who took every wrong turn no matter how well-intentioned. Thank heavens it had happened before either of us had said anything we could not take back.

On the bedside table, I’d left a little leather box. Lucas’s grandmother’s ring. Returned, finally.

We’d had our final outing, after all. Planned or not. And it had certainly been one for the papers.

Jane locked both trunks, and we did a final spin about the room.

“I shall have the men carry these down as well,” Jane said from the window. “I see the carriage now.”

A knock rapped on the door.

“Don’t answer it,” I begged Jane, but she strode around me anyway and

opened the door.

“Your Grace,” she said.

I froze as she stepped aside for him. I could not have prepared myself for the sight. The blood. The bruising. I sucked in a breath.

“Georgiana,” Lucas said.

“Your face,” I whispered as I hurried toward him. I’d seen him defend me. Heard his yelling, the gasps from the onlookers. He’d done it all for me. I fell into his embrace.

“Are you . . . leaving?” His voice faltered.

“Lucas, your eye.” His arms were around my waist as I lifted a finger to the drying blood along his brow. I traced down his temple, wincing as I noted the split in his lower lip. “What happened?”

“Reynolds and I had a conversation. He will never hurt you again.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I chided him. I grasped his arms, firm and unyielding and warm as they held me to him. “Lucas, sit down. Jane, get us water, please.”

She rushed out of the room.

My gaze washed over his face, tracking every cut, every bruise, every fleck of dried blood *I* had caused, and it pained me to my core. I wanted to cry, seeing him like this, but his hold felt so secure. I felt so safe as he tightened his arms around me and held me together. Wounded himself, but here to heal. I did not deserve it.

“Why did you—”

“I love you.” He spoke the words like they were timed, like if he did not release them he might very well explode. His eyes studied mine. “I love you, Georgiana.”

His words squeezed my heart, sliced it into shreds. Like fireworks in my chest and smoke in my eyes. *I love you too*, I wanted to cry. But I couldn’t release the words and tie myself to him. Not when binding our hearts would cost him the future he’d planned for.

He pressed his forehead against mine. “Don’t leave.”

I swallowed down the lump forming in my throat. I’d thought by coming here I could erase the past, that things could be as they once were. A second chance for friendships and finding my place.

Instead, I’d continued on the same path as before. I’d hurt the person I cared most for.

“But look what I’ve done to you,” I whispered.

Jane rushed back in, pouring water into the basin. I took a rag from her hand

and dipped it in with renewed purpose. Lucas waited on the bed as I wrung out the cloth, then I sat beside him, and gently worked away the blood.

“Is the doctor coming?” I asked.

He nodded, studying me.

“Good. You’ll need a stitch or two.” I thumbed his brow.

“This was not your fault, Georgiana.”

I shook my head. Of course it was. “But it happened. By tomorrow, everyone will be talking about it.”

Lucas held my wrist. “So we’ll stay in. Avoid them. Read books, learn a duet, whatever you like, until the whisperings have run their course.”

A lovely thought. Perhaps we *could* wait them out. It was only a game, after all. But what then? My last public kiss had been the real scandal, but this time had proved that Society would never truly forget my past. I could smile and converse with them, but they’d always be watching, waiting for me to take another wrong turn. They were vultures waiting for prey, and I would no longer entertain them.

“This past month has taught me so much about myself. I returned to London thinking this life—London Society—was what I wanted. But it isn’t. I do not enjoy it as I thought I would—the games, the dinner parties—it is all so exhausting.”

“I understand.” He nodded, swallowing. “I have several estates in the country. Do you remember, at the Waymonts’, we spoke of Tinlow Court? Let me take you there. In a few months, Parliament will have adjourned—”

“I want to go home, Lucas.”

“Then *I* will come with *you*.”

I took the ring box from the bedside table and handed it to him. I softened my voice, and the truth we’d both known all along. “You are the Duke of Marlow. You are bound to your duty. To the dukedom. This, and London Society, will always be your life.”

His jaw worked, gaze set upon the little box in his hand. “Last night you said you wanted more too. Is that not true?”

“Lucas—”

“Please, Georgiana.” His eyes reddened.

“*Because* I love you,” I whispered, “I will not stay. You need more than what I can give you.”

“You are wrong. I need exactly *you*.” He took my hand and placed the box in my palm. “Give me time, and I will prove it to you. Stay, and let me court you properly. I will burn every gossip paper that comes within arm’s reach of this house. I will snuff anyone who so much as blinks wrong at you. Whatever you

need, I will do. Only tell me. Tell me what you need, Georgiana. *I need you to stay.*”

“I do not doubt you,” I whispered, gently setting the ring box back on the bed. “But I know a truth you have still yet to learn. Remember what I told you in the passageway, and again in the stables?”

“I cannot control another person, nor their mind.”

I nodded. “You deserve someone who makes all this *easier*. Someone stronger than I can be.”

“It is time to go, Miss Wood,” Jane said from the door.

“Do not leave me.” His voice broke.

I shook my head. “Not *you*, Lucas. Never *you*.” I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “I must go. Please forgive me.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

MARLOW

I turned the square leather ring box over in my hand.

All that anger. The resentment I'd harbored for months after a failed engagement. But I'd had no idea what it felt like to be truly rejected until *this* moment.

My chest was empty. Clawed out. I was gutted. The pain so raw and all-encompassing I'd nearly gone numb from it.

I couldn't move from her bed.

Gabriel flew past the open door, then quickly backtracked. "In here," he said over his shoulder. Our eyes locked, and his flashed with worry. "Margaret," he called out from the doorway, frowning. "Come, quickly."

"What is it?" she asked, hurrying past him inside the room. *Georgiana's* room. Now empty. "*Lucas*," she crooned. "What is wrong?"

"She's gone," I choked out. Lud, what was wrong with me? My throat was painfully clogged. An awful burning rose into my throat, pricking the corners of my eyes.

"What has happened?" Maggie sat beside me on the bed.

Mother entered, red-faced and grim. I couldn't stand, I was shaking so suddenly, so forcefully. I was left with nothing but rubble. That was all I had, all I'd ever have if I could not create a path that led Georgiana straight back *here*.

What was all of this without *her*?

"I cannot do this." I swallowed hard, determined to speak.

"The duchy?" Maggie took my hand. Her eyes locked on mine, serious and worried.

I tried to breathe. "It is too much," I whispered.

"That's my fault," Gabriel grumbled from the doorway, shifting his weight from side to side. "I ask for too much. I've made your life difficult."

I tugged out of Maggie's hold and dried my wet cheeks with my sleeves.

"No. It's not you. It's me. I—I am inadequate. I have ruined everything."

Mother sat on my other side. "Lucas, my son, that is the farthest thing from

the truth. Why would you say such a thing?"

Because it *was* true. "Why else would Georgiana leave?"

My family deserved the truth, the whole of it, so I started from the beginning. "Before Father died, he told me to do whatever it took—*whatever* it took—to restore the dukedom. For our family line and all who depended on us."

Mother nodded, patient. Gabriel leaned against the door, watching his feet.

"But he wasn't here." My voice broke. "He wasn't here to tell me *how* to see it through, and it's been so difficult. I have sacrificed my integrity in the pursuit of keeping my promise, and still I have failed him."

"You have had to make some difficult decisions. We all see that." Mother squeezed my arm. "But you have not failed him."

I shook my head. She had no idea. "I've been selfish. I've made deals advantageous to myself and harmful to others. I've used information against . . . I've blackmailed—"

"Darling," Mother said solemnly. "Is any of this irreparable?"

I shrugged. I supposed with time I could heal fractured relationships. Balance my greed with generosity in other ways. "No."

Despite her calm demeanor, her shoulders visibly relaxed. "Then it seems you have learned a lesson in how you wish to do business, and namely in how you do *not*. That is good."

Not good enough. "I hate myself for forcing—"

"You hate your *choices*. You must never hate yourself. Am I quite clear? You, Lucas, are not a bad man. You are my son. You are your father's son. The Duke of Marlow. And from your very core, you are good. The difference between who you want to be and who you are is merely a measure of daily progress."

My head hung. She took my face in her hands and swiped my tears with her thumbs.

"You are the greatest pride of my life, Lucas." She kissed my cheeks one at a time, then my forehead. "The burden is heavy. But you are not inadequate."

I wanted to believe her. She understood. Of anyone, *she* did. She'd carried this weight beside my father. Slowly, I raised my gaze to hers, to a face as familiar as my own. Wisdom in every line. Her eyes measured with empathy I did not deserve.

"Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

She did not hesitate. "What does your heart tell you?"

"That after having her, I cannot do this alone," I whispered.

"Miss Wood." Mother swallowed. "She would make a fierce partner, to be sure."

“She doesn’t want it. Me.”

“She loves you,” Gabriel argued. “Anyone with eyes can see it.”

I shrugged. “She left.” And nothing in my life had cut so deep. I’d never wanted anything *this* much.

“Then go after her,” Maggie said with feeling, as though the answer was obvious. “Show her how serious you are.”

I wasn’t sure anything I said or did would matter. “I do not know how to convince her to want this . . . this *part of me* I cannot renounce.”

Gabriel crossed his arms. “What is it, exactly, that discourages her from staying?”

“London life,” I said.

“Then live in the country most of the year. Hire more management. You certainly have the funds.”

I had offered. “She doesn’t think that is wise for the dukedom.”

“When have you, the Duke of Marlow, ever let anyone tell *you* what is wise?”

True, but I had never faced anyone as wise as she. “This is Georgiana. She doesn’t like it when I . . . try to bend things to my will.”

Mother’s lips twitched. She squeezed my arm, then stood. “It sounds like you have much to think about. Find me when you have made your decision.”

“So, don’t bend things to your will, then.” Gabriel moved out of Mother’s way as she quit the room. “Or better yet, bend them without her noticing.”

Gabriel, as usual, wasn’t making any sense. But I was desperate. I’d try just about anything. “How do I do that?”

“Well, to start, give her a few days to calm her nerves. Deuces, you just beat a man senseless in her honor. She’s bound to be a little skittish.”

Maggie nodded. “And with good reason. She’s had a very difficult year, Lucas. No one could blame her for feeling distrustful of the future.”

Was that it? “You think she does not trust me?”

“I think she needs a safe place to fall when she’s scared. Right now, that safe place is her brother’s home. Your task is to change that safe place to *you*.”

Yes. That was exactly what I wanted. To be the place she ran to when she was scared or sad. To hold her until she felt capable again. I’d do anything to be Georgiana’s refuge.

“How?”

Gabriel stood tall and nodded. “You must go to her.”

“But you just said—”

Maggie stood and began to pace. “Befriend her brother. Show Georgiana you mean to be a permanent fixture in her life too.”

“She won’t like me forcing my way—”

“If she loves you, it won’t feel forced. Right now, she truly thinks she’s doing you a favor. She’s making the decision for the both of you, and that isn’t fair.”

“Not one bit,” Gabriel agreed.

Maggie hovered over me. “We need to make a plan. You need to prepare.”

“I’ll go to Hampshire,” I said. “I’ll meet with her brother first.”

Maggie shook her head. “You’ll rent a room at the inn. Stay apart from her so she knows your aim is not to force things.”

“I’ll help with business around here,” Gabriel offered.

“I can ask my steward to come.” My mind raced with possibility. “But what about the rumors?”

Maggie’s lips turned up. “Let your mother and I take care of the papers. Go and win Georgiana.”

Could I? Would this actually work?

“And for heaven’s sake,” Gabriel muttered, “marry her and secure the heir.”



The afternoon went by in a frenzy of paperwork, beginning with a rushed meeting with my steward and ending with Toole closing the door behind himself in my study.

Only a few tears escaped the man when I agreed to allow him his marriage. He grinned wider than I’d ever seen him in all our years together.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he said. “You have my word, the marriage will not affect my work nor my dedication here.”

I nodded once. “If I had any reservations on the matter, Toole, I assure you this would be a different conversation entirely. Tell the staff to take the day off to celebrate, when it comes.”

At dinner, Mother and Maggie told me the plan.

The *new* plan.

When, inevitably, the papers wrote about my altercation with Lord Reynolds, my family would pay the editor to publish an article from a different perspective in the crowd. A nameless friend who’d tell the world that I had loved Georgiana since the moment I’d met her. That ours had been a friendship, and only a friendship, until we’d taken a chance and learned it was far more than either of us could bear to part with.

“Then, with the wedding announcement in the papers, we’ll write, ‘His Grace, the Duke of Marlow, formally apologizes to anyone and everyone he misled in his pursuit of marriage. He did not know, until it was almost too late, that the love of his life had been standing beside him all along.’”

Gabriel took a long swig of his wine, then started to clap. “Brava! I think that that will do *very* nicely.”

A slow smile turned my lips.

For once, a story in the gossip papers would be entirely true.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

GEORGIANA

Ten Days Later

Mercutio hadn't left my side since I'd arrived home. He'd become a verifiable companion. Not just in the barn, but out on walks, now, too.

They say animals *know* when something is wrong. Perhaps that was why Mercutio had come to me in the first place. He'd felt how broken I was nearly a year ago. He'd come when I needed him, but he'd otherwise lived his life with his many wives and his tomfoolery.

Now that I had well and truly lost myself, Mercutio had found new purpose. Sometimes he followed me all the way to the door of the dower house, where I now resided. Just a short walk from the big house, but it was my own space where I could spend my days and nights without worrying about interrupting my brother. Peter had the servants dress it up a bit—a bookshelf here, a painting there, my harp, and new rugs for the floors.

I still dined with him and Amelia in the evenings, and I still spent time in the barn, where I now lay on an old wool blanket in the hay. With Mercutio cuddled close against my stomach, and the final few pages of *Udolpho* lit by dusty beams of afternoon sunlight, I sighed, thinking of Cleo and the library.

Of Lucas.

My favorite memories. I missed him so badly, my chest felt like an aching, open wound, and I had to bite my cheeks to keep the tears from coming.

"Steady, Mercutio," I whispered, steeling myself against the rising emotions. "Steady."

Mercutio snuggled closer, his eyes closed, and placed his little paw on my arm.

Udolpho had lost its appeal. But I read on so at least Emily could have *her* happy ending.

Mercutio's right ear perked up. Then his right eye peeked open.

Then the left. His head slowly lifted.

“Please don’t let it be a rat. I cannot bear it.” I listlessly flipped to the final page and read.

The last words felt final. Like I’d closed a chapter in my life by finishing this book. Valancourt had lost all appeal. I doubted any fictional man could possibly live up to the real one still etched on my heart.

A gentle tap sounded on wood. I groaned, rolling over with the blanket around my body. *Please don’t be Amelia*. As much as I loved my sister-in-law, as grateful as I was for her recent coddling and affection, some sorrows needed to be endured alone.

Mercutio stood and stretched.

Tap, tap.

If it weren’t for the baby, I’d ignore her. I sighed and pushed myself up. “I am here,” I called.

I turned round to the barn door, and there he was.

Lucas, haloed in light like some sort of god come down to earth. His smile lit up his whole face, and I was frozen. Dreaming.

“Georgiana.” He stepped inside and closed the door. “You look well.”

Well? I touched my hair and immediately felt straw. My face flushed with crimson heat. “What are you doing here?” rushed out in a frenzied voice.

Mercutio stalked toward him with predatory strides, sizing him up.

Lucas followed my gaze and immediately grinned. “Mercutio?” He bent down, and Mercutio’s shoulders aligned to pounce.

I jumped up. “No, Mercutio—!”

Lucas reached inside his jacket and pulled out a handful of something. My fierce protector took a few hesitant steps closer and sniffed it. Whatever it was, he literally ate out of Lucas’s hand.

I stood there completely bewitched. This perfect, polished man was in my hay barn, feeding my filthy, beloved cat. *Why?*

“Forgive me,” Lucas said. “I’d hoped to meet him. This is Cleo’s favorite treat.”

When he wasn’t looking, I swiped at my cheeks, tugging straw from my untidy hair. Heavens, I had bathed only last evening, but look at me!

When Mercutio finished, he gave Lucas a kingly look, blinked around his domain, then stalked off as though his work was finished for the day.

On the contrary, cats could most certainly *not* read a person because I was completely out of my mind, something was *very wrong*, and Mercutio did not care one whit!

Lucas stood and swiped his hands on his trousers. His expensive, flawlessly

tailored trousers that now had Mercutio's drool all over them. I flushed even harder.

Lucas looked around, unbothered. "So, this is your barn?"

Bury me! "Yes," I said through a painful lump in my throat. "Forgive me, I wasn't expecting visitors."

As though I might have cleaned it in the interim.

Lucas grinned, seeming all too pleased to linger. "Have you finished *Udolpho*?" He motioned to the corner of the book poking out from where I clutched the blanket around me.

Oh, why had he come! We had both said what we'd needed to say. We'd ended things between us irrevocably, and with good reason. This was the most painful conversation I had ever experienced in my life.

"I just read the last page."

He took a few cautious steps closer. His eyes trailed the wide burrow of hay where I'd been reading. Again, he smiled to himself. "I did too. Finished the last volume last night at the inn."

Finished? Lucas read *Udolpho*? "The inn?"

"I've been in Hampshire for a few days now. Your brother and I . . . I wanted to get to know him better."

My brows furrowed, and Lucas watched the spot between them. His eyes softened. He said, "My favorite part was when—" He tilted his head, then motioned for my book. "Do you mind if I read it to you?"

Still flustered, I shook my head and, struggling to keep hold of the blanket, handed him the book. He chuckled, taking the book, and then tugged on the blanket, which I released from my shoulders. He spread it out over the imprint I'd left in the burrow and flourished a hand at the space.

"Sit," he said. "Please."

My legs were shaking as I complied, and he wordlessly crouched beside me. His knee brushed mine as he scooted onto the blanket, glancing—nervously?—as though to ask for my permission.

I did not know what to say. My mind argued with my heart. I yearned to have him near. But he should not be here. He should not have come. With everything between us now, we could not hope to be friends.

I'd always want more. And so, I hoped, would he.

Dash him! I should be angry! I had made the hard decision to leave. I had suffered for both of us and left him to happier, much better things than I could give him. Could he not just leave me in peace?

He thumbed *Udolpho*'s bound leather and its pages as though it was the most precious book he'd ever touched, then opened to a page.

I perched on an elbow, studying his familiar features. Despite it all, I'd missed him so much I could cry. The strong, smooth angles of his jaw. The crease in his left cheek. His beautiful, clear blue eyes. Every freckle and every line. Every healing scar and every blemish. His lips, the perfect shade of pink. His hair, so thick and golden. I would give anything to have him stay.

He smiled at a page. "Ah. There she is."

"Who?" I breathed, lingering between the joy and pain of his nearness.

"Theresa." His eyes read down the page, brightening. "My favorite character in the whole book."

The old servant? I let myself smile as I watched him read, and he caught me, grinning back.

"Do you remember when Emily rejects Valancourt over all he had purportedly done in Paris?" he asked.

I nodded, mesmerized by his profile, his hands encasing my book.

"Here it is." He leaned back on the hay, raised the book to nose level, swallowed, and cleared his throat. "Theresa, speaking to Emily, says, '*Dear, dear! To see how some people fling away their happiness, and then cry and weep about it, just as if it was not their own doing, and as if there was more pleasure in weeping and wailing than in being at peace.*'"

His eyes traveled the page, as though perhaps he read the words again and agreed with their wisdom.

If only it were that easy to choose peace. If only there were no consequences.

Lucas lowered the book, shifting his knees toward mine. "It would seem that Theresa, both servant and friend, who has had to watch Emily's heartache over losing Valancourt, is frustrated. Emily could have married the man right then and there, if she'd wanted to." Lucas's eyes met mine, softening. "If she'd trusted him. She already knew his heart was good. Instead, they broke apart, and they were miserable."

They were. For a long while, until the very end when the truth of Valancourt's character was resolved, and Emily married him. In the book, Valancourt was redeemed. There would be no such redemption for me.

"It's just a story. Fiction."

"Fiction can still teach us things. You think there are no Theresas in the real world? No Emilys and Valancourts acting ridiculous? That book was painfully long, and yet I have learned a few valuable lessons from it. The first being that when you have something good, you don't make excuses for why you shouldn't have it."

He looked so serious, his light-blue eyes so earnest, so sure. I fingered a piece of hay on my skirts and looked away.

He closed my book, tossed it aside on the blanket, and stretched out his legs. I felt his gaze wash over me with gentle examination.

“Do you have business in town?” I prodded. I really wanted to ask, *When must you leave? How much time do we have?*

Lucas shook his head, lounging like he had all the time in the world. He reached out and pulled a piece of hay from near my ear. His eyes found mine, watching me. “I came to see you.”

I swallowed hard. As I’d feared. His visit was a knife twisting in an old wound. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“That is what Emily St. Aubert said to Valancourt, and yet he persisted.” His smile softened. His thumb brushed a bit of dust from my cheek.

“Lucas,” I breathed, reveling in his touch, angling for more of his fingers on my skin.

“Your brother said to give you time, but I cannot bear another day.”

My brows furrowed. “My brother said?” I sat up ramrod straight. “Lucas, are you playing some sort of game with me?”

He leaned back with a pure and unbridled expression, like he enjoyed looking up at me. “No game, my love. But I would like to clarify a thing or two. To start, I have been here for three days, meeting with your brother in secret, until he agreed to let me see you. Which happened just this morning during our fencing match—I see where you learned your great lunging skills—when I won the required fifteen hits over him. Your sister-in-law judged fairly, I might add, if he wishes to debate the matter later.”

I wondered if Amelia had said anything at all, and what. “You’ve been here for *three* days?”

He told me about Maggie and his mother, then handed me a page from the paper dated a week ago today. “I won’t offer you a recounting of the first few days of chatter on the subject of Lord Reynolds and me. But we posted this in response.”

I read down the page. My heart hung on the words: *friendship grew into something more, and does not profess to be a perfect man, but endeavors to love and be loyal to his dearest friend, expecting that the world around him does the same.*

He rubbed his jaw. “I did not admit to any wrongdoing, which might seem cowardly, but now everyone will know the truth about what happened that day. Why I did what I did. Which leads me to my second clarification. If you had any doubts at all, Georgiana”—he pushed up on his elbows and lifted a hand to my jaw, tracing the sensitive spot by my ear—“you should know by now that I love

you. And it is blasted painful to be parted from you. I cannot bear it another day.” He thumbed my bottom lip. “There is no one like you in the world.”

He reached into his jacket and withdrew a little leather box. He opened it and pulled out a ring.

His grandmother’s ring.

I couldn’t breathe.

He held it between his first finger and thumb. “This ring is imbued with a legacy that goes back generations in my family, and my hope was that it would serve as a reminder to its wearer of that legacy for many generations to come.”

“Your father’s legacy.”

He shook his head. “My father’s legacy was restoring the dukedom. He did well, and I am and will always be proud to call him my father. Proud of his accomplishments and grateful. I finished the work he started, and I hope he’s pleased.” He frowned, eyes downcast, and swallowed.

I reached out and cradled his face with my hand. He leaned into my touch, then turned and placed a slow, soft kiss in the center of my palm.

My heart melted and burned and cried out his name.

“But the dukedom is mine now.” He met my gaze with firm determination. “It is time I work toward my *own* legacy. It’s time to think about what *I* want to leave behind, and who I want to share it with. That someone is you.”

Emotion welled behind my eyes. Still, after everything? It was far too good to be true. Far too lovely and perfect. *He* was too perfect.

“You’ll say there’s someone better, more prepared or more accomplished than you, and you might be right. Perhaps there are a dozen women more suited for the dukedom than you. But no one could make me feel in a lifetime how you make me feel in a single moment. I want my legacy to be tied with yours.” Gently, he took my hand and slid his grandmother’s ring onto my finger. “I want to make a life with you. Grow old with you. We’ll face whatever comes together, as one family, mine and yours. Marry me, Georgiana, and I swear I will make it the best life you could ever dream—”

I leaned into him and kissed him soundly. He fell back on the hay and cradled my neck, keeping me exactly where he wanted me. His thumb traced my jawline, fingers lightly grazing down my neck, my arm.

When his hands met my waist, they drew me up, and gently lifted, then tossed me back against the hay. He climbed over me, his hair lined with straw, eyes hazed and wild. “Yes?” he breathed against my mouth, entwining his legs with mine. “Is that a yes?”

I wove my fingers under his parted jacket, up his waistcoat, beneath his doubly knotted cravat, and he tensed under my touch. “Yes,” he answered for

me, grinning and breathless. “That was a yes. That was *evenings in the library*, yes. *Late mornings, taking tea in your bed*, yes.”

I pulled his cravat down until his lips took mine.

He kissed me like we had all the time in the world. Like we could exist on just this. Like nothing else in the world mattered but us.

His fingers swept across my side, my ribs. He pulled back, just barely, to look down at me. To see me.

It was the most wonderful feeling in all the world, to be seen by this beautiful man. “Say something,” he begged.

I love you, I wanted to say. *More than anything*. “You, Lucas Kennerly, Duke of Marlow, are better than the best book. The most honorable, most exceptional of men. And, still, I left you. You must understand *why*.”

“I know why, you little ninny,” he whispered, his eyes filled with emotion. He kissed the corners of my mouth. “You think you will ruin me, but I am telling you, it will be quite the opposite.” He buried his face in the curve of my neck, tickling the space by my shoulder with his kisses. He made me forget why loving him was a bad idea. I bit my lip hard, trying desperately not to dissolve into the wave of joy that beckoned, and dug my fingers into the nape of his neck.

“Say yes.” He groaned. I laughed when he kissed up my jaw, and then back down again. “*Please*.”

“How about, *receiving no invitations because we’re outcasts*, yes? You are not thinking this through.”

“No?” He kissed my nose. He rolled until we were side by side, looking out across the barn. He lifted a hand as though to form the frame of our future. “I see our family—not just an heir. A proper family—and summers in the country. Our children wandering like wild things, their cats and hounds and chickens all at their heels.” He looked back at me, grinning. “I see you inviting anyone and everyone to one of your grand parties, no matter how many times their names have been in the papers. Me, growing what we’ve built tenfold for our children. Of course, there’ll be plenty of late nights in the library. A rendezvous or two in the hay barn.” He winked, and I tugged him back until his knees entangled with mine.

“It won’t be perfect,” he admitted. “We are good at making mistakes, you and I, but we’ll fix them together.”

Heavens, he was so sincere. So confident, but so hopeful for the future he’d just spelled out. I felt his hope take root in my chest and spread out like veins around my heart.

I wanted it. So badly, I wanted it all to come true. “I have no idea how to host a party as grand as that, but if you promise not to be cross—”

He squeezed my thigh and bit back his grin. "I promise I won't be cross." He took my jaw delicately in his hand and pressed his lips fervently to mine.

"There is so much I do not know, Lucas. I've barely traveled. I will surely bumble it all—"

He kissed me into silence, then drew back, and said, "You, *Georgiana Wood*, are perfect to me in every way that matters. You make all the bad things worthwhile. You make them *good*. You make me better. With your sweetness, your genuine heart, your laughter, your brilliance . . . we will find your confidence together. And you will flourish."

Heavens, *that* was how he saw me?

Our eyes locked together.

I waited for him to break. To change his mind. To look away. Any sign that he was unsure.

He didn't.

Would it be so terrible, a life with him? If he knew the risk of my failures. If he promised to support me, to guide me . . .

He waited. Lips pursed. Gaze set like he would sit beside me for a lifetime while I thought it through.

A life with Lucas could go very wrong. But the way he saw us, the future he wanted for us, was a dream I'd risk anything for.

Slowly, I nodded. "Very well, then."

"Yes?" He bit back his smile, still questioning.

I let myself smile, let myself *feel* again. "I love you, Lucas. My answer is yes."

"Yes!" he cheered, grinning wider and kissing my face all over until I truly did dissolve into the joy that beckoned me. I reveled in it.

We spent another few moments—and perhaps a few more after that—in the barn, and then a few more against the barn door before Lucas finally opened it.

Sunlight poured in, and we walked hand in hand toward our future.

Epilogue

Four Years Later

His Grace, Lucas Kennerly, the Duke of Marlow
She'd left a calling card on my pillow.
It read,

Her Grace

Georgiana Kennerly

The Duchess of Marlow

She'd had it newly embossed, the lettering framed with gold. The old ones, she'd said, were out of fashion. Trust my wife to know.
I lifted the card and flipped it over.

The library, she'd written.

Smiling, I tugged on my banyan and slippers and stole from the room, careful not to make a sound as I closed the door to my chamber behind me. We hadn't been alone in a week, not since her family had descended upon us—Wood, Amelia, little Penelope and Frederick—plus Maggie's family and Gabriel as well. They came like clockwork. Every summer since the morning, not long after our declarations in Georgiana's hay barn, when I'd taken her in front of the vicar. The day I'd made her mine in every way.

I crept around the corner, stilled just inside the doorway, and watched her stitching something by the fire with a book balanced in her lap and my grandmother's ring on her finger. This library was different from ours in London. More open, double in size, with a table and chairs under the wide windows and several oil paintings of fox hunting and landscapes. My eyes, however, hung on Georgiana as she drew her bottom lip between her teeth and grinned down at the page.

"Dare I ask?" I raised a brow and sauntered over.

She jolted. "Lucas! You frightened me." Guilty as ever. Valancourt, or worse—Captain Wentworth.

I perched on the arm of her chair. "What's this?"

She lifted her embroidery proudly. "Albert wanted a lion on his blanket. I am obliging him."

Ah. I could see the oranges, yellows, and browns taking shape beneath her fingers. At freshly three years of age, Albert lived and breathed lions of late. He wanted to know their habits, diets, how and why they roared. We'd pulled every book from the library that mentioned them in the slightest to try to appease him.

"Stole it straight from his chubby little fingers, did you?"

Georgiana nodded, covered a yawn, and set her bundle aside. "Did you see my new calling card?"

I leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "I had hoped it was an invitation to a more private space," I admitted. Then again, we'd formed Eloise right here on a blanket in front of the hearth.

I should've closed the door behind me.

Georgiana followed my gaze and smirked. "Did you tell Gabriel what I said?"

"No more gifts larger than the size of his fist, yes." I tugged my wife to standing then took her seat and settled her on my lap. "He was not pleased. Said something about the new heir needing to enjoy his childhood while he can."

"That stuffed lion he brought is twice the size of Albert, Lucas! How will we ever fit it in the carriage?"

Not to mention the wooden horse taking up a whole corner of the nursery. And the little bow and arrow set. The perfectly sized foil and glove. The pony in the stables she did not yet know about. I winced.

Gabriel had come into quite a lot of money since his railroad venture had taken off. "He means well," I told Georgiana. "He loves Albert."

"He needs to give someone else his love for a time." She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned her cheek against my chest. I inhaled apple blossoms and sweetness.

"The house is quiet . . . everyone has gone to bed . . ." I mused. I shifted her higher in my lap until her nose brushed mine.

Her eyes warmed. "Good evening, Your Grace."

"Your Grace." I leaned in, and—

"I said if you *won* all three rounds." Gabriel stalked into the room. "There! He is here. Ask him yourself."

In came Wood, smirking, then Thomas, who quietly beamed with humor. I wouldn't mind seeing them if I hadn't just spent the last three hours with them at White's.

And if I hadn't come home with particular plans for this beautiful woman on

my lap.

“Georgiana.” Wood smiled at his sister. “Forgive us, but your husband must remind his cousin of the bargain he made.”

“Wood goes three rounds at the tables, and Gabriel rewards him with a view of that letter in his pocket that he’s had tucked away all week,” I said. “Now, all three of you get out.”

Wood held out his hand to Gabriel expectantly. “I’d like my view, now, please.”

Georgiana leaned her head against mine. “Peter, leave him be. Let him have his secrets.”

“I won this fair and square.” Wood chuckled. He’d taken some time to warm to us, but he’d fit seamlessly into the family all the same.

“Peter?” Amelia wiped sleep from her eyes as she waited in the doorway.

Wood’s playful demeanor instantly changed. He was at her side in three wide strides, Gabriel’s letter easily forgotten. “. . . still awake?”

Gabriel blew out a breath. He eyed Thomas, who’d already started for the door. “Don’t you say a word. Either of you. I need a drink.”

Georgiana and I looked at each other as Gabriel helped himself and sat down in front of the hearth.

I laced her fingers with mine, then grew impatient. “Come to bed,” I whispered. “*Your* bed.”

She brushed her nose against my cheek and kissed my jaw. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

I bounded up and lifted her in my arms. She laughed like she had years ago, before Albert had come out screaming and changed our lives forever, before Eloise stole her heart with the roundest, most perfect hazel eyes and little pink lips. Like we could be forever in that library in London, having every hope but no true idea what wonder the future held.

We couldn’t have known her first London party as a hostess would be such a success. Nor that she’d end it in tears for how cruelly an older woman had critiqued her for dancing so much and kissing me at the end of the night. She’d kissed me anyway, several times at her parties since, regardless of what the *ton* deemed appropriate.

We’d faced it all side by side.

Her laughter was a cornerstone in the legacy we were forming together. It helped me believe the letters that she wrote to me. The ones she tucked under papers on my desk, in drawers, even in the bottom of my boots, declaring her love. Toole always fought his smile when he discovered them in front of me,

looking at me like he understood. Like, perhaps, his wife worked in similar ways.

I carried Georgiana Kennerly, Duchess of Marlow, all the way down from the library, shushing her laughter with kisses until she was breathless, until she was lowered to her feet, pressed against the closed door of her bedchamber, and encased in my arms.

“You are more beautiful now than you have ever been,” I whispered against her lips. “Thank you for this life you’ve given me.”

She took my face in her hands and kissed me roughly, pulling back only to whisper, “Ours is my very favorite story, Lucas.”

Our story.

Our legacy.

Ours.

Acknowledgments

Eight years ago, I lost my five-month-old son. I wrote the first chapter of *Lakeshire Park* in an effort to distract myself from the most horrible pain that had become my closest companion. I finished *Lakeshire Park*, then I wrote *Miss Newbury's List*. Writing those books quite literally saved my life. Without them, I would not have written *The Duke's Bargain*. I am grateful that out of sorrow, beautiful things can grow. I hope this book brings joy.

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About the Author

Photo by Abby Ricks Photography



MEGAN WALKER was raised on a berry farm in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, where her imagination took her to times past and worlds away. While earning her degree in early childhood education, she married her one true love and started a family. But her imaginings of Regency England wouldn't leave her alone, so she picked up a pen. And the rest is history. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband and three children.