

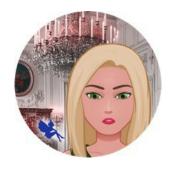
THE DUKE'S SCOTTISH BRIDE

A Steamy Historical Regency Romance Novel

SCOTTISH DUCHESSES
BOOK III

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AVA MACADAMS



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About the Book

"I wonder how prettily you'll moan for me when I taste your lips, wife."

Marry, and you'll die—that's the note Lady Marion receives on the day of her arranged wedding. Desperate, she escapes, and runs straight into a stranger's carriage.

Duke Anselm is finished with runaway brides. Until he learns this fiery Scotswoman holds the key to finding his missing sister. But when they're caught together, a marriage of convenience becomes the only way out.

Only, his defiant wife awakens desires that he's long kept buried, and now, Anselm's not sure whether he just wants to protect her...or possess her completely.

Before You Start Reading...

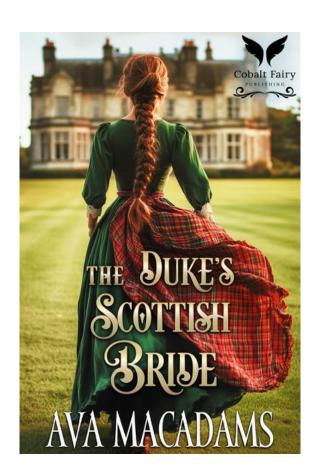
Before you start reading...

Here is **Anselm's Prequel Chapter** which will help you understand and empathize with his character.

Many of my readers requested it and that's why I am giving it away for free! I believe you will LOVE IT!

It's not mandatory to read it, but it will be really helpful if it's your first time with this book.

Read his story here.



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Chapter One

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ust a little more, Lady Marion," her maid pushed and pulled tighter on the strings of the corset while adjusting the intricate lace on the bodice. "There it is, dear. Ye are a vision to behold, a most beautiful bride. Yer parents would be proud."

"Thank ye, Jean," she whispered, the customary joy of the occasion absent from her voice.

Marion stood as still as a statue in front of the large, gilded mirror. The heavy silk train of her wedding gown rustled around her as she turned. The dress was a masterpiece of ivory and lace from Paris, a gift from her soon-to-be husband. Yet, the fine fashion felt less like an adornment and more like a shroud.

- She shivered as she pulled the lace sleeves down to her fingers.
- She was beautiful and yet, she could not stop the dread from overtaking her.
- A soft knock at the door preceded a footman, who entered with a silver tray. On it lay a single, cream-colored envelope. Her breath hitched at the sight.
- Another one, she thought to herself as her already nervous stomach grew tighter by the moment.
- Her fingers trembled as she broke the wax seal. The elegant script swam before her eyes as she read the chilling words.
- Gilton has already promised himself to me. Cross that line, and I will make sure you are buried in that wedding gown.
- "Lady Marion? Is somethin' amiss?" Jean asked softly. "Tell me, lass. It's all right."
- Marion swallowed. Words caught in her throat as she fought to speak. She shook her head and looked up at Jean, her hands slightly trembling.
- "It is... it is another note," she explained as she extended the paper to show her. "The third in two weeks now."
- Jean gasped as she read the alarming words. The rosiness of her plump cheeks paled to a ghostly white. She made the sign of the cross and looked up to the sky.
- "Oh, dear God! This is dreadful... on yer weddin' day no less," she yelped as she placed the note down on a nearby table. "This is some cruel joke. I am sure that is all," she cursed as she wrung her hands.

- "Please fetch me uncle," Marion said, her voice steady despite the tempest welling up inside of her.
- She knew she had to keep her senses about her, if she was to sort this out. And she had to.
- Her maid rushed out of the room, and within moments, Marion's English uncle, Lord Harlowe, stormed inside.
- "What is this nonsense I hear, Marion? Do you not understand the gravity of this day? The trouble that we have all gone through to ensure this is a joyous occasion and secure you a proper match with the Viscount!"
- "I have just received another note, Uncle. This one threatens me life," she said. Her fingers twitched at the thought.
- Marion handed him the wrinkled note then and he shook his head in frustration. He grabbed it quickly and scanned the words. His jowls quivered and his face grew red. Then, with a roar, he crumpled the paper in his fist and threw it on the ground.
- "This is your doing, is it not? Another one of your ridiculous stunts to avoid your duty. This is your third season, and I tell you, Marion... This is the last of it! You must marry Lord Gilton today, whether you like it or not."
- "But Uncle, I am—"
- "That is final!"
- Am I just an object to be passed off? Marion thought, defiance hardening her gaze.
- Her uncle's words hurt because they showed his carelessness for her safety and happiness. She could not let this go.
- She picked up the crumpled paper and shook it in front of him.
- "Uncle, someone is threatenin' me!" she cried. Fear coated her tongue as she licked her dry lips. "Cannae ye see this is serious?"
- "Serious?" He scoffed as he looked her squarely in the eye. "What is serious is your refusal to secure your future. Now, you must hurry! Your aunt and I will meet you at the church. And for God's sake, try not to look like a frightened doe when you walk down the aisle."
- He spun on his heel and strode out. The door slammed shut behind him with a loud smack that made Marion jump.

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- "Lady Marion, please let me rub yer back. It'll help calm ye nerves," Jean offered softly.
- "I cannae shake the feelin' that somethin' terrible will be fall me if I go through with this... Yet, I ken that me fate will be even worse if I daenae marry Lord Gilton," she confessed. Tears prickled the backs of her eyes but she forbade them from falling. "How does a person make a choice when they are all bad?"
- Marion hated crying and the feeling of the wetness on her face. Innately, she was a happy person, and she abhorred any person or situation that stifled that. In fact, she had not cried since her parents passed away all those years ago. The thought of them, how they should be here to help and guide her, sat heavily on her chest.

This is all too much. How am I supposed to go through with this?

The inside of the carriage, despite the luxurious trappings and velvet of the cushions, felt hard and stifling. The relentless clop of the horses' hooves echoed in her ears and was only eclipsed by the frantic beating of her heart. She may as well have been in a tomb; at least then there would be silence.

Buried in that wedding gown.

The words clawed at her, painting a horrifying picture, as she tried not to think about it. Yet, the more she tried to push the images away, the more they surrounded her.

She pictured herself in a coffin with dirt seeping through the cracks in the wood as she was buried. It was as if she could hear the shovel smack against gravel and send little rocks hitting the casket in sickening repetition, just like the merciless clopping of hooves.

I cannae breathe. I cannae think. I must get out of this carriage.

"Driver, stop!" Marion cried. Her voice was thin as she clutched at the bodice of her dress. "I need air. Just for a moment. I beg ye, please!"

"My lady, I am under strict orders from Lord Harlowe not to stop until we reach the church," the driver called back, his voice gruff but not unkind. "Just following orders."

"Please!" Marion pleaded, pressing her hand against the partition between them. "I beg ye with all me heart! Just for a moment. I feel ... I feel like I am goin' to be sick."

The driver shook his head and after a moment of hesitation, the carriage began to slow. They pulled to a halt beside a narrow alleyway in Strathcairn Village.

"Just a minute, then, my lady, and no more," the driver conceded, likely afraid she would wretch in the carriage and ruin her dress. "Your uncle will have my head if we are late, and I very much like my head."

Marion did not wait for Jean. She flung open the door and practically tumbled out.

She gulped desperately, inhaling the cool, crisp air. Pulling the note out of her sleeve where she had tucked it, she clutched it in her hand. She stared at the crumpled paper in her fist. Her mind raced to find a sensible solution to an impossible problem.

She closed her eyes in defeat.

What options do I have? Where can I go, especially when I look like this? Think, Marion. Think!

Her mind drifted and again she could see her body in the coffin. This time it was as if she were a spectral spirit looking down on herself.

There was dirt on the white dress and her once radiant face had gone deathly pale.

She could not take the thought a second more.

She opened her eyes, looked out, and saw it right in front of her. The wheels of her mind began twisting, fast and furious.

Reckless? Yes... But is it my only option? Also, yes...Oh Maither and Faither, what should I do?

On the other side of the alley, partially obscured by a bustling market stall, sat another carriage. It was unfamiliar, unguarded... and seemingly unoccupied from her vantage point.

Anything must be better than this, she thought.

Her body screamed with anxiety and sprang into motion before she could register the course ahead.

Marion darted across the alley, lifted her dress to her knees, and moved with surprising agility. While her heavy gown was a hindrance, nothing could dampen her resolve. She moved with a desperate speed; one she did not even know she possessed inside of her.

Perhaps there is some of me maither's fiery spirit within me yet!

She yanked open the mysterious carriage door and scrambled inside before pulling it shut behind herself with a click.

The darkness inside was a welcome reprieve for her sore eyes. She just needed time to relax and think.

Her breathing returned to a steady pace and Marion closed her eyes. A part of her wished she could curl up and hide there forever.

For now, I am hidden and that is enough.

Chapter Two

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am looking for a young woman," Anselm explained. His voice cut through the low murmur of conversation as he approached the old innkeeper. "She is about nineteen years of age, with dark hair and green eyes. Very fond of books."

He was sure to keep Verity's name, and any other particulars, to himself. There was no need to advertise his sister's flight to every nosy Scot as he went about his desperate search to find her.

I am sure it would be the talk of the village to hear about the Duke's wily sister and her mad dash in the Highlands.

- The gossips would have a field day as word would no doubt follow them all the way down to London.
- The reek of stale ale and unwashed bodies assaulted him as he anticipated a response that did not come. The innkeeper was preoccupied with wiping down the old wooden table in front of him, and clearly in no rush to assist him.
- "Have you seen this woman around here?" Anselm pressed while placing his hand on the table and hoping to gain the innkeeper's attention. "Did you hear me?" he asked sharply, raising his voice louder in case the man was losing his sense of hearing.
- The innkeeper grunted then and looked up at him with a smirk on his face. The old man's eyes were the color of muddy water and red with fatigue. He took a long moment to assess Anselm before answering.
- "And what business would a fine English gent like yerself have with a young lassie like that? Has yer lady run off with another man? Maybe the bonnie lass ran off lookin' for a real Scotsman. Cannae say I'd blame her, no' wi' folk like yerself about," he said laughing to himself as he began polishing again.
- "As you have so cleverly gathered, I have come a long way," Anselm persisted, ignoring the man's insolence. "And I have been tracking this woman for some time. You would do well to answer my questions."
- A ripple of distrust went through the room in the form of hushed whispers and pointed looks in Anselm's direction. The patrons, who all had the ease of regulars, seemed to notice him and were sizing him up. Heads turned and voices went quiet as church mice as men sipped their stouts and watched this interaction intently.
- "Well, there is nay one like that here," the innkeeper snapped. "I have nay interest in yer trackin', English, and I daenae care how far ye have come. In fact, I daenae care what fancy title ye have neither, so ye can forget about throwin' that around, too." He tossed his rag onto the counter and looked at Anselm. The innkeeper's unimpressed expression was as cool as stone.

Anselm reached into his coat and pulled out a handful of sovereigns then placed them on the counter in resignation.

- "Perhaps that will refresh your memory," Anselm offered, hoping the universal language of compensation would work to his advantage.
- He detested bribes, especially for such a small ask, but he was desperate to gather what information he could and move on.
- The innkeeper's eyes flickered to the gold, then back to Anselm, then back to the gold again. His muddy eyes went hard. He swept the coins off the counter, sending them skittering across the floor with a single sweep of his grubby hand.
- "Keep yer filthy English money. It ain't no good here."
- "Aye, tell that to yer king, English!" A dirty, toothless man yelled from across the room.
- His loud, jeering laugh echoed through the bar as others began to join in chorus.
- "Aye, that is right!" One man yelled while slamming his glass on a table. "Get out of here!"
- "What was that?" Anselm's voice dropped so that there was a dangerous edge to it as he turned to face the rowdy crowd.
- The innkeeper leaned forward. With his massive forearms braced on the table, he drew Anselm's attention back to him.
- "Me friend over there said that we daenae take kindly to yer sort pushing yer weight around. Now, get out!" He barked.
- Before Anselm could respond, a group of rough patrons rose to their feet and looked at him. They strode toward him, with menace in their eyes, which were also hazy from drinking. They quickly surrounded him. Their faces were grim and fists clenched tight. The innkeeper came from behind the table and joined them, tapping the dirty rag against his hand like a battle drum.
- "Last chance, English," the innkeeper warned, as he crossed his arms defiantly over his pot belly. "We daenae like to fight in this place, but if we have to we will. Ye will surely regret it."
- Anselm glared back at them with a grim smile playing on his lips. He moved first and landed a swift, unexpected jab to the innkeeper's large gut.
- "Urgh!" A gasping choke erupted from him as he doubled over in pain that filled Anselm with immense satisfaction.
- Suddenly, the man with the missing teeth found himself sailing over a table and landing with a crash on the hard ground. A younger, more wiry man charged at Anselm. It was nothing for Anselm to block the swing that came in his direction before sending the man sprawling across the floor like a cricket ball.
- Damn you, Verity, he thought as each blow landed harder than the last and until the remaining men cowered back in fear.
- They were clearly no match for his skill, let alone his resolve. He was in no mood to rabblerouse.
- The fight was over almost as soon as it began, and there was not a scratch on Anselm's face.
- The innkeeper laid groaning amidst his scattered regulars who looked on with stunned faces in the now silent room. Anselm loomed over them all, breathing calmly and spitefully. Even his coat remained unrumpled.

- "Now that we have that unpleasant business behind us, gentlemen," he said in a flat and even tone. "About the young woman. Where is she? Can any of you tell me?"
- A man on the floor coughed and spat a stream of putrid tobacco juice onto Anselm's perfectly polished boots. He groaned and shook the spit from his shoe in disgust.
- "Daenae ken nothin', English bastard," the innkeeper moaned. "Piss off."
- Anselm was no closer to finding Verity, and one thing was for sure—these men would be of no help.
- Disappointment heavy on his shoulders, Anselm walked into the cool, early spring air.
- The stroll down the alley to the carriage was a welcome contrast to the heat of the foul inn and the odor of its regulars.
- He entered the carriage and sat down on the velvet cushions before resting his head back on the seat.
- He tapped the partition for the driver to take off and as the horses started moving, he looked up.
- And stilled.
- A young woman sat across from him.
- He couldn't tear his eyes away from her. There she was, small and delicate, yet every inch of her stirred something deep inside him. She wore a wedding gown, made of swirling white silk, that highlighted her curvaceous figure. Its grand design took away Anselm's breath completely.
- Her slim waist and the gentle swell of her bust drew his gaze like a magnet. Dark chocolate hair spilled in soft waves around her face, making those impossibly blue eyes shine all the brighter. They were wide and vulnerable, but there was something in them that held him.
- "Is it traditional in Strathcairn for brides to hide in strangers' carriages?" he quipped, a wry twist to his lips as his eyes involuntarily found her generous chest which was accentuated by a delicate lace ruffle. "Some sort of odd ritual to bring good luck?"
- "Please, take me anywhere but here, sir. I beg ye with all me heart," she pleaded. Her voice was as soft as her sapphire eyes.
- "And why should I do that?" Anselm asked as he raised a curious brow. "I have urgent business of my own. I am not running a rescue service for runaway brides."
- "Please," was all she said, ignoring the sarcasm in his voice. "I beg ye, sir."
- While he could sense that she was guarded and in need of help, he had no time for distractions. His priority was Verity, regardless of the trouble this young woman had found herself in... which he also could not help but think about.
- How could someone let this creature out of their sight even for a minute?
- He tapped on the partition with his knuckles. "Turn the carriage around. We are taking this woman back to... wherever she came from."

"I have a name. I am... Marion. Lady Marion," she said quietly. "Please, don't take me back. Take me anywhere else, but not back."

A flicker of desperation crossed her face, as if she would burst if he did not help her. Something about the urgency in her striking cerulean eyes pulled at him. Anselm felt almost as if a string tethered them.

She was undeniably beautiful. Perhaps even more than beautiful. Yes, as he looked deep into her sparkling eyes there was no doubt she was a goddess. Even in her disheveled state. Yet, any involvement, even with a woman as unique as this, would be a complication he could not afford.

"Feumaidh mi cuideachadh," she muttered to herself.

"I do not understand your words, my lady," he said as his mind floated to the thought of his sister somewhere out there alone. "So, if you need something you must speak English. I have no time for riddles."

"I should have gone to Verity..." she trailed off. "I ken that would have been the smartest choice, but there was no time to think."

Anselm froze. Every muscle in his body tightened so that he thought his tendons might snap in half. He prayed his mind was not playing tricks on him.

"What did you say?" he demanded in a low and desperate tone.

"W-What? Nothin', sir. I was merely talkin' to meself."

"Repeat your words. Now."

She looked startled and stared at him, then repeated, "I should have gone to Verity."

"Who is Verity to you? How do you know her?" he asked, leaning forward and only inches away from her.

"I... I...daenae... I daenae even know who ye are, sir. How can I answer that question if I daenae ken who ye are?"

"I am Anselm Drummond, Duke of Greystead. You will do well to speak plainly."

She swallowed hard and her eyes locked onto his for a brief moment before darting away. Her breath caught, and he saw the faintest tremor in her hands as she seemed to weigh whether she dared speak or stay silent.

"She is a friend of mine," she answered tentatively. "A lady. She fled London to live her life here in Scotland."

She clearly knew nothing of the deeper truth and for that, Anselm was grateful.

Finally, he had a lead. Something to go on.

"Tell me where she is now." His voice was sharp as steel as he pressed her for more information. "Immediately. Or I deliver you straight back to whatever disaster you are fleeing. Those are your options. Take it or leave it."

Her shoulders slumped and she looked at him curiously. She crossed her arms under her chest in frustration, only accentuating

the perfect bosom that drew Anselm's gaze like a moth to a flame.

"She is staying with Lady Inverhall," she confessed with a sigh.

"Where is Lady Inverhall's house exactly?" Anselm nodded as he acknowledged that the name was a welcome lead in his search. "Give me the address. Now."

Again, she hesitated, but he pressed.

"You must tell me where this house is," he said. His patience grew thin as a crepe when pitted against the prospect of finally finding his sister. "I must find her."

Reluctantly, she gave him directions to the home. Anselm, in turn, relayed them to the driver who took off in the new direction with a jolt.

"You are coming with me," he informed her. His emerald eyes held hers. "And if you are lying, Lady Marion, you will regret it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Yer Grace," she said quietly.

Chapter Three

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erity!" Anselm called out. He would not wait for the butler to announce him or observe any other propriety for that

He simply pushed past the bewildered man and strode into Inverhall like he owned it.

Lady Marion, surprisingly still agile in her cumbersome gown, was right on his heels, following him.

He found Verity in the drawing room, seated leisurely on a settee with a book resting in her lap. Beside her sat a young woman he didn't recognize. Dark brown hair framed a face that could barely be more than twenty. Anselm immediately assumed this was Lady Inverhall as she remained completely absorbed in her own book and unaware of his presence.

"Verity!" He called again as he entered the room.

- Verity's face went utterly flat at the sound of her brother's voice. The book slipped from her fingers and thudded to the carpet as their eyes met.
- "Anselm—" she began to say, but he stopped her.
- "You are coming with me," Anselm barked. His tone allowed no space for argument. "Now."
- Lady Inverhall rose. A delicate frown creased her brow as she approached him with a warm smile.
- "Yer Grace, I assure ye, Verity has been quite safe here in me home. There's no need for such haste. Please, let me ring for some refreshment and—"
- "If you will excuse us, my lady. This is a family matter," he snapped.
- "I am sorry we have never been properly introduced, Yer Grace, but I feel as if I know you well. When your family holidayed in the Lake District during the summer months, I always spent ample time with your sister."

Anselm straightened. As he blinked, he recalled the names Lady Inverhall and Elspeth being mentioned by his sister a few times, and the trip to Scotland for her wedding. When he really stretched his mind, he recollected the subsequent trip Verity made just a few months ago to see Lady Inverhall after her husband passed away suddenly. In all his concern and haste, he hadn't even remembered this dowager his sister had befriended long ago.

Idiot, he reprimanded himself, *I should have thought of Inverhall first*.

"If she would like to plan a trip to visit you in the future, with proper notice and planning, that will be a different story," Anselm said as he turned his steely gaze on her. "But Lady Inverhall, with all due respect, my sister's safety and future are my concern. She will be returning with me to London. Now."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Verity and Lady Marion exchange worried glances. It was evident they were speaking a silent kind of language only close friends could.

- "How do you two know each other?" he asked Verity.
- "Marion's my friend," Verity explained. "We met in the village's bookshop," then, she turned to Marion, "What happened, my friend?"
- Marion hesitated and sighed, "It's a long story."
- "Well, both Elspeth and I are here to hear it."
- Lady Inverhall stepped forward, "Perhaps some tea could help all of us cal—" she persisted but Anselm put his hand up.
- "Enough. I am not wasting another second here. Verity, gather whatever is necessary for our return to London."
- Verity's jaw tightened, but her voice remained calm and steady. "Anselm, listen to reason. It's too late for all that. Lord Fanthorpe will not marry me now. Not after I ran away. We both know how these things work. You cannot fix this."
- "I can and I will," Anselm replied sharply, his eyes glinting with fierce determination. "Your actions do not change our duty. I'll handle Fanthorpe."
- "I do not wish to be handled like a business transaction," she snapped, though still keeping her composure. "You can arrange a thousand weddings if you like, but I won't go back into a life I've already rejected. You cannot force me into it."
- "You think I will allow you to stay here and ruin yourself entirely?" he ground out. "You will come back with me, Verity. You are my sister. My responsibility. If I must drag you out of this house, I will."
- Lady Inverhall stepped forward again, her expression firm. "That's enough, Yer Grace. You may believe this to be your family matter, but as long as Verity is under my roof, I will not see her dragged about like some disobedient child."
- Anselm's gaze was ice-cold as it flicked to Lady Inverhall. "If you wish to press this matter further, my lady, I remind you that I could easily involve the authorities. I doubt you'd wish for scandal in your home."
- A tense silence fell, every breath in the room held tight.
- Verity's face flushed, but not with shame. With a quiet exhale, she rose from her seat with the regal dignity of a woman who had made her peace with hard choices.
- "No need to threaten anyone," she said coolly, her voice carrying the weight of resignation. "I will go with you, Anselm."
- She met his gaze squarely, lifting her chin in defiance even as she agreed.
- "I will return with you, brother. On one condition."

- "Oh, dear sister, there are no conditions. You will be returning home at once."
- "There is," Verity pressed. There was fire in her eyes. "Marion must come with us."
- Anselm blinked. He glanced at the lady standing beside him, then back at his sister.
- "Absolutely not," Anselm scoffed. "This woman is not my responsibility. She has her own affairs to attend to."
- Lady Inverhall stepped forward then, her voice gentle but firm. "If I may, Yer Grace, Marion is welcome to stay here with me as long as she needs. There is no place safer for her than Inverhall."
- "Thank you, Elspeth, I—" Marion began to say but Verity's eyes narrowed.
- "Marion, did your uncle and aunt ever hear about Lady Inverhall?" Verity asked.
- Marion hesitated. "I mentioned her once or twice."
- Verity's tone grew serious. "Then they will come looking for you here. You cannot stay. You must come with us and get far away from this place."
- "I will not repeat myself, sister," Anselm folded his arms, still unwilling to relent.
- "Anselm, please," Verity pleaded. "She clearly needs help. Look at her!"
- The tension in the room thickened until it became a palpable weight as Anselm looked at the would-be bride in front of him.

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- Marion felt a pang of guilt rush through her veins. Her cheeks flushed at the thought of such an imposition.
- And yet, she was so utterly desperate.
- As much as she needed an out, and there was one right in front of her in the form of Verity, this situation was her fault and hers to manage. She gave up on the idea of knights on white horses and fairytale endings long ago.
- It was time to face the music.
- "Verity, nay," she interjected, stepping forward and shaking her head in resignation. "I am so sorry I dragged ye all into this. I will go back. I will go to me wedding. There is nay other option for me."
- "No!" Verity cried, looking at her in horror. "You cannot do that! What about those notes you were telling me about? The threats? Is that why you left?" she said as she walked to Marion and took her hands in her own. "I can see it in your eyes... there was another one, wasn't there?"
- The Duke's head snapped towards Marion.
- "What notes?" he demanded. "What are you talking about?"

Marion avoided his gaze. She shook her head and took her hands away from Verity.

"It is nothin', Yer Grace," she said. "I have acted rashly by runnin' away from me duty. I can handle meself. The notes and Lord Gilton cannae be worse than livin' with Reverend McCrae and his wife." She winced as the words left her mouth.

She knew how pathetic, and unlike herself, they sounded.

The Duke took a step towards her. His expression was unreadable.

"This conversation is done," he declared and turned to Verity. "Pack only the essentials for now. You can send for the rest later. My driver will take you in my carriage to the next travel stop. He will ensure your safe arrival, and we will regroup there."

"Fine," Verity mumbled, "but you may bear this on your conscience, brother. You are leaving an innocent woman in danger."

The Duke clenched his jaw. "You have done enough recently, sister, to speak about burdened consciences." Then, he turned to their host. "Lady Inverhall, would you be so kind as to spare me one of your carriages to take me and Lady Marion back to the village? I can hire another carriage there and send yours back to you."

She hesitated, a flicker of concern in her eyes. "Yer Grace, surely it would be better if Marion stayed here, away from the dangers she faces. That wedding—"

"I'm done with runaway brides," Anselm interrupted, voice cold and unwavering. "Her duty is clear. She must return to her wedding, and that is final."

Lady Inverhall opened her mouth to protest again, but Marion gently raised a hand to stop her.

"It's all right, Elspeth," Marion said softly, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside. "I daenae want ye to get into trouble on me account. I'll go back to me wedding."

Lady Inverhall's eyes searched Marion's face for a long moment, then she nodded reluctantly.

"Are you certain?"

Marion nodded, "Yes."

Lady Inverhall pursed her lips. A moment later, she sighed.

"Very well, Yer Grace," she said, inclining her head toward Verity. "I'll tell me staff to fetch ye a carriage."

"Good," Anselm said, turning back to his sister. "Then make haste. I wish to be on our way at once. Let us get Lady Marion back to where she belongs."

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Anselm saw a man blocking the steps of the local church.

His posture was rigid with the practiced ease of one used to drawing rooms rather than rustic villages. The man's pale, angular face held an angry frown, and his eyes flicked over Lady Marion with a kind of impatience barely concealed beneath polished

civility.

- "There you are, niece," the man hissed and seized Lady Marion by the arm roughly.
- Lady Marion winced, and a flicker of anger surged through Anselm's veins. The man seemed vaguely familiar. Something about his bearing stirred a distant memory.
- I do not care for the way he handles her, Anselm thought as he walked a few paces behind and stored the moment for later.
- The familiar man released Lady Marion and turned his gaze to Anselm. His entire demeanor shifted instantly, flipping like a coin.
- "Ah, the Duke of Greystead," he said smoothly while extending a hand. "We met at Lady Forshaw's ball some years past, Your Grace. Lord Harlowe, at your disposal."
- Recognition clicked into place. Anselm recalled the cold courtesy and subtle barbs masked by practiced charm.
- "Lord Harlowe," Anselm simply repeated the title.
- "Your Grace!" The earl's voice sharpened with forced warmth. "What an unexpected pleasure to find you at my niece's nuptials! Pray, to what do we owe the honor of your presence?"
- A woman appeared beside him with the careful grace of a woman well versed in the unspoken rules of *ton* society. She was just over forty. Her dark hair was streaked with early silver and her expression was a practiced blend of deference and calculation, much like the man beside her. She stepped forward timidly and executed a perfect curtsy.
- "My dear husband, I believed we would be aware if a man of His Grace's status was invited to our Marion's wedding. We are most surprised, Your Grace," she said softly to Anselm, "to see you so far from Greystead Hall and London this time of year. Are you on holiday in fair Scotland?"
- Anselm felt a wave of disgust at their hollow pleasantries. There was a careless indifference beneath their words toward the young woman between them. Something was clearly amiss—and neither seemed to care.
- "Your niece appeared to be in need of assistance," he stated plainly, offering no further remarks.
- A man stepped forward, thin-lipped and sneering. He looked about thirty and was plain enough, though his clothes were impeccably tailored—as if that alone could make up for a lack of any real presence. His dark eyes were cold and calculating, but there was nothing about him that stirred respect or fear.
- Anselm recognized him then. Lord Gilton. He didn't know the man well, but from the tension around Lady Marion, it was clear she dreaded this match.
- "Marion, my dear, you've kept us waiting quite a while," he said with a singsong tsk-tsk. "While I hear lateness can be fashionable, a bride ought not to be so tardy on her own wedding day. Fear not, Lord Harlowe, I shall have to teach her better manners." He laughed lightly. "Rest assured, I'll see she knows her place."
- Gilton reached out then so his fingers could brush Lady Marion's arm. The sight of this movement sent a spike of anger through Anselm and was only amplified as he watched her recoil at the contact.

She is genuinely afraid of him.

This man was a danger and of what variety, Anselm did not know. He had heard rumors of his peculiar tastes and proclivities, which he'd paid no mind to in the private clubs of London. Yet, looking at him now, he was unsure they were just rumors; Gilton oozed treachery.

Lady Marion inched away from the Viscount and pulled a note from her sleeve to present to the group. Anselm watched her hand tremble as she held it out to Gilton.

"I received this," she whispered. "Just as I was finishin' up dressin' for our wedding day with Jean."

Anselm's eyes narrowed as he snatched the paper from her hand. He unfolded it quickly. Anselm leaned forward so he could read the words before Gilton.

Gilton has already promised himself to me. Cross that line and I will make sure you are buried in that wedding gown.

He reread the words several times, letting them register, then looked up at Lady Marion.

"Why did you not show me this before?"

Before she could answer, Harlowe laughed loud and dismissively.

"This is all nonsense, Your Grace! A ruse! What you are seeing is a flighty girl's defiance against a respectable match. You know what fickle creatures these females can be. It is in their nature. They cannot help it! With her parents gone, I have taken great pains to see her through *several* seasons and ensure that she has an excellent husband to care for her. She needs a firm hand, that is all. I know she will do well."

Lady Harlowe's posture straightened at his comment indicating she silently agreed with him on the matter.

Gilton's smile widened. A thin, predatory curve tugged at his lips as he puffed out his chest.

The three of them, Gilton and Lord and Lady Harlowe, seemed to form a silent tribunal as they all towered over Lady Marion while she kept her gaze fixed firmly on the ground.

"My dear Marion, you will be very happy in our marriage. I assure you." He placed a hand on her elbow. His touch lingered as Anselm watched the subtle digging of his fingers into her skin. "It is time."

The threat was real. Anselm could not and would not leave her here.

"Get back in the carriage," Anselm ordered in a low voice.

Lady Marion blinked. Her blue eyes went wide as saucers, as if she had not heard him correctly. Instead of moving, she stood there, again like a doe in front of a hunter.

"Get back in the carriage, Lady Marion. Now," he repeated, a bit louder this time. His voice was just as firm as the others looked at him curiously.

She did not he sitate a second time. With a rustle of lace and silk, she was off. She turned and ran down the steps, scrambling

- towards Anselm's waiting coach without a backward glance.
- "With all due respect, what in the blazes is this, Your Grace? My niece is set to marry Lord Gilton," Harlowe huffed.
- "No, Lord Harlowe. Your niece is coming with me."
- "Are you kidnapping her?" Harlowe blustered. It was clear he was dumbfounded and confused. "I have spent good money for this wedding and a wedding will be taking place now!"
- Gilton took a step forward then, clearly intending to follow Marion. Anselm moved quickly and blocked the path with his burly body.
- "You will have to go through me to get to her, Gilton."
- "This is an outrage!" Lady Harlowe shrieked as she clasped onto her husband's elbow. "You cannot simply take our niece, Your Grace! My lord husband forbids it!"
- "I can," Anselm countered. His gaze grew hot as he fixed it on Lord Gilton. "And I will. Given the circumstances, I can see that she needs me. She is in danger, but I will not allow the threat to continue. She is coming with me and will remain in my care until a more suitable arrangement is made. Who lets a woman go through with a marriage when there are threats against her very life?"
- With those final words, Gilton and Lord and Lady Harlowe froze in shock. There was nothing left for them to say. It would be up to them to conjure up a tale for the guests and figure out what to do with the food and arrangements that had been made for the occasion.
- Anselm did not care. His mind was already spinning to the next steps in the plan he was forming as he went along.
- "Your Grace—" Gilton started.
- "As for you, Gilton—" Anselm cut him off with a growl. "You'd better think before coming near her again."
- And with that, he turned on his heel and strode away from the scene so that he might hastily join Marion in the carriage. He slammed the door shut and barked an order at his driver with a rough tap on the partition.
- "Let us be done with this cursed place! And quickly!"
- The carriage lurched forward. It rattled away from the church and left the sputtering, enraged figures of Lady Marion's family and her intended husband in the dust.

Chapter Four

A

er Grace... Thank ye. For what ye did back there. At the church... I daenae ken what to say," Marion whispered. She broke the silence between them as they sat in the carriage.

- "You should have told me about those notes immediately," the Duke corrected as his gaze fixed on the passing scenery.
- "I... I dinnae ken if ye would believe me," Marion answered as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I thought ye might dismiss me as hysterical, like me uncle."
- "You had a good reason to flee that wedding. All I gathered about you was that you were another naïve woman trying to avoid the inevitable," he countered as he kept his gaze averted out the window.
- "Well, ye are rather good at ruinin' weddin's. I was very impressed by yer skill. Was it yer first time?" she retorted.
- "If I am good at ruining them, you are rather adept at fleeing them," the Duke snapped back dryly.
- "Well, when the prospect was so enchantin', how can ye blame me? Likely demise or dishonorable flight?"
- The Duke's gaze snapped back to her. "And yet you didn't tell me about the death threats. Not once."
- She met his eyes defiantly. "And what have I seen of ye but cold commands and brusque orders? Ye practically dragged Verity from Lady Inverhall's house like a man haulin' a reluctant servant. Why should I trust someone who treats others like property?"
- His jaw tightened. "You know nothing of me or my family."
- "I saw how ye treated Verity. Ye 'dinnae even sit to speak with her or ask why she left. Ye cut her off before she could explain."
- The Duke didn't hesitate to close the distance between their opposing seats in the carriage. "Verity did plenty of damage by disappearing without a word. Sometimes actions speak louder than explanations."
- She held his gaze steadily and her chest rose and fell as she took quiet breaths. "Maybe if 'ye'd listened, things would be different. But ye chose to judge before ye understood."
- "I have carried enough responsibility to be capable of judging, my lady."

"Carrying a lot of responsibility doesn't give you the right to dismiss those who need to speak," she shot back. "No one's right all the time."

The Duke's mouth twitched. "I am right often enough."

"Maybe that's the problem," she countered sharply. "Ye think bein' right is a license to silence others."

He met her gaze steadily. When he spoke, his voice was low, steady, and tinged with steel. "Sometimes silence is the only thing keeping a man from losing control."

"Control isnae the same as strength."

He let his voice drop low until it was little more than a growl.

"True control is knowing exactly when to take what you want—and how hard to hold on when you do."

Marion's breath hitched. The Duke sat so close to her that his bold words sent a thrill through her despite herself. She felt the heat radiating off him as the space between them shrank until it felt impossible to breathe. Her heart hammered loud and fast as she became acutely aware of his nearness; the faint brush of his skin, the sharp scent of him, the electric tension pulling tight between them.

For a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them as they were caught in a fragile, charged silence that seemed to hold infinite possibilities.

Then, with a sudden, controlled motion, the Duke pulled back just enough to break the spell. His eyes were dark and unreadable.

"We have a few hours ahead of us," he said quietly. "No need to waste time on distractions."

They didn't speak for a long time, but Marion felt a phantom current linger in the air around them.

It' would be a long journey, indeed.

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Four long hours later, the carriage rattled to a halt outside a coaching inn in Dunkeld. The morning sun, which had witnessed their dramatic departure from Strathcairn, was now well into its afternoon descent as the sky turned amber.

They stepped down and stretched their cramped limbs as they took in the fresh air. They went inside the inn and found Verity waiting at the entrance. Her face registered a mixture of relief and shock at the sight of Lady Marion with him.

"Marion!" she cried, rushing forward to embrace her friend. "What happened?" Before Lady Marion could respond, Verity turned to him. "Thank you, brother," she said, smiling.

Anselm paid the driver, included a generous tip for his haste, and sent the rented carriage back to Strathcairn. He walked over to the ladies then and nodded at Verity before turning to Lady Marion. His gaze swept over her conspicuous wedding dress.

"Do you have another gown, or at least a cloak to cover that up a bit?" he asked Verity as he noticed curious glances already

being cast their way.

He loathed attention. The memory of the scuffle in the Strathcairn inn sat fresh in his mind. He did not want any trouble or questions. The Scottish folk did not take kindly to wandering English Dukes.

"Yes, I' have several dresses in my trunks."

"Good. It seems we have attracted some attention," he said, realizing he should have planned first and entered the inn second. "So, we will stop here for rest and a late lunch, then continue our trek in about two hours. Lastly... due to this attention we're receiving, we must pretend that Lady Marion is my bride."

Verity and Lady Marion looked at each other in shock.

"Clearly, he is right to say so, Verity... We daenae want to attract any attention. I will go along with yer story, Yer Grace. I am grateful for your intervention and quick thinkin', *husband*." Lady Marion looked up at Anselm beneath full eyelashes.

Her blue eyes glittered at him and he couldn't miss the light sarcasm in her tone.

He nodded and then quickly left to acquire new transportation while the ladies sat down to enjoy needed refreshment. Once the transaction had been completed, Anselm looked over at the ladies' table and his gaze once more landed on Lady Marion's outfit.

"Could a room also be provided for my wife to change into her traveling clothes before we leave again?"

"Aye, we have one available, Yer Grace," the innkeeper replied. He accepted the lie easily enough and made it clear he did not care one way or the other about their tricky situation.

- Anselm paid the required fee and nodded curtly as the innkeeper handed him the key. Leading the ladies upstairs, he placed a hand lightly on Lady Marion's back before guiding her with practiced ease.
- But as they ascended, his fingers slid lower, and rested just above her waist. The touch lingered. It was a deliberate, controlled caress that spoke of restraint, though every inch of him longed to explore further.
- He caught her glance over her shoulder. She arched her brow and the teasing spark in her eyes dared him. He returned her look with a hard, unreadable expression. It was stern but charged beneath the surface.
- Play along now. No need for Lady Marion to know how much I am enjoying this.
- They reached the room. He stopped outside the door and turned to Verity. "Give her a dress for the night."
- Verity rummaged in her travel bag and pulled out a plain, serviceable gown that Anselm prayed would be acceptable.
- Anselm waited outside with Verity. The silence stretched between them.
- This was a welcome buffer. His mind was a battlefield of anger, relief, and raw desire. It was a volatile mix that unsettled him. He preferred logic and reason, business and pragmatism, but thoughts of Lady Marion's small frame slipping out of that tight gown clawed at his focus.

He pictured her fingers fumbling with the buttons, the soft curve of her neck exposed as she worked, and the swell of her breasts beneath the silk loosening with every undone stitch. The thought was electric, almost unbearable, and his body reacted even as his mind tried to stay anchored.

Verity's quiet voice pulled him back. "What you did back there... it was very noble, Anselm."

Anselm's jaw tightened at the compliment. It was not what he wanted to hear from his sister. He was still irritated with her and wrestling with the implications of her flight and the damage control that awaited them in London.

"Once we are home, we'll talk properly, Verity. At the moment, things are already complicated enough."

Verity frowned and her usual spark was dimmed by his words. She stammered for a moment, before settling on three simple words. "I am sorry."

"We'll talk when we are back home," he repeated, his voice flat and final. "But that is a start for the hell you put me through, little sister."

They stood there for a few more moments in uncomfortable silence. Then the door opened and Lady Marion stepping out of the room while looking at the floor.

Anselm cursed inwardly.

Verity's dress hugged Lady Marion's small frame, tracing every delicate curve of her petite figure. It emphasized the fullness of her chest and the gentle roundness of her hips with undeniable allure. Anselm's mouth tightened as a sharp edge of desire flickered through him at the sight.

Despite reason, Anselm's eyes continued to rove over her. A primal awareness struck him deep as he really took her in. Yet as soon as the feeling came over him, he shoved the unwelcome attraction away.

I must get hold of myself.

"Let us be off then," he barked. His expression hardened as they made their way back down the staircase and out of the inn.

Chapter Five

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learly, we can go no further tonight. We need a place that will not draw undue attention," the Duke stated. "Driver, please stop at the small inn over there on the left. It will have to do," he ordered through the partition.

The carriage had jostled on for what seemed like forever, eating up the kilometers between Strathcairn as they made their long way toward London. Their silence was broken only by the rhythmic thud of hooves on the road. Night had fully descended by the time they reached Edinburgh, only making the hours more indecipherable.

What day is it? What time is it? Marion wondered, rubbing her eyes as she willed herself to stay awake.

- She was so tired, not just from the journey but the exertion of all she had faced. She was in desperate need of rest and small comforts, a warm bed and a hot cup of tea.
- They made their way inside this new inn, and the Duke went to the counter. He booked three rooms: one for their driver, one for himself, and one for the ladies.
- "Good evening." His voice was smooth and convincing as he offered a charming smile to the innkeeper. "My cousin, her traveling companion and I are most grateful for your vacancy this evening. We have grown weary of our travels."
- With Marion now free of that wedding gown, they had no reason to pretend they were husband and wife.
- The innkeeper only nodded and led them down a dimly lit corridor.
- Suddenly, Marion saw the Duke gripping Verity's arm and pulling her back slightly out of the innkeeper's earshot.
- "Do not even think about running. Not again," he said in a low, hard voice. "I mean it, Verity."
- "Leave her be, Yer Grace," Marion said as she slipped back to them and wrapped an arm around Verity. "She is nae goin' anywhere. I promise ye she will be safe with me."
- His gaze snapped to Marion. "Stay out of this, Lady Marion. This is none of your concern."
- "It is fine, Marion," Verity interjected as a reluctant sigh escaped her lips. "He is right. I will not leave you alone with my brother. What kind of friend would I be to leave you with such a curmudgeon?"
- The Duke narrowed his eyes at her, but Marion could see the flicker of relief crossing his features.

"Good. See that you do not," he said with a final, piercing warning in his emerald eyes. "Goodnight," he said and disappeared into his room.

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"What happened? It was your wedding, Marion! And why were you with Anselm in the first place?"

Marion sank onto the soft bed where she closed her eyes to steady herself. She rubbed her temples and tried to make sense of everything that had happened.

How can I explain it all to Verity when I barely understand it myself?

She began with the note, her uncle's sharp words, the growing dread she felt on the carriage ride to the church, and her desperate need to escape which led her to jump into a random carriage just to get away.

"I can't believe you did that," Verity said, half laughing. "That was reckless! I'm a terrible influence on you, I swear."

"Maybe so." Marion smiled faintly as a shiver running down her spine. "But anythin' seemed better than walkin' down that aisle."

A small smile tugged at her lips as she thought of the Duke stepping into the carriage and feeling utterly baffled to find her sitting there.

She had been terrified, yes, but there was something about that brooding Duke—with emerald eyes like Scotland's rolling hills—that stirred her. She'd never seen a man with such a perfectly chiseled face. From his dark hair to his strong jaw and carefully kept beard, she could not help but marvel at his immaculate appearance. And his size—so strong, tall, and capable—he radiated power, and surprisingly, she found she liked it.

True control is knowing exactly when to take what you want—and how hard to hold on when you do.

Those words of his, that moment in the carriage, his hand on her waist at that inn... It'd stirred sensations within her that she'd never imagined before.

For a moment, she wondered if this strictness, this intensity... if it all translated to passion. If the Duke was a man who'd close the distance between them completely and lay a kiss on her lips.

What am I doing? This is Verity's brother, for goodness' sake!

Shaking off the thought, she told Verity about the confrontation at the church.

"Well, I'm happy he stood up to that ogre uncle of yours," Verity commented, "and that spineless dandy Gilton. Perhaps it was a bit too bold, but it was necessary."

"Daenae make me feel worse than I already do," Marion muttered.

"No, it's a good thing," Verity said firmly. "Well, what do you think you'll do now?"

Marion stilled. Her friend's question hung in the air. Indeed, now that she'd left her uncle and aunt as well as her fiancé, she'd

have to figure out a plan.

She hadn't debuted in London; her uncle had forced her to meet suitors across Scotland during the summers. So, now, she'd have to rely on Verity and the Duke for that. She wasn't thrilled about this, but perhaps they could help her find a decent husband there.

And even if she couldn't find one, perhaps she could become a lady's companion for a dowager; Marion knew that spinsters often chose that path. Again, she'd have to ask for a recommendation by Verity and the Duke, but surely, their word had some influence over the London *ton*.

"I have an idea," Marion whispered. "But above all, I have time to think, and that's a luxury I'm grateful for. The only thing I regret is outin' yer whereabouts without yer permission."

"I hold no grudge against you, my friend. Anselm was bound to locate me at some point. At least I have you with me now," Verity said.

Marion savored that rare, precious moment of shared vulnerability with her closest friend. Despite everything, she felt safe, warmed by the bond that chased away the lingering chill inside her.

But as the fire dimmed low and the room grew quiet, a question weighed too heavily on Marion's heart to ignore.

"Verity..." Marion's voice broke the stillness as she turned toward her in the dark. "Why did ye run away? Truly."

Verity was silent for a moment, her silhouette still beneath the covers. Then, with a sigh, she whispered, "I suppose I owe you that answer."

Marion waited, watching her friend's profile in the faint glow of the dying hearth.

"I told you I fled an arranged marriage," Verity said quietly. "That much is true. I couldn't stomach the thought of marrying a man I didn't love, a dull, respectable lord chosen by my brother."

Marion's heart gave a faint, startled jolt.

"Yer brother arranged it?" she asked softly.

Verity let out a soft, rueful laugh. "Oh yes. He meant well, I think. He thought he was protecting me. Securing my future. And I tried, Marion. I truly did. I tried to be the dutiful sister, to push aside my own dreams for the sake of family honor."

Her voice tightened, thick with old emotion.

"But as the wedding drew near, it felt like I was standing at the edge of a cliff, staring into a life I didn't want. A life where I would disappear into someone else's expectations. So I ran."

Marion said nothing, watching her friend in awe.

"I left a note for Anselm," Verity continued, her voice softer now, tinged with regret. "I begged him to tell society I'd gone to care for a distant aunt or fallen ill—anything to shield him from scandal. I didn't mean to wound him, but I needed my freedom more than anything else."

Marion reached out and gently squeezed Verity's hand.

"I went to Elspeth," Verity said, a faint smile creeping into her voice. "Posed as her companion, slipped into the village to buy books and write in peace. And then I met you."

Marion's heart ached with understanding. "Ye never told me it was yer brother who arranged the match."

"I didn't dare," Verity whispered. "I suppose... I felt guilty. I still do. I hope he won't hate me forever." She exhaled slowly. "I love him, Marion. He's my brother. But I hate the way he tries to control everything and everyone around him. I kept my dreams hidden for so long, afraid of disappointing him."

They fell quiet, the weight of Verity's confession settling between them.

"I just want to prove that I can live on my own terms," Verity finished, her voice barely audible. "Even if it means risking everything."

Marion squeezed her hand again, her heart full. "Ye already have."

Later, curled beneath unfamiliar covers, Marion willed herself to sleep, but her mind drifted elsewhere.

She couldn't stop thinking about *him*. The duke. His sharp wit, his searing gaze, the way he had looked at her in that carriage, as though he could see every secret she kept.

That unexpected intimacy hummed beneath her skin, lingering as she prayed that, when sleep finally claimed her, it would carry her straight into his arms.

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Five endless days later, the rhythmic jolt of the carriage had become a familiar companion.

They had made their way from Edinburgh to Berwick-upon-Tweed, then Alnwick, Newcastle, Darlington, and finally, they approached Stamford.

Anselm had mostly kept to himself. The conversation he and Lady Marion had shared when alone was starkly contrasted now that they had Verity with them. The ladies did their best to fill the void with quiet chatter, but exhaustion clung to them all like a dark shadow.

"If I do not stretch my legs soon, they might just shrivel up and fall off. Could we walk around for a bit, Anselm?" Verity asked as the carriage pulled up to another inn.

"We shouldn't waste time, Verity," Anselm replied. "We need to press on."

"You are tired too," Verity countered in a frustrated and determined fashion.

"We could be seen." He knew they were close to their destination and was sure his sister comprehended their location, as well.

"Oh, what's the harm? We can just say that Marion is a distant cousin."

- "We haven't a maid." He strove to make his apprehension clear as he continued to point out issues. "It would not look proper."
- "Then we'll say she is my maid. And that is if anyone even asks," Verity said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You worry too much, brother. What trouble could we get into?"
- Anselm groaned. It was a sound of pure exasperation. He was tired as hell, too tired to fight. He scowled at his sister, then at Marion, who tried to look innocent. He hated losing control of his meticulously planned schedule, but Verity's stubbornness was a force to be reckoned with.
- "Fine," he bit out, realizing it was best to pick his battles now that Verity was with him. "But we do not linger. When I say it is time to go, we go."
- After leaving the carriage at the inn to give the horses a rest, Anselm accompanied the two women into the bustling streets of Stamford.
- Predictably, Verity's gaze lit up the moment she spotted a quaint little bookshop tucked between a milliner's and a tearoom.
- Inside, Anselm drew in a deep breath, savoring the rich, musty scent of old paper and leather bindings. He'd always loved to read—though time for it had grown scarce under the weight of his responsibilities. Still, there was comfort in the presence of books.
- Quiet. Order. A world where everything made sense.
- He watched Verity as she became instantly engrossed by discussing the finer points of a locally printed collection of poetry with the eager shopkeeper. Anselm was sure that he rarely had such a captive audience as his sister.
- "Please, please do tell me that you have it," she pleaded. Her voice was bubbly in anticipation.
- "Sadly, we do not carry it, my lady," the shopkeeper sighed. "But the print shop down the lane *occasionally* binds short-run artistic volumes. They might have a copy."
- "I will have to see about that," Verity said with satisfaction. "I am sure there are many other lovely books in this shop I can find before I go that way. Could you point me in the direction of the latest novels?"
- Verity dragged Marion through the shop as they combed through tomes in search of books to entertain and enlighten the mind.
- Despite his usual aloofness, Anselm watched them with interest. He bought Verity a new, beautifully bound volume of poetry in hopes she would be satiated.
- "Oh Anselm, we must get something for Marion to read! The carriage rides have become such a bore. We have nothing left to speak of! Can we get her something?"
- "Very well, select something quickly so we can be on with it," he said, the gesture a rare, almost imperceptible softening of his hard façade.
- "Marion, you must read this one," Verity said, placing a novel in her hands. "It follows a handsome earl and a commoner with lots of intrigue, travel, crime, and drama."
- "Oh, I cannae let ye do this for me, Yer Grace," Marion said as she her cheeks flushed as she looked up at Anselm and tried to

- set the book back on the shelf.
- "I insist, Lady Marion," he pushed as he took the book from her hands and placed it on the counter in front of the shopkeeper.
- "Thank ye, Yer Grace," she said. Her small smile stretched across her face.
- As they left the shop, Verity bounced on the balls of her feet. "I am just going to pop over to the print shop. I will only be five minutes!"
- "We'll go together," Anselm barked, already turning towards the lane.
- He was not ready to let his sister wander off alone, no matter how innocent she seemed.
- Verity shook her head. She was already halfway to the door. "No, really, I will be quick. It is broad daylight, and it is only a few minutes away. I will keep my head down and I promise not to run off! Besides," she added, her eyes again glinting mischievously as she looked between them. "You and Marion look like you could use a moment to talk."



- Marion gasped and a hot blush bloomed across her neck. "Verity!" she hissed, scandalized—but her friend was already gone, slipping through the crowd and into the little shop like a wisp of smoke.
- Anselm muttered something unintelligible under his breath. He shook his head as he stared after Verity.
- They lingered in the narrow alleyway beside the print shop, half-shadowed from view. Marion folded her arms, more for balance than irritation, and peeked up at him with a lopsided smile.
- "Even when ye're annoyed, ye cannae seem to tell her no," she teased. "That must be infuriatin'."
- "She's lucky I don't wring her neck," he said dryly, though the edge in his voice had softened.
- "I think ye'd like her less if she weren't a bit of trouble."
- Anselm gave a low grunt. His eyes fixed ahead, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "Stubborn women seem to be a particular affliction I can't shake. I do what I can to survive."
- "Aye," Marion said. She kept her voice light but her chest tightened. "And yet somehow, we keep survivin' ye too."
- His gaze snapped to hers, sharp and unreadable.
- The air changed—thickened—like a storm gathering low in the clouds. The alley suddenly felt far too quiet, close, and private. Marion could feel the wall at her back and the solid presence of him in front of her. Heat radiated from him like a furnace.
- "Do you always talk back like this?" he asked, his tone low, almost amused.
- Marion tilted her head and lifted her brows with mock innocence. "Only when I think someone can handle it."

- He gave a quiet huff through his nose, not quite a laugh, but close. "And you've decided I can?"
- "Well," she said, glancing away toward the shop door, "ye've survived Verity this long. That counts for somethin'."
- His gaze lingered on her. It was sharper now, like he was seeing something he hadn't before. "You're not nearly as mild as you pretend to be, Lady Marion."
- "Aye, well, neither are you," she returned as her eyes flicked back to him.
- The space between them stretched taut as their unspoken words thickened the air. The sounds of the town seemed to fade behind them. She was suddenly far too aware of the way the light filtered into the alley and caused his shadow to fall just beside hers.
- "Doesn't mean I'm not trying," he said in a quiet, more serious voice.
- Marion blinked. She was caught off guard by the sincerity buried in the words. "Tryin' what?"
- But he didn't answer.
- He simply looked at her—really looked—and something shifted. The teasing slipped away and was replaced by a silence that was anything but empty.
- The heat of him, the strength in the way he held still... it was overwhelming. She could feel her heart rate pick up. It thudded deep in her chest causing a low ache to build somewhere she didn't dare name.
- They didn't move or speak. Their eyes locked.
- And then, slowly—inevitably—he leaned in.
- She looked deep into his green eyes, which were dark and compelling in the measly light of the dank alley. Marion's breath hitched in her throat and her heart thundered an unrelenting rhythm against her ribs as she felt weak in her knees. She was powerless against him.
- She leaned in too, unable to fathom her daring, as her lips parted slightly. She had longed to feel his full lips on hers since she first set eyes on him. She wanted the hairs of his beard to scratch her chin.
- Their breaths mingled and just as their lips were about to touch, a loud noise rippled down the alleyway.
- The moment was shattered at the sounds of a scuffle.
- "What was that?" she whispered, and they both pulled back. Her eyes scanned the empty alley looking for the source.
- Nothing was there. No one was to be found. Just the distant sounds of the town remained, as if the sound were a specter.
- Marion watched Anselm's jaw clench tight as he marched back to the main street. She struggled to keep pace with the wide strides of his long legs.
- They waited outside the door for a moment before Verity emerged from the print shop with a triumphant grin on her face. She

clutched the rare poetry collection against her chest in a hug. She took one look at their flushed faces and tense shoulders.	
"Everything all right?" she asked as her gaze darted between them. "What did I miss?"	

Chapter Six

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hat a sight to behold," Marion said as she gazed up at the grand London townhouse from the carriage window. She was stunned at the quiet grandeur of the place.

It was vast and imposing, yet possessed an undeniable, tasteful elegance. The brick was understated, offset by gorgeous full windows and gold gilding that felt fitting.

- Six days had passed since their hectic departure from Strathcairn, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief as the carriage rolled to its final halt.
- "You are a sight for sore eyes, Mr. Lewis," Verity offered as she approached the butler. "Please tell me that you can have the staff ready my old room."
- "Oh certainly, Lady Verity," he said with a bow while turning his eyes to the Duke. "Welcome back, Your Grace. We anticipated your arrival and made the necessary arrangements. I trust you had a pleasant enough journey."
- "Thank you," Anselm answered. His eyes floated over to Marion. "Please allow me to introduce Lady Marion Campbell."
- "How do you do, Lady Marion? I am the butler, Mr. Lewis," he replied as he performed a small bow. "Welcome to the Greystead townhouse."
- The seasoned butler, a man whose bearing suggested he'd seen everything in his old age, still managed a flicker of surprise at the sight of two women.
- "Lady Marion is a distant cousin who will be staying with us," he explained. "On my father's side by marriage."
- "It is a pleasure to make yer acquaintance." Marion offered a small curtsy.
- "Very well, Your Grace. I will go make the arrangements and alert Mrs. Clarke. And a pleasure to meet you as well, Lady Marion," he said as he walked away to coordinate with the servants.
- After a few hurried moments amongst the staff, Verity was whisked away to her familiar room. Marion was directed to a more modest, though still perfectly appointed, guest chamber in a separate wing.
- The walls were painted a rich green. The verdant tones reminded her of Anselm's eyes.
- Does everythin' have to make me think of him? She cursed inwardly.

She sat down on the bed. The plushness of the brocade duvet provided comfort for her aching bones. Most of all, she loved the oversized picture windows that let in the glowing sun and looked down on the bustle of London.

She thought back to the whispers she had heard as she passed down the hall to the room. The judgment, even from the servants, was a familiar sting amongst the English, but a sting all the same. She ought to be used to it by now.

"I think she is Scottish," one maid had said to another. "Did you hear that accent? She did not say much, but she is a Highlander!"

"Not sure how that can be a cousin to His Grace," one footman said to another maid. "She is as wild as a Scottish mare! I do not think His Grace has any Scottish ancestry."

She closed her eyes to quiet the voices in her head and let rest wash over her.



Marion woke to a soft tap on the door.

"Lady Marion," a maid called from the threshold. "Lady Verity has had us draw you a hot lavender bath and it has just finished."

Marion jumped out of her bed at the thought of a luxurious soak. She was ushered into the ornate bathroom next to her chambers, complete with marble flooring and elegant landscape paintings.

How I would love to paint somethin' like this again, she thought as she lowered herself into the steaming water.

As the maid washed every inch of her body, Marion steeped away the worries that filled her. She thought of her uncle and aunt, Lord Gilton, and how desperately she needed to find her own path.

Then there was the Duke of Greystead. He was cold, *aye*, and authoritative, and so infuriatingly set in his ways. And yet... the intensity in his eyes, which held the green of a Highland forest in summer, were intoxicating.

His gaze was deep, rich, and threaded with shadows.

Those gleaming orbs were the sort of green that seemed soft at first glance but even when looked at long enough could allow a person to get completely lost. They might wander through something ancient and untamed with no clear path back.

Don't get carried away, lass. He's Verity's brother! She scolded herself.

Even though Marion had seen the playful glimmer in Verity's eyes when she'd left her and the Duke on their own back in Stamford, Marion knew well that His Grace would keep away from her. He was too stiff, too...

Drat, the point was that Marion had to keep him out of her mind.

Soon, the maid assisted Marion out of the tub and helped her dress for dinner. She was offered one of Verity's gowns once more, as with her hasty departure, she'd brought no other clothes. Tonight's dress was a deep sapphire which was again a touch too snug across her bust.

- She looked in the mirror, noting how the cut hugged every part of her body a little too tightly.
- It will have to do for now, she could only think.
- Moments later, Marion entered the dining room and was greeted by Verity and the Duke's gaze. The latter lingered a moment too long to be mistaken as a passing glance.
- "While it may be a bit too tight, you look absolutely radiant in that color," Verity gushed as they sat down to sup. "It goes so well with your eyes. Do you not think so, Anselm?"
- "Indeed," he said gruffly before taking a long swig from his wine goblet.
- The dinner was served in courses with quiet precision by the attentive staff. They started with vichyssoise, then a duck dish that was accentuated with orange and herb. They moved onto a sumptuous stew, followed by a delicate dessert consisting of a lemon pudding.
- "Each dish is more delightful than the last," Marion gushed, savoring each bite. "Do you always dine like this?"
- "I think my brother is trying to impress you," Verity said with a wink.
- "It's a celebratory dinner," the Duke said. His gaze flicked to Verity as his eyes narrowed just slightly. "My sister has returned."
- He left it at that. Calm, final, not inviting further comment.
- Verity's teasing smile faltered. She leaned back slightly in her chair as a hint of color rose to her cheeks and she lowered her gaze to her plate.
- "Of course," she murmured.
- Silence fell over the table. Once the last dish was cleared, the Duke dismissed the staff with a curt nod.
- "We'll require privacy for our conversation," he stated, his voice allowing no question.
- The staff exited promptly and made sure to close the heavy oak doors behind themselves.
- The Duke leaned forward and rested his elbows on the polished table as he drained the last of his glass.
- "Now, about your safety, Lady Marion," he began. "Harlowe and Gilton will undoubtedly retaliate. I'll make arrangements for you to stay with one of my aunts as a lady's companion this week. That should keep you safe and out of the immediate line of fire, while I deal with them."
- "Thank ye, Yer Grace," she murmured, sincerity warming her voice. She appreciated the way he was helping her so much. "That is most kind."
- As Marion felt a rush of relief, she was overwhelmed by a pang of sadness as she looked at Verity. She had been so lonely for so long. The years after her parents died were spent with the McCrae family or being ushered about by the Harlowe's. The thought of leaving the dearest friend she had ever known felt sharp, like being exiled all over again.

But it wasn't just Verity.

Her chest tightened as her eyes flicked toward the Duke. There it was, the deeper ache—unwelcome, unfamiliar. For a fleeting moment, she'd tasted something different here, something close to... safety, even...

Well, she didn't precisely know.

And now, just as quickly, it was slipping from her fingers.

She straightened, steadying herself, her face calm even as the quiet, hollow disappointment bloomed inside her.

Of course it was only temporary. It had never been hers to keep. "Oh, Marion! Must you go? I would be so sad to see you leave." Verity's lips turned down at the corners unhappily as she threw down her napkin.

"It is the safest route, Verity," the Duke stated as he turned his gaze firmly on his sister. "For now."

Marion held Verity's gaze, searching for some reassurance in those sorrowful eyes. She gave a small, steady nod.

"Aye, it's for the best, Verity. I promise," she reassured her friend.

She saw the tight frown deepen on Verity's brow. There was quiet sadness in that look which didn't fade despite her words. It was clear that Verity wanted her to stay. She wanted to hold onto this precious bond they'd begun to build.

At least they had a few days together before she'd leave. That was Marion's only consolation.

Then the Duke's voice cut through their moment, firm and resolute. "Well... Verity, join me in my study. We need to talk."

For a brief second, a flicker of perplexion crossed his eyes, as though he questioned the plan himself. But just as quickly, the shadow passed, and was replaced by the careful mask of formality.

"I hope you enjoyed the dinner, my lady," he said smoothly as he inclined his head with practiced courtesy toward Marion. "I wish you a good rest. If you'll excuse me and my sister, we have matters to discuss."

Chapter Seven

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ow, little sister," Anselm began as he settled into his leather chair with deliberate calm and swirled the brandy in his glass. "What precisely did you think you were doing? Running off like some vagrant? Have you the faintest notion of the scandal you've stirred? The stain you've placed on our name?"

Verity stood before him with her chin lowered not in meekness, but in quiet acknowledgment of the storm she'd caused. For all her usual boldness, she wasn't foolish enough to pretend innocence now.

Her fingers worked nervously at the fabric of her gown, though her gaze didn't lift to him. Instead, she stared into the fire crackling behind his chair.

"I couldn't, Anselm," she said in a low but clear tone. "I couldn't marry him. Not Lord—" She gave a faint, dismissive wave. "—Fanthorpe. He was dull, yes, but it was more than that."

She drew in a breath and her hands finally stilled.

- "I want more than that," she continued. "I want to write. To create something that matters. I won't spend my life as a footnote in someone else's story. I won't be bartered off like a trinket."
- Anselm's fingers tightened around his glass, so he set it down with deliberate care. He rose from the chair in one smooth motion, letting the firelight throw his shadow long across the room.
- "And your grand solution," he said, voice clipped and cold, "was to run."
- He paced slowly. With each step measured, the anger coiled tightly beneath his skin. It was controlled, but sharp enough to cut.
- "You thought vanishing would solve everything?" he continued, "Did you think of what it would cost, not only to this family, but to you? The whispers. The ruin. The doors that would close forever."
- He stopped and turned toward her. His gaze grew cold and direct.
- "Do you imagine this has been a pleasant affair for me, Verity?" His voice dropped lower. "I spent six days chasing after you across the countryside, fending off gossip, lying to innkeepers, and enduring every curious glance that followed me. All because you refused to face the life you were born to."
- Verity held his gaze now. Though her expression was tight, she kept her lips pressed together against any sharp reply. She wasn't cowed, but she wasn't naïve enough to deny the damage she'd done either.

"That is it, Verity," he said. His words cut clean and without hesitation. "You only consider yourself."

She flinched. Just barely, but it was there. There was a faint wince around her eyes and a tightening of her mouth. She looked away then. Verity dropped her gaze to the floor as her shoulders curled inward as though she were bracing against the weight of his accusation.

For a brief moment, he felt something tighten in his chest, but he held firm, unmoving, and unwilling to soften now that the truth had finally struck home.

When she spoke again, her voice was soft and quiet. "Marion told me once that... that, well sometimes, you just have to choose your own path," she said. Her eyes glimmered. "That living a life shaped by obligation isn't truly living at all."

Anselm stopped dead in his tracks and narrowed his eyes at his sister.

"Lady Marion?" he scoffed. "So, it seems our distant cousin has been filling your head with dangerous notions." He gave a slow, deliberate shake of his head, but his gaze remained sharp and steady on Verity. "She's been a poor influence on you. Had I known she was the source of these...delusions, I—"

"She is not," Verity said. Her voice was tight even as her eyes shone with unshed tears. "Marion is all I have. And so is Elspeth."

She stopped there, as though the words themselves cost her something.

Anselm's jaw tensed. He straightened as the weight of her careless declaration settled heavily on his chest.

"You have me," he said.

At first, she pursed her lips. And then, as if some tether snapped inside her, she met his gaze, and her voice took on the sharp quality of flint striking steel.

"Do I?" she asked. Her words were cool and too steady for comfort. "I had you when you sold me off to the highest bidder?"

Anselm said nothing at first. He only watched her. Every instinct urged him to lash back. But he wouldn't lose his temper here. He refused.

She thought it was that simple. A cold transaction. A careless hand pushing her toward duty.

He studied her. The anger in her eyes, the flush on her cheeks, the way she stood so straight now, all pooled together as if she were daring him to deny it.

It would be so easy to remind her of everything he'd carried, everything he'd kept hidden. All of it, for her.

But she was innocent. And all their family's darkness was his to carry alone.

And so, when he finally spoke, his voice was calm. Distant.

"I made the only choice left to me," he said keeping each word deliberately even. "You may not approve of it, Verity. But you'll see, in time, it was the right one."

She gave a short, bitter laugh. "You always do think you know best," she murmured. Her gaze dropped to the floor while her hands curled at her sides. "Marion and Elspeth are the only people who truly understand me. They are the only ones who listen —who see me for who I am and not what I'm meant to be."

Anselm said nothing.

He simply watched her, and, just for a moment, felt far older than his thirty-three years.

At last, he straightened. His voice was cool and final as he turned from her.

"We will discuss this again," he said while adjusting his cuffs with a slow, deliberate precision, "when you have had time to consider your actions properly." He let the words hang there for a beat before adding in a quieter but no less firm tone. "I want you to think more on what you have done."

He turned away, dismissing her. Even with his eyes averted, he could feel Verity staring at his rigid back. He could hear the unmistakable sound of her chest heaving with frustration.

Without another word, she spun on her heel and stormed out.

Anselm stood for a moment leaning his arm against the mantle and watching the twisted flames. He listened to the pitter patter of her retreating footsteps.

Then, he moved to the bell pull and yanked it sharply.

Best to deal with all this trouble at once, he thought as he walked over and drained the last of his brandy. Let us be done with this messy business.

Mr. Lewis appeared almost instantly.

"Fetch Lady Marion," Anselm told him. "Now."

"Of course, Your Grace," he replied and turned to do so. "At once."

A few minutes later, Lady Marion stood hesitantly in the doorway. She clutched her hands before her. Her blue eyes looked uncertain as they darted around the room.

"Close the door behind you," Anselm simply said.

She complied. The click of the latch was loud in the quiet room and she jumped in response like a mouse.

"Give me that note," Anselm said, extending his hand. "I will have it investigated. This person might seek you out. I will leave no stone unturned."

She hesitated, clearly startled by his insistence. And then—foolishly—she shook her head and took a step back.

"Yer Grace, ye have done more than enough already," she said. "I couldnae possibly repay ye. I cannae let ye go through any more trouble for me."

Anselm remained quiet at first. His gaze swept over her. The sapphire gown Verity had lent her was far too snug for propriety; it clung to her figure, drawing attention to every curve it should have concealed. He took in the way the bodice shaped her waist, the soft lines of her shoulders, and the quiet defiance in her stance.

Heat stirred low in his chest—sharp, unwanted.

He narrowed his eyes slightly and forced the thought aside, shutting it down with cold precision.

Foolishness.

He had no business noticing such things.

When he finally spoke, his voice was cool and steady as stone.

"I decide what trouble I am willing to take on. You would do well to remember that, Lady Marion. As for repaying me," he countered, "you can. By steering clear of my sister."

Her brows knitted together. "What do ye mean by that, Yer Grace?"

"What I mean, Lady Marion," he started while taking a step towards her, "is that you and your circumstances amount to an imminent scandal. Bringing you here was necessary, and I will ensure you remain safe. But Verity's disappearance has already set the *ton* whispering. Managing the consequences is my responsibility, and I will do so. But we cannot court more trouble. You will leave this house tomorrow. I will oversee the arrangements myself."

"But... what ye said earlier at dinner?" Marion asked softly. "Ye said I'd leave later this week. I thought I'd have a wee bit of' time with Verity."

Anselm's eyes narrowed slightly. "That was the plan. But circumstances have changed. I cannot risk your safety or my sister's. You'll need to prepare to leave sooner than expected."

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Marion frowned. Her face flushed with resentment as she wondered just how red she could get.

"Risk yer sister's safety? What do ye mean by that, Yer Grace?"

The Duke's gaze was steady and unreadable. "It is a matter of discretion," he said coolly. "The fewer complications surrounding Verity, the better."

Marion's brows drew together again as the weight of his words settled heavily.

"Complications?" she echoed as her voice tightened. "Ye'll have to be plainer than that, Yer Grace. I deserve to ken exactly what ye're implying."

His jaw tightened ever so slightly. He held her gaze for a long moment, silently, as though weighing whether she was even worth the explanation.

Then, finally, his patience thinned just enough to slip through his tone.

- "You," he said quietly but sharp, "are a bad influence on my sister."
- The words landed between them with the precision of a blade.
- "A bad influence?" Marion scoffed as her temper sparked. "Ye speak as though I ordered her to flee!" She threw a hand toward the room around them. "Ye ken very well, Yer Grace, that I dinnae ken Verity had run from this place until I hopped into yer carriage. Not before."
- The Duke's gaze hardened. His voice was cutting, though he kept it level. "I did not suggest you orchestrated her escape, my lady." His words were clipped and precise. "But she certainly seems to believe it was the right choice. And that, I suspect, is your doing."
- Marion's breath caught, but only for a heartbeat. Then her eyes narrowed as they became sharp and bright with fury.
- "Me doin'?" Her voice dropped so that it was quiet but scalding. "Aye, I encouraged her to stand her ground. Because we both believe a woman should have a say over her own life, to chase her dreams instead of settlin' as some man's wife. For that is far from the grand purpose of a woman's existence."
- Her voice was rising before she realized it. Her anger was sharp and sudden and it burned through her restraint.
- He took a step toward her. Then another.
- Marion's back met the study door with a soft thud. Her breath caught in her throat as he closed the distance between them. He wasn't touching her—not yet—but she could feel the heat of him and sense the tension crackling in the narrow space between their bodies.
- His green eyes locked on hers, burning—not just with fury, but something deeper, darker. Something neither of them dared name.
- "You were always going to be trouble," he muttered, his voice low and rough, meant more for himself than her but she heard every word.
- His gaze dropped, lingering and *devouring*, before dragging back up to meet her eyes.
- "I knew it the moment you looked at me," he added. His breath ghosted against her skin. His nearness was overwhelming—too much, yet not enough. "A tempest within my own home."
- Every part of her was sharply aware of him—of the power coiled in his frame and the faint scent of brandy and cedar that clung to him.
- She should've pushed him away.
- Instead, she swayed closer, caught somewhere between fury and something far more dangerous. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest.
- "Look at you tempting me, little tempest." His voice turned into a deep, husky whisper. "I wonder how prettily you'll moan for me when I taste your lips."
- Marion's breath hitched and her pulse pounded in her ears. She could feel the unspoken dare hovering between them.

- And then, just as swiftly as he'd closed the space between them, he tore himself back and cleared his throat.
- "Go to your room, Lady Marion," he commanded.
- The sudden absence of his warm presence made her knees weaken. She clutched the door behind her breathlessly and stared after him as if she'd been spun through a storm.
- Yet she knew well to steer clear from such storms.
- She turned and rushed out of the room. Her emotions swirled chaotically as they threatened to swallow her whole.
- Part of her felt grateful for not entangling herself further with the Duke. He was complicated and his temper flew from hot to cold in a flurry. Yet the sharp sting of rejection gnawed deeper than any threat in those cursed notes.
- She curled up in bed, pulled the duvet up to her chin, and willed herself to dream of anything but him.

Chapter Eight

ust you always make such dramatic entrances?" Anselm drawled, not looking up from his coffee after a loud, unceremonious bang had announced his friend's arrival.

He knew the sound as well as he knew his own voice.

Emmanuel Brimsey, the Marquess of Wrotham, strode into the breakfast room. He held a triumphant grin on his face and was clearly oblivious to the fact that Verity and Marion had not yet descended that morning.

"Apparently, scandal just runs in your blood, old friend," Emmanuel quipped, brushing off Anselm's dry remark with a dismissive wave. "As rigid as you are, your true nature cannot escape you."

Anselm's chair scraped against the floor as he stood abruptly. His green eyes narrowed as he stared at his friend.

"What are you talking about? I am in no mood for jokes or riddles. Out with it. And quick."

Emmanuel extended his hand and revealed a crumpled scandal sheet. Anselm walked over to him and snatched it. His gaze swept over the bold headlines.

He cursed under his breath.

"Good mo-"

Just then, Verity and Marion sauntered into the room. Their morning greetings immediately died on their lips as they heard his words.

Emmanuel instantly brightened at the sight of not one, but two beautiful ladies.

"Verity, my dear! You are a ravishing sight. And you... good morning to you, my lady. I am Emmanuel Brimsey, Marquess of Wrotham. At your service." He bowed dramatically as he took Marion's hand and brushed a kiss over her knuckles. "Anselm, I must commend your taste. Truly exceptional."

Marion looked confused, while Verity, sensing the undercurrent of anger radiating from her brother, stepped forward.

"Anselm? What is it? Is something wrong?"

"We were seen. Lady Marion and I," he said through gritted teeth while tossing the crumpled sheet at Emmanuel.

- "Seen?" Verity gasped. Her hands found her cheeks. "Where?"
- "Stamford." Anselm began anxiously playing with his beard and pacing the room.
- "Well, I did indeed leave you two alone for a moment. But—" Verity started before Marion cut her off.
- "The sound we heard... near the alleyway," she said quietly.
- Emmanuel passed the scandal sheet to the ladies. Verity and Marion leaned in and pressed their heads together as they scanned the words. Anselm watched their expressions shift from curiosity to shock as they read the salacious details in plain black and white.
- How he'd been seen in a compromising position with an unknown woman, at first, but then the writer went on to add that they'd heard Anselm refer to her as 'Lady Marion.' The writer swiftly managed to gather that the unknown woman was none other than the Earl of Harlowe's Scottish niece.
- "And now, it is everywhere," Emmanuel added. "I saw more sheets being handed out on my way here. The whole of London knows, old boy. Time to fess up because it seems you are in love. I, for one, think this will do you some good."
- Anselm cursed again and his hand clenched into a fist.
- "I must leave. Now." Lady Marion's voice was resolute. She looked at Verity and her eyes filled with guilt. "I cannae risk ruining ye or yer family any further. I will just drag ye down with me."
- Suddenly, the breakfast room doors burst open once more and all heads turned to the sound.
- "Lady Verity!" the Marquess of Fanthorpe roared as he stormed into the room.
- Verity's intended groom was a tall man. His broad shoulders were tense beneath a plain dark coat. His stern face was flushed with anger and confusion. Though not a figure of great note, his presence commanded uneasy silence.
- "I demand you tell me to my face the reason for cancelling our wedding!" His voice trembled with indignation.
- Lady Marion stepped in front of Verity.
- "Me lord, I... I apologize, but...but...it is me fault ye see. I needed Lady Verity most urgently—" Lady Marion began to say, but Anselm knew better.
- His gaze flicked to Fanthorpe, whose anger simmered dangerously. The tension in the room thickened; the scandal sheets, the canceled wedding, the unanswered questions...
- It was all about to erupt.
- Anselm's mind raced as he weighed the fragile threads that held his family's reputation together. Lady Marion's hesitant attempt to soothe the situation only reminded him of the urgency. If Fanthorpe's fury went unchecked, the fallout would be devastating.
- There was only one way out of this. Only one decisive course to regain control and stop the gossip from spreading further.

- He took a steadying breath and cut in firmly, commanding attention.
- "Lord Fanthorpe, my sister and I had to travel to Scotland to fetch my bride."
- Marion's eyes widened.
- "Bride?" Lord Fanthorpe repeated. His voice was laced with disbelief. "This is the first I have heard of this! You have previously made it abundantly clear that you are not searching for a wife."
- "Indeed," Anselm continued. "I know the scandal sheets have taken liberties with my fiancée's reputation as of late, but I assure you, great imagination was used in conjuring their story. I merely wanted her to be present for my sister's wedding."
- Fanthorpe's face contorted in a mix of shock and disbelief as his gaze flicked between Anselm and Lady Marion.
- "This is your bride? This... this... Scot is your bride?" he demanded. His voice trembled with a mixture of incredulity and contempt.
- Anselm's reply came low and fierce. "Yes."
- Fanthorpe's lips curled with bitter scorn. "So, this is why my wedding was delayed? Why I suffered such humiliation? Because of some savage Highland mistress?"
- Anselm moved instinctively. All his muscles tightened as a predatory gleam rushed through his whole body.
- "You would do well to watch your tongue, Fanthorpe," he growled as he now stood in front of him. "And to remember your place in my house."
- "I suggest you heed the Duke's warning, my lord," Emmanuel added plainly.
- "I do not give a whit about your bride! No, no, this is beyond insulting. I've had enough! I am breaking the engagement to Lady Verity this instant!" Fanthorpe shrieked, though he looked visibly pale and flailing when pitted against the Duke.
- "Leave my home, Fanthorpe. Now. Or you will not have a tongue to throw insults with," Anselm said as he took another step forward and positioned himself so he was towering over the panicking Fanthorpe.
- Despite his evident disadvantage, both physically and in about every other way, he managed to puff out his chest.
- Anselm tried his best not to laugh at the gesture.
- "The audacity!" Fanthorpe hissed.
- Anselm took another step towards him which caused Fanthorpe to turn sharply before storming out of the room.
- The doors slammed behind him, leaving silence which was broken only by the steady breathing of those who had witnessed the confrontation.
- Anselm's eyes lingered on the closed doors a moment longer before he turned back to those still in the room.

- "I will be leaving now to obtain the marriage license," he stated, as if he were leaving for any routine errand. "This is the only way to draw the *ton's* attention away from both the scandal sheet and Verity's broken engagement."
- His gaze swept the room once more. He caught the flicker of doubt in Verity's eyes, the steadiness in Marion's, and even the faint smirk playing on Emmanuel's lips.
- Verity reached for Lady Marion's hand. When she spoke, her voice was soft and uncertain. "You don't have to do this for me, Marion. You've already escaped one marriage you never wanted. I won't be the reason you lose your choice."
- Verity's words hung in the air. Lady Marion met her gaze for a long moment, and something unspoken passed between them.
- Anselm's brows furrowed. How did this woman communicate so easily with his sister? How had she forged such a deep bond with Verity?
- Lady Marion's eyes flicked toward Anselm and he could feel the way she searched his face.
- Anselm held her look steadily, aware of the subtle tremor in her hands and the flicker of doubt shadowing her expression.
- Lady Marion's gaze shifted back to Verity, where a flicker of hope and gratitude softened the tension. A surge of conflicting emotions played across Lady Marion's face: uncertainty, fear, and determination battled beneath the surface.
- Finally, with a slow, decisive bob of her head, Lady Marion met Anselm's eyes once more.
- "I accept," she said clearly. Her voice sounded steady despite the storm she seemed to hold inside.
- "How's that for a dashing proposal? Whatever happened to the diamond ring or getting down on one knee?" Emmanuel joked.
- Anselm glared at him, and his friend ran a hand absently through his golden locks while looking around the room.
- "Bad moment, right. Pardon me," Emmanuel muttered.
- Anselm's eyes wandered back to Lady Marion, who kept her gaze fixed on him.
- He pursed his lips. Then he turned to his friend.
- "Emmanuel, we are leaving. Now."

Chapter Nine

to the

o you truly believe this charade will quiet the wagging tongues?"

Marion heard a woman's voice from beside the church door.

Less than a week had passed and Marion Campbell was to be no more. She would be the Duchess of Greystead.

"It is the only option, my dear," a man had whispered back. "But I suppose that a scandal averted is a scandal half forgotten. Though, I must confess, a duchess from... *those* parts. Unfathomable. It was just the other day the Duke of Greystead married that Scottish girl."

The ceremony was without fanfare or fancies, though perfectly adequate and tasteful. It was a hurried affair, discreet and swift, practical and economical.

In fact, it was like the way the Duke handled all his affairs. It was fitting.

The guests were a small collection of Anselm's closest, most trusted acquaintances. For the farce to be real, there needed to be witnesses.

Marion tried not to make eye contact with anyone other than Verity as she felt guests looking at her. Their whispers were muted but palpable as she willed her heart to remain steady.

Much to her dismay, her uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Harlowe, had managed to return to London just in time for the wedding. This meant that Lord Harlowe would walk her down the aisle.

And he did, but not without spilling his derisive words.

"So, this is how the prodigal niece returns," he'd sneered quietly, loud enough only for her to hear. "Running from a viscount's bed to a duke's altar...not quite the grand escape you fancied, is it? You should count yourself lucky the Duke sees some worth in you. I daresay most would have passed on a girl with your... reputation." He straightened abruptly before adding in a clipped tone, "Try not to disgrace the family further, Marion. The people of the *ton* have long memories, and so do I."

Marion tried her best to ignore his vitriol and instead focused on the husband-to-be who was waiting for her at the end of the long church aisle.

How am I in this position again?

So little time had passed since her failed wedding and yet so much had happened since then.

A bride once more...

Gratefully, the Duke had made sure she had a modest, white wedding gown made instead of the extravagant dress she had worn just a short time ago.

She hoped he'd burned the other one.

The one she wore now was cut to the neck but expertly tailored to her curves with delicate buttons down the back. Her chestnut locks were half up while the lower part cascading down her back in delicate ringlets. Her crown was adorned with tiny crystals and flowers woven in that caught the sunlight.

She did not feel like a bride but certainly looked the part.

A wedding breakfast at the Duke's townhouse followed the ceremony, which was held in one of the townhouse's smaller, elegant drawing rooms just a short way down the hall.

There were perfectly set tables with fine crystal, china, and gold silverware. The hardwood floors in the room gleamed from the natural light that streamed in through the wide windows and illuminated the room. A soft quartet played tasteful background music as guests circulated.

The Duke leaned in as they sat down at their table before they had to approach yet another guest to thank for coming.

"Remember your lines, Duchess," he whispered to Marion. "A chance encounter, profound admiration, and an irresistible passion. Make it convincing."

- "As if me life depends on it, Yer Grace," she replied through gritted teeth. "Which come to think of it, it rather does."
- "Whatever fuel you need for your performance."
- "Are ye quite certain this tale is believable?" Marion asked genuinely, as she gestured subtly to the guests around them. "Cannae we do better?"
- The Duke took a sip of champagne as his gaze swept the room. "The vultures of the *ton* will believe anything if the champagne is good enough. Besides, you' have experience in playing the bride."
- "I have had practice, aye," she quipped back.
- Suddenly, a shadow fell over their table, and they looked up. Lord and Lady Harlowe stood before them. Their faces were little more than brittle, polite masks with forced smiles.
- "Your Grace," Lord Harlowe boomed, his voice oozing false pleasantries. "Congratulations to you! A most unexpected, yet delightful, turn of events." He clasped the Duke's hand, shaking it firmly. "I must thank you, Your Grace, for handling this rather delicately. One might say, you ensured everyone's interests were well-served. Given the disposition of my guileful niece, that is."

The Duke kept his face neutral, which perplexed her greatly.

Aye, he must be a formidable card player, Marion thought, able to see right through the two of them. I ken Lord Harlowe wouldnae give this up so easily.

"Lord Harlowe. One does what is necessary for the sake of discretion, wouldn't you agree?" The Duke's eyes held a challenge, one that Lord Harlowe would do well to leave alone.

"And you, Marion dear. Who would have thought? From the Highlands to a duchess. You always were... full of surprises," Lady Harlowe said to shift the attention but the subtle venom in her tone was unmistakable. "Tell me, Marion, does the mountain air prepare one for the dizzying heights of London society?"

"I find that one adapts, aunt. And I do have His Grace to guide me... of course." She met Lady Harlowe's gaze. "I am sure ye understand the nuances of such swift transitions."

"Indeed, my dear. Indeed," Lady Harlowe murmured.



As the last of the guests departed, their carriages rumbled away into the fading afternoon. Verity approached Anselm then. Her expression was soft with relief but also burdened with concern.

"Anselm," she began hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked around to ensure they were truly alone. "Perhaps... perhaps I should stay with Aunt Eleanor for a while? She said it would be no trouble when I saw her just a few moments ago."

"You what? Why would you leave?"

"To give you and Marion some space. It might... ease things for both of you as you transition, and—"

"Absolutely not, Verity. This marriage is a necessary arrangement to salvage a situation that was quickly spiraling out of control. And you," he added, his voice firm, "are not leaving this house or my sight. Not when the gossips are still sharpening their claws, eager for their next victim. Your presence here, as my sister, is a shield."

"But... won't it be awkward?" Verity asked as her shoulders slumped. "For you and Marion, I mean. You are newlyweds, after all."

"The Duchess and I will adjust. We all have our parts to play."

"Is everything so calculated with you?"

"We all must do what we need to survive. Now, if you will excuse me, I have matters to attend to."

With a curt nod to his sister, Anselm retreated to his study.



"This way, Your Grace," Mrs. Clarke, the housekeeper, instructed Marion as she opened the set of grand doors adjoining the Duke's study. "The Duchess's chambers."

Beside her stood a young woman, Marion's newly assigned lady's maid.

- "I am Beth, Your Grace." The maid curtsied, and her voice trembled slightly. "At your service."
- "I am sure we will get along very well, lass," Marion offered warmly as they entered the room.
- Marion was happy to have the assistance of Mrs. Clarke and Beth with changing her clothing. The silk of her simple wedding gown was replaced by a delicate, crimson nightgown.
- She looked around, impressed by the lavish four poster bed in her new chambers, the roaring fire, and the tastefully ornate portraiture adorning the walls.

Yet, it was all so overwhelming.

Me weddin' night... Aye, I dinnae think of what I would do if I actually got to this point.

TX7 ith the glittering moonlight coming in through the window, Marion stood in her new bedchamber.

She was restless and rudderless. Indeed, the vastness of the Greystead London townhouse felt heavy and foreign. Every creak of the floorboards, every distant murmur from the street below, made her jump.

She knew what was expected of her tonight.

The consummation.

- Her breath hitched when a soft, yet decisive knock sounded at the adjoining door which led to the Duke's own chambers.
- She hesitated, before finally, softly, calling out, "Come in."
- The Duke entered and immediately his gaze swept over her. She watched him look at her from top to bottom, then up and down again and again. His eyes darkened as they absorbed every inch of her.
- Marion felt a blush creep up her neck, likely matching her sheer crimson gown, which left little to the imagination.
- "No need to blush, Duchess. I am not here for that." The Duke finally broke the silence.
- A wave of relief, sharp and unexpected, washed over her... which was quickly followed by a prickle of disappointment.
- Was it something about her manner of dress? Had she done something wrong?
- "Oh. Right, of course," she mumbled and opened the door wider for him to enter.
- "I came to speak about Verity," he said as he stepped into the room, halting just a few feet from her.. "Now that you're here, Duchess, I won't tolerate you leading her astray or pushing her toward choices that could ruin her standing. Under my roof, there's no room for recklessness. You will keep in line."
- Marion stiffened as her short-lived relief evaporated and was replaced by anger and hurt feelings.
- "So, this is again about me bein' a bad influence," she said as her voice grew tight with resentment. "I have heard it is *droch fhortan* to speak ill of yer wife on yer weddin' night."

- "I am stating a fact," he retorted, ignoring her Gaelic, as his eyes hardened. "Verity must be protected from scandal, and frankly, from herself. She is naïve and easily swayed. She is my responsibility and—"
- "Naive? Or simply yearnin' for a life that isn't dictated by yer rigid expectations?" Marion challenged as her Highland temper continuing to flare. "She deserves autonomy over her own future, Yer Grace. She shouldnae be punished for wantin' more than some title and idle duty. It isnae her fault she was born a woman and not a man."
- "This is none of your business, wife. You are overstepping," he replied, taking a step closer to her.
- "And ye, the illustrious Duke of Greystead, are controllin' everyone around ye!" She shot back, refusing to yield an inch. "Or at least constantly tryin' to! But ye end up suffocatin' those ye claim to protect; ye need to allow room for—"
- He stepped closer. "You speak of suffocation and punishment." His tone was steady, and his eyes never left hers. "But the truth is that ensuring the safety of others requires control. And sometimes, Duchess, what feels like chains is protection from falling apart."
- Marion's jaw tightened. "Protection? Or possession? Because I have seen yer sister since we returned here. She 'isnae alive here. She 'isnae happy."
- A flicker of something like pain or frustration crossed his face before he masked it with cold resolve.
- "Alive doesn't mean safe. I keep her safe. Even when it costs me."
- Her voice softened to barely a whisper. "Safe 'isnae enough. Nae for yer sister. Nae for me either."
- He closed the distance between them. They were not yet touching, but she could feel the heat of his body warming her own.
- "If you do not wish for safety, then, tell me, Duchess. What is it you want?" he asked.
- Marion gulped. His scent filled her nostrils, peat and smoke, pine and soap. It was intoxicating, the smell of him so close and so near, coupled with the heat radiating from his body.
- "Nae yer cold protection. Nae yer rules," she uttered.
- A flicker of something dark passed through his gaze. "Then what?"
- Marion's mind raced. The question stirred something deeper than she expected. She wanted a life shaped by her own choices, a life not weighed down by duty or obligation. A quiet existence filled with colors and canvases, where she could paint freely and breathe.
- She never imagined wanting more than that simple freedom.
- Yet here, in the charged space between them, something complicated and fierce pulled at her: a desire that unsettled every certainty she held. She couldn't deny the magnetic pull that drew her closer and threatened to unravel everything she thought she wanted.
- Her gaze rose to his lips. So close, so tempting...

She muttered, but words failed her, for she was far too intoxicated by this proximity.

She waited for his touch. Every nerve ending prickled to life as she felt the familiar pulse between her legs that crept up whenever they were close. How she longed for his touch there, much as she did not know what to expect.

Yet the Duke's eyes widened, as though a horrid realization had taken over him, and he suddenly pushed himself toward the adjoining door in a rush.

"I will sleep in my quarters," he said. "You are released from your marital duties."

"But..."

He walked out and shut the door between them before she could finish her sentence.

Marion stood there for a few moments.

What did I do wrong? She wondered as she walked over to the bed and tossed the covers over her aching head.

And how did I get here?

Chapter Eleven



he days following the wedding blurred into a new, bewildering routine for Marion.

Each morning, Mrs. Clarke brought new instructions on what was to be done. There were new duties on managing the household and the requisite assessing glances of the staff.

While she was raised properly, by her parents and the strict Reverand McCrae, life in Greystead Hall was new territory.

Eventually they will tire of me Scottish ways, and I will become plain to them, she prayed.

While Marion did not always enjoy the detailed directions Mrs. Clarke gave, she was immensely grateful. She had been with the family for many years and was a great resource for a fledgling, Scottish bride.

"Your Grace," Mrs. Clarke began one brisk morning after Marion felt slightly more settled in, "I have taken the liberty of sorting through the household accounts. There are a few discrepancies in the linen inventory that require your immediate attention, and the cook insists on ordering French truffles for Thursday's dinner. Now I am sure you know, His Grace prefers simpler fare. And then there's the matter of the stable hand... Young Thomas, who I am sure you also know about... He has a rather unfortunate tendency to misplace harnesses. Lord knows what he does with them!"

"Right. The truffles. And the harnesses. Is there anythin' else that requires my immediate attention, Mrs. Clarke?" she asked with a smile, even though she was still half asleep and fully in over her head.

Mrs. Clarke simply raised a silver tray in response presenting the delightful aroma of bergamot and black tea. Beside it was a small scone spread with fresh butter. Marion's lips watered at the sight as she wondered if there was any need this woman could not anticipate.



The clatter of dice and the murmur of clandestine conversations was a familiar backdrop in the gaming hell, which Anselm abhorred. But certain matters required him to venture into such places. He walked through the smoky room and made his way to a private suite.

Lord Fanthorpe was lounging on a velvet settee, and looking up as Anselm approached him.

At first, the poor sod must not have noticed it was Anselm. His face lit up with a particular expectation that quickly soured. He'd clearly been anticipating a more indulgent kind of company.

"Your Grace," he scoffed as he pushed to his feet and made it clear that his intent was to leave. "What are you doing here?

- Have you come to preach virtue at me? I think I will just make my way to a less-frequented—"
- "You are not leaving until we have spoken, Fanthorpe."
- "I would stay, but I am quite busy finding ways to spend my fortune in peace. Thank you very much though."
- Anselm blocked his path with a shift of his considerable bulk.
- "A moment of your time, Fanthorpe," he said. "Now."
- Despite his initial indignation, Fanthorpe nodded his head in agreement, and they settled at a small table away from the main hall. Somehow, it did not feel quite right having a manly conversation in the confines of a courtesan's bed or in the middle of the gambling area.
- "The way our families parted was, shall we say, unfortunate," Anselm began cooly, his gaze unwavering. "Amends must be made, and I understand that. For the sake of both our reputations."
- Fanthorpe scoffed and a sneer twisted his lips. "It is your sister's reputation that will suffer, Your Grace. She is the one who fled her wedding, after all. That is what angers me more than anything. It was such a disgraceful display!"
- Anselm nodded as he considered his next words carefully.
- "Foolish rumors, Fanthorpe, are insidious things," Anselm said, his tone deceptively mild. He drew a folded note from his breast pocket and placed it on the table between them with pointed precision. "One might hear of a certain marquess spending an undue amount of time in gaming hells, frittering away his inheritance on ladies of the night."
- Fanthorpe's face blanched.
- "Perhaps word could circulate about a proclivity for... even more unsavory habits," Anselm continued, his gaze sharp as a blade. "Or about a rather significant debt owed to certain characters who would not appreciate a quiet departure from London without recompense."
- The threat hung heavy in the air, thick as the tobacco smoke curling between them.
- "I had hoped the rumors were baseless," Anselm added coldly, tapping the note with a gloved finger. "But this left me in no doubt."
- Fanthorpe's face mottled with fury. His tired eyes bulged as he digested Anselm's words.
- "Are you threatening me? Are you daring to imply that I..." He slammed his fist on the table, rattling their drinks, and not finishing the thought.
- "Consider it a friendly suggestion," Anselm returned smoothly. His gaze never left Fanthorpe's.
- Anselm could smell the drink coming from him and see the redness in his tired eyes.
- "All this unpleasantness can be resolved of course," Anselm offered after taking a long sip of whisky. "The ton need only know that the wedding was mutually cancelled, and that both our families have parted ways amicably. A simple, dignified

statement approved by both parties. Nothing scandalous. Nothing that would invite further speculation. It remains simple."

With that, Anselm slid a folded piece of paper across the table. Fanthorpe eyed it suspiciously, then unfolded it to reveal a deed of money transfer. Anselm had made sure it was a sum so handsome that it would make his eyes widen.

And he had to fight a chuckle when Fanthorpe's eyes threatened to bulge out of their sockets.

"Also," Anselm added as he swirled his glass, "perhaps a lengthy holiday is in order? Wherever your heart desires. Say, a villa in Italy? An apartment in Paris? A place where the current gossip will not reach you. A place where you could rediscover your finances and reputation."

While Anselm embellished here and there, it was true Fanthorpe had been squandering his money on drink, gambling, and women.

Fanthorpe's eyes greedily devoured the sum. His exasperation melted away like an icy beverage on an island holiday. He clutched the paper to his chest before giving a silent nod confirming his acceptance.

"Italy, you say? The Tuscan sun sounds rather appealing now that you mention it. And the wine, of course is impeccable."

The men stood up then. But before Fanthorpe could make his escape, Anselm's voice cut through the clamor of the gaming hell one last time as he brought him close.

"Should I hear even a whisper of ill will about my sister's name... I am talking even a single, solitary word... You will regret it. Even if you aren't the one to say it. I assure you that my reach extends far beyond the gaming tables of London. Far beyond even the Tuscan sun. Are we clear?"

Fanthorpe merely nodded in silent promise. When Anselm released him, he practically bolted from the room.

Chapter Twelve

to the

olite society, my arse," Marion grumbled under her breath.

She had quickly discovered that she abhorred the gilded cage of polite society.

While she was no stranger to the *ton*, being a duchess was new territory and with it came unwanted scrutiny. She felt as though she was an ant under a magnifying glass because of the awful way the single young ladies treated her with a restrained disdain.

"I wonder how a wild creature like her managed to capture the heart of the Duke?" One girl whispered when Marion was passing down a London street on her way to the market one morning.

"It must be that she is so exotic," her companion retorted as they laughed, walking by her without greeting.

At Lady Danvers' seasonal dinner later that week, Marion was resplendent in an emerald gown with her hair drawn up in an elegant bun. Anselm had insisted that the family diamonds be brought out of the safe. She selected a delicate necklace with a teardrop which fell just between her full breasts.

Perhaps this will grab his attention, she thought as she prepared herself for the night's festivities.

"Your Grace," purred Lady Thistlewaite, fanning herself as she approached Marion over aperitifs. "Such a distinctive shade of green. Is it, perhaps, a tribute to your Highland heritage? Perhaps next time you should try tartan?"

"Indeed, Lady Thistlewaite. I find it rather suits my figure and complexion," Marion said, setting her shoulders back.

"Indeed," she responded in kind, looking up at Marion from behind her fan.

Aye, she is unsufferable as a wet tartan on a cool night! Why must I attend these frivolous performances?

Before Marion could deliver a satisfying retort, a man came to her side. It was a man she did not recognize, but she quickly realized his gaze was lingering on her hair, then her lips.

"Your Grace, what a beautiful necklace," the man said. His eyes drew immediately to her generous bosom. "You are a breath of fresh air in this rather stodgy company. I am Lord Drewble," he said as he planted a chaste kiss on her hand.

Aye, I ken that name. I can remember Verity tellin' me the stories of Lord Donald Drewble. I believe she said he was a man of questionable taste and unseemly morals.

- "Thank you very much, Lord Drewble," she said politely, as she slowly took her hand out of his grasp. "It is the family's."
- "You are a beautiful contrast to your husband. Much as I respect the Duke, I always found him rather dull," he whispered in her ear, liquor heavy on his breath. "You are positively wild and full of life."
- "Speakin' of the Duke, I really should be findin' His Grace."
- "That accent drives me wild," he slurred. He stepped so close that his breath, heavy with stale malt and cigar smoke, fouled the air around her. His words dripped with lechery as he leaned in. "Is it true what they say about Scottish women? That you're untamed, fiery... ripe for a man's taking? I've been wanting to see if the stories are true."
- Marion straightened. A cool smile played on her lips as she willed herself to remain composed despite his audaciousness. She could hardly believe her ears.
- "Lord Drewble, I assure ye, I am quite tame. I find that a strong will is often mistaken for wildness in circles such as these. If bein' me own person makes me wild, then I suppose I am. And I daenae take kindly to yer advances."
- "Oh, please, Your Grace! You are mistaking my English. I was merely trying to pay you a compliment," he purred. His eyes were wild as he looked at her. "It must be a difference in the meaning of our vernacular, you see."
- "I mistake nothin' and I can understand yer English just fine," she said as she lifted her chin. Her eyes dared him to respond.
- She would not cower to the likes of Lord Drewble or the passersby on the streets. She would not cower to anyone. She was her parents' daughter, and no one would dampen her spirit. Not anymore.
- So much had happened since they passed when she was fifteen. Reverend McCrae's household, the engagement to Gilton, the coolness of her aunt and uncle... and now this life with the Duke of Greystead.
- Suddenly, a presence came over them and they both froze in place. She could feel he was behind her before she even turned around.
- "Drewble," the Duke greeted cooly as his voice was devoid of warmth. "I believe my wife was just about to join me." His hand settled on Marion's lower back as he drew her closer to him.
- The pressure of his fingers, surprisingly firm, sent a jolt through Marion. How she had longed to feel his touch only compounded by his intervention in what was becoming an uncomfortable situation.
- "Ah, yes, of course, Your Grace. My apologies. I was merely admiring your wife's...charming spirit," he said as his eyes trailed one last time to her chest, earning a murderous look from her husband.
- He bowed awkwardly and retreated then, practically tripping over his own feet in his haste to get away.
- "Was that truly necessary, Yer Grace?" she asked, turning to face him. "I believe I was quite capable of handling Lord Drewble."
- The Duke's grip on her back tightened as he pulled her closer to him.
- "Indeed, Duchess... but I promised to ensure your safety. And I mean to make good on that vow."

After dinner was finished, which was pleasant enough and without issue, they retired to the drawing room for digestifs. The meal itself was elegant and well-planned, although Anselm did not care much for such over-the-top dishes as escargot and foie gras.

Lady Featherstone, a notorious gossip, cornered Anselm and Marion with her plump body before they could make their exit. She wore an ostentatious purple gown that ironically had feathers sewn throughout it amidst glittering beads. When the candlelight hit her just so, it could be blinding to the naked eye.

"My dear Duke, one must ask about your sister's most unfortunate situation. I felt so bad for her when I learned of the news. Such a pity about the Marquess of Fanthorpe. He was quite a catch I say. One heard such whispers, oh dreadful whispers, really. Was it true he ran off with an underage ballet dancer from the theater? Or perhaps it was a widowed countess in a remote part of Ireland—the one with the scar on her face?"

Anselm offered a calm smile. He would be ruffled by no one, let alone Lady Featherstone. He was prepared for such questions, although Lady Featherstone's flare for drama was unmatched.

"My lady, you do flatter me, attributing such scandalous melodrama to my most simple sister. It was, I assure you, a mutual understanding to go their separate ways. Sometimes, even the most promising unions simply aren't meant to be. We cannot all marry for love, like I have," he said, holding Marion close against his side to sell the story.

He did not miss how Marion leaned into it and the heat of her body warmed his own.

"Oh indeed," Lady Featherstone cooed.

"Lord Fanthorpe is a most agreeable fellow. But he realized his heart lay elsewhere and Verity, of course, respected that. She is a sensible girl. They parted as the fondest of friends."

He paused then. His gaze subtly swept the room, ensuring he had everyone's attention as he raised his voice.

"He is currently on a long overdue holiday, enjoying the sun in the Italy I believe. A well-deserved respite, after the rigorous demands of the Season. He even sent Verity a most delightful seashell just this morning. Such a thoughtful gesture, wouldn't you agree?"

His tone was so reasonable, so utterly convincing, that even Lady Featherstone, despite her insatiable appetite for scandal, seemed to accept it. In fact, she seemed to be hanging on his every word as he found himself adding details to the story.

Anselm looked at Marion then, who gave him the tiniest wink. His chest brimmed with pride as he stood straighter.

"Well, that does sound sensible and quite nice given the circumstances," Lady Featherstone said as she angled her body away from the couple, allowing a small space for them to sneak away from her clutches.

"Well, I do believe my Duchess needs a bit of fresh air," Anselm offered as he ushered Marion away.

"Yes, I do. Lovely seein' ye, Lady Featherstone. Yer dress is beautiful," she said as they walked away.

"My, my, your accent is as unique as the folks have been saying! Perhaps I should have been talking with you. You are such an...enchanting creature."

"Perhaps another time, Lady Featherstone," Anselm replied as he led Marion away from the crowd.

It seemed the *ton* had shifted its fascination from Verity's broken engagement to Marion, also known as the wild Scottish bride, in a matter of minutes.

As Anselm and Marion continued to circulate and guests enjoyed after dinner drinks while making polite conversation and introductions they found themselves surrounded by cruel whispers and lingering glances.

"Did you see her standing with her husband earlier as they talked with Lady Featherstone?" Lady Scrimshaw tutted to her husband. "Positively glued to him as if she were at a Highland fling! One would think she'd forgotten she was a duchess, not some lass at a barn raising. What has gotten into the man?"

"And her gown," Lady Nichols chimed in, her voice dripping with disdain as she sipped her champagne. "Such a vibrant shade of emerald! It practically screams attention. So, unlike His Grace's sister, the dear Lady Verity. She always dresses with such refined subtlety and her dresses are cut tastefully."

"Can we leave now?" Marion asked. Her blue eyes looked up at Anselm and made her plea. She knew he could overhear the conversations around them as well as she could.

"Very well, I too have had enough for one night," he said as he wrapped his arm around her and escorted her to their carriage.

She sat back against the velvet and looked out into the dark night up at the stars. Finally, there was some sense of peace.

They can talk all they like. I am the Duchess of Greystead now, much as they daenae like it.

Chapter Thirteen

the state

arion was relieved that each day became a little easier as she acclimated to the routines and demands of being a duchess. The most mysterious aspect, though, was her husband himself. She could learn about selecting menus and what patterns matched others, but the Duke was a most complex puzzle.

She found herself observing him and watching his controlled demeanor as he went about his days, trying to decipher what made him tick. He was a slave to work and nothing else. He took great pains to avoid her most days and only engaged in shared meals and social events that required the presence of *his wife*.

He was truly living up to their marriage in image only, for the sake of preventing scandal—just as he'd said. At least he was true to his word and she could depend on that. Marion knew she should be grateful given the choices she had, yet she couldn't help but want more.

One afternoon, while overseeing the ordering of spring linens with Mrs. Clarke, Marion ventured a question.

- "Mrs. Clarke," she began, her voice soft as her fingers traced the delicate embroidery on a pillowcase, "His Grace, well ye cannae deny that he carries such a burden. It is in his very eyes."
- "I suppose that is true," she responded. "Most men of his station do."
- "It is just that... well, he seems so very stern, so responsible for everythin' and everyone. Does he ever... relax? Read a book? Take a walk?"
- "You are observant, Your Grace. You will do well in this place, I know it. His Grace is a good man, but he had to grow up quite quickly. Took on a man's duties far earlier than most. It was after his parents passed, you see. Had to see to everything with Lady Verity so young." She paused then and her gaze grew distant.
- Swiftly, she shook her head, the produced the next linen sample to review.
- "What do ye mean by that, Mrs. Clarke? I daenae mean to pry. I just want to understand. I could ask Verity, but..."
- "Best not to dwell on past sorrows, especially in a house where new beginnings are so desperately needed."
- She gave Marion a warm, almost conspiratorial look and offered no more explanations. Mr. Lewis entered then.
- "Are you finished selecting the linens, Your Grace? I have received word that the order should be placed today," he said.

- "Yes, indeed," Marion sighed. "Let us go with the green pattern."
- "A wise choice," Mrs. Clarke said as Mr. Lewis took the samples and exited the room.
- Marion pressed no further on the matter of the Duke, and the meager details Mrs. Clarke had shared. Yet, she felt the hint of a deeper, untold story lingering in her mind. There was a puzzle piece she couldn't quite fit into the formidable image of the Duke.

And she would seek it out.

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- A few days later, Marion accompanied Verity to a small, charming bookshop in the center of London that she had not been to before. Marion browsed a collection of illustrated botanical prints for her quarters. Her fingers traced the delicate etchings of orchids and ferns.
- Verity, as if on cue, struck up a lively conversation with the bookseller. Her voice was animated as they discussed the merits of various novels which had become all the rage.
- "Oh, Mr. Hawthorne," Verity practically chirped. Her green eyes sparkled as she beamed at a captive audience. "You simply *must* tell me. Does the hero finally declare his undying love in chapter seventeen, or does he remain tragically brooding until the very last page?"
- "Lady Verity, for a true romantic, the brooding is half the pleasure, wouldn't you agree?" Mr. Hawthorne laughed.
- Marion listened idly to their conversation and had moved on from botanical prints to reference tomes, where she overheard a nearby conversation in the next aisle. She could tell there were two ladies even though they kept their voices hushed while discussing a newly arrived scandal sheet.
- These people are in a bookstore, and they are readin' that rubbish? What is wrong with these English lasses?
- "Did you hear the latest?" one whispered. "That poor Miss Albright. Ruined, absolutely ruined! And all because of a rogue's promises and a clandestine assignation with a local clergyman!"
- Marion's stomach clenched. The *ton's* appetite for ruin was insatiable and she had no taste for it.
- It made her long for the simplicity of Strathcairn and the rolling green hills of Scotland as well as the misty mountains that surrounded her home.
- Her heart hummed with a bit of hope. Perhaps, after they'd finally escaped the focused attentions of the *ton*, they would be able to visit.

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- A few streets away, Anselm had his own meeting. He stepped into a private room in a quiet London club. The air was thick with the familiar scents of aged leather and pipe smoke. It brought back memories: visiting this very place with his father, long before illness had stolen the man's mind and strength.
- Anselm pushed the memory aside and focused on the task at hand.

He crossed the room and greeted the man he had come to see: a sharp-eyed Bow Street Runner, dressed in plain clothes. Anselm knew him through political circles. He was renowned for his discretion.

And tonight, that was exactly what Anselm required.

"Daniels."

"Your Grace," Daniels nodded while offering no further pleasantries.

"I have a delicate matter, Daniels," Anselm began. "And I think you are just the man to help me untangle it."

He recounted the threatening notes Marion had received in Strathcairn, omitting the specifics of the wedding day drama as they seemed irrelevant to his search. He preferred Daniels to have only the facts, so that details wouldn't color his perception.

"These notes were quite unsettling for my wife. Delivered to her before she arrived in London. Luckily, there has been no contact since she has been in my household."

"Understood, what of it now then?"

"I want this threat removed. Permanently, discreetly, and as quickly as possible," he said as he inconspicuously pushed a heavy purse across the table. The leather sagged under the weight of gold. "This is for your silence and swift action. And for any expenses you might incur. It should be more than worth your trouble."

Daniels weighed the purse as a faint smile played on his lips before he shook his head.

"Understood, Your Grace. Such threats require immediate attention, and I can understand wanting certainty. A lady's peace of mind is the key to a happy marriage...or so I am told. Never did find a lady willing to put up with the likes of me." He paused, considering the facts he had learned and piecing them together. "Perhaps a trip to Strathcairn would yield answers? I always say the simplest answer is usually the right one."

Anselm shook his head. "Too much time. The source of these notes must be connected to the man Marion was meant to marry, Lord Gilton. I want you to investigate him."

"Shouldn't be too hard."

"Tail him. Find out about his habits and associates. Any lovers, any enemies. Whoever this vengeful mistress is, she'll be wherever Gilton is. And he is bound to return to London eventually. He wouldn't miss the Season for long. Not with his proclivities, which I am sure you have heard of."

Daniels nodded and his expression turned grim. "It will be done discretely, Your Grace. I will return with a report as soon as I have something concrete. Rest assured, I am quite adept at uncovering hidden truths. I will leave no stone unturned."

Daniels rose then, bowed, and slipped out of the room as silently as he'd entered. The drink he had ordered for appearances remained untouched.

Anselm grabbed the drink and drained it as he watched the man go and a steely resolve settled over him.

He was determined to handle this situation and protect Marion from unseen danger without burdening her with details. She did not need to know the depths of the ugliness he was willing to uncover or the sheer depravity of some men.

Chapter Fourteen

hat is that?" Marion tilted her head towards her bedchamber's door.

The soft tap on it was so faint, she almost dismissed it as a trick of the wind or a creak in the hall.

But then it came again a little more insistently. It could not have been Anselm, as he would have come through the adjoining door.

She rose from her vanity, where she'd been idly braiding her hair, and opened the door a crack.

Verity stood there, flushed and breathless. Her green eyes were alight and her dark hair a mess of curls around her head.

"Marion! You will never guess!" Verity started, practically vibrating as she bounced in place. "The bookseller, he sent me the address of a publisher! Mr. Hawthorne, bless his heart! I sent them a sample of my manuscript, just a few chapters, and... and they have offered to print it! They want to print it!"

She clapped her hands together as tears of joy streamed down her flushed cheeks.

"Verity, that is wonderful!"

"We must go now! To the printing press! I must deliver the rest of the manuscript before they change their minds. They said they'd have a night foreman there, just for a few hours. There is no time to lose!"

"Now?" Marion's voice was laced with disbelief. It was so late and the household had already settled into its nightly slumber. A quick glance at the grandfather clock confirmed it was well past midnight. "Verity, that is impossible. It is the middle of the night. It is too risky. Are ye sure this was a real offer? What if someone sees us? Aye, what if Anselm finds out..."

Verity's jaw set as a familiar stubbornness crept into her eyes.

"I am going, Marion. With or without you. I will not let this opportunity slip away. Not after everything I have been through to get here. Not after... after Lord Fanthorpe."

"I understand, but—"

"This is my chance, Marion, my only chance to prove I am more than just... a disappointed bride or some foolish woman. I am just as good as any man out there! If I were a man, you wouldn't be giving me such trouble!" Her eyes, though still bright with excitement, were dark and desperate.

"We wouldnae be havin' this conversation if you were a man...It is not yer fault that things are so hard for us women, but we have to be smart."

A cold knot formed in Marion's stomach. She knew that look. Verity would go without her. And if she went alone, the risks would be tenfold.

Her heart heavy, Marion sighed.

"Aye... this is an important opportunity. Very well. But we go together. And ye promise me, Verity, no more impulsive dashes into the night. This is it. The first and last one! From now on, ye do business durin' daylight."

"I promise!" Verity practically sang, already pulling Marion towards the back staircase as she reached for her cloak.

With the complicity of a trusted footman, a young man named Thomas who was recently promoted from stable duties despite his constant losing of saddles, they made their way out.

Thomas seemed to view the Duke's household with a detached amusement and he displayed a fondness for Verity, so they slipped out of the townhouse.

The London night air was cool and crisp, carrying the distant rumble of carriages. Before long they found themselves in a dimly lit alleyway behind a bustling printing press with the smell of ink and paper hanging in the air. Marion felt the whole experience was invigorating and so she surrendered to the excitement.

Verity, pulling a thick roll of parchment from beneath her cloak, handed it over to a grizzled night foreman under a false name.

"Eliza Jane Bennett," Verity whispered. Her voice was barely audible over the clatter of machinery emanating from the large building. "For Mr. Michael Murray!"

The foreman merely grunted. He snatched the manuscript and slipped it into a large, dusty bin. Marion remained cautious, looking around the dark alley to ensure their safety. Her senses heightened. Every shadow seemed to hold a lurking threat. But somehow, as if a guardian angel was looking over them, nothing went awry.

In fact, the transaction was swifter than Marion expected.

As quickly as they had left, they slipped back through the quiet streets. Within thirty minutes' time, they had returned home without even a blip of an incident.

"Promise me, Marion. Promise you will not tell Anselm. Not a word. He'll never understand. He'll lock me away and throw away the key," Verity whispered as she stood outside of Marion's bedchamber.

Marion hesitated, the lie already tasted bitter on her tongue. How she loathed lying... Yet the fervent hope in Verity's eyes swayed her.

She saw not a mischievous girl, but a woman desperate for control over her own destiny.

Just like me.

"I promise ye," Marion assured her, already hating the words as she spoke them. "But Verity, ye must be more careful than that. This is a dangerous city and we cannae have the *poukha* takin' ye."

"I will, I will! Thank you, Marion. Thank you for everything. You understand me completely and your support means so very much." Verity squeezed her hand as a dazzling smile lit up her face before she danced into the dark hallway and back to her own room.

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Later that night, as Marion unlaced the back of her gown, a soft knock came from the adjoining door.

Anselm's door.

Her heart leaped into her throat. She froze and a nervous flutter in her stomach unsettled her. He had not knocked on that door since their first night as man and wife.

What could he want at this hour?

The door creaked open, and Anselm stepped silently into the room.

"Duchess," he greeted as he entered.

Marion's eyes widened.

He stood shirtless. The faint flicker of candlelight cast shadows across the hard planes of his chest. His skin was bronzed and smooth over muscle and his broad shoulders tapered to a lean, defined waist. Her gaze drifted lower, lingering on the line of his trousers, which were slung low on his hips, revealing the sculpted lines of his abdomen.

Marion's breath caught as heat coiled low in her belly. She knew she should look away, but the sight of him, bare and unguarded, unsettled her in ways she hadn't expected. There was nothing soft about him. Only power and restraint, carved into every muscle, every angle.

And all of it belonged to her husband.

Then, her clock began to tick, bringing her back into the present moment. She was mortified at her gawking, and she whirled around, clutching the fabric of her nightgown to her chest to cover herself up.

"Yer G-Grace!" she stammered. Her voice was a humiliated squeak as her cheeks flushed hot. "Ye... ye ought to put somethin' on! It is... it is improper to just stumble into someone's room like this!"

"Blushing, Duchess?" he asked as a taunting chuckle rumbled from his chest. "I did not take you for such a modest creature. Especially not after your late-night excursions."

She risked a glance over her shoulder as her pulse quickened, the heat of guilt prickling at her skin. He was still there, standing silent as a statue near the doorway, arms crossed, his posture deceptively relaxed.

But it was his eyes that set her nerves alight.

They weren't amused. They weren't furious either. They were cool, steady, watching her with unsettling precision, as if he were cataloguing every detail: the faint flush on her cheeks, the hurried breath.

Marion swallowed hard.

His gaze roved over her slowly, thoroughly, but not in a manner meant to fluster her—not this time. No, this was something sharper. She felt stripped bare under the weight of it, as though he were quietly measuring how much of the truth he already possessed... and how much more he intended to drag from her lips.

The sheer restraint of him unsettled her more than any burst of anger would have.

- "What are ye doin' here really?" she demanded. Her voice regained some of its fire as she ignored his implication. "Ye havenae' bothered to come by since our weddin' night. In fact, ye hardly bother with me at all unless it is some required event."
- "I heard movement," he replied, taking a slow step closer to her. The air in the room seemed to thicken with his presence and the fire in the hearth danced as wildly as her heartbeat. "Thought I would check on my wife."
- His eyes swept over her. A possessive glint in their depths made her skin prickle. She knew that look, *craved* that look.
- "Well, wh-why—" She stammered.
- "Why are you dressed? Or rather, why are you just undressing now? Having just returned from some assignation? While I know I said our marriage was in name only, I did not take you for such *activities*."
- Marion fumbled for an explanation that would make sense. Her mind raced as she desperately searched for a plausible lie.
- "I... I was quite thirsty, ye see. I wanted some water and dinnae wish to bother the staff at such a late hour. The kitchen is... quite far... so I put on me clothes and I—"
- Anselm's smirk widened, a truly infuriating sight as she was trying her best. She knew he would be angrier if he truly expected she was out with another man, yet he was enjoying the tease.
- "You went to rather great lengths for a glass of water, didn't you? Sneaking about in the dead of night, ... And through a house full of sleeping servants and guards? Most resourceful, Duchess."
- "I am accustomed to modesty," she retorted, clutching her nightgown tighter, as if the thin fabric could shield her from his burning gaze. "Havin' lived with a clergyman, as ye well know! Aye, Reverend McCrae and his wife were most strict."
- His emerald eyes were sharp and knowing.
- "You do not strike me as modest at all, Duchess," he said, his gaze deliberately sweeping over her. "Not with the way your gowns cling so deliciously to your figure. Quite daring, really—especially when it isn't even the current fashion."
- His voice dropped, losing its teasing edge, and becoming gravely serious as he licked his lips.
- "Are you going to tell me the truth now? Or shall I detail precisely where you and Verity snuck off to tonight?"
- Marion's eyes widened again.

"Oh, I have had staff watching Verity since our arrival in London. Not to imprison her, Marion, but to *protect* her. And by extension, to protect you, now that you are involved in her games. I was merely waiting for your return before addressing this matter."

A hot wave of fury surged through Marion, pushing aside her embarrassment and her attraction to the infuriating man in front of her.

"Ye had us watched? How dare ye! That is a breach of privacy! Verity is nae a child, nor am I."

"And sneaking out in the dead of night, lying to me, and putting yourselves at risk is superior, then? Listen to yourself speak," he countered, his voice rising and the anger he was wielding matching her own. "This is London, not some quiet Scottish village where you can wander about unprotected! You could have been robbed, abducted, or even worse... I dare not think of it. You put both yourself and my sister at risk."

Marion's cheeks burned, but she refused to back down. "We were careful! We went nowhere dangerous, and we harmed no one. Ye speak of risk, but what life is worth livin' if we're stifled? Ye daenae trust us to know our own minds! Ye'd rather have us caged like birds. Kept safe, aye, but miserable."

His gaze burned into her, his breath hard and fast. "Better caged than dead," he ground out, his voice low and sharp.

She lifted her chin, refusing to yield. "I would rather risk freedom than live half a life at the mercy of yer control."

His eyes darkened, something far more dangerous than anger flickering there. He leaned in, his voice a low rasp, rich with meaning.

"You know nothing about being at my mercy, Duchess."

"Then enlighten me, Yer Grace," she shot back.

A muscle twitched in his jaw. His gaze locked on hers, molten and unreadable.

He didn't speak at once—he moved.

Slowly, deliberately, he closed the space between them, step by step, until her back met the carved wooden post of the bed. The cool wood pressed between her shoulder blades. He caged her there with one arm braced above her against the bedpost and his body crowding hers.

His breath was warm against her cheek as he leaned forward.

"It means," he said, his voice like velvet dragged over steel, "knowing you'd surrender every inch of yourself... not because I demand it, but because you wouldn't be able to help yourself."

Her pulse thundered in her ears. Her breath became shallow as his words slid over her skin.

"It means knowing exactly how to unravel you," he went on as his lips just barely grazed the shell of her ear, "slowly. Thoroughly. Until there's nothing left of your defiance but a plea."

She shuddered—whether from fury or longing, she no longer knew.

"That's what you want, isn't it, Marion?" he murmured. His lips now brushed hers, faint as a ghost's touch. "To find out what my mercy really feels like?"

The air crackled, thick with their heated argument, but beneath it, a different heat burned. His bare chest was so close she could feel the soap, peat and pine radiating from him and mixing with her own scent. She inhaled the smell of his skin that she craved with every fiber of her being. The musky aroma sent a shiver through her.

Their eyes locked and blazed with defiance and passion. They would never see eye to eye and yet something joined them so close together. The connection was undeniable. They were magnetic and frenetic all at once.

Anselm lowered his head. His eyes dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes. She knew he was seeking unspoken permission and challenging her. He would not take her unwillingly.

Heavens.

She wished she could control his effect on her. If only the crushing attraction could subside, just a bit, then she could get her bearings. She was practically humming with need as she longed to be filled by him in ways she couldn't understand but only feel.

"Anselm..." His first name tumbled out of her lips—the name she'd heard Verity use so comfortably, but she'd never dared to utter herself.

But now... she wanted to speak his name, to feel his skin on hers, his lips on hers...

The Duke—no, *Anselm*—bit his lip, as though he were in pain.

"Marion," he whispered back, and her whole body sang, as though it'd been expecting his voice for years.

And, at last, Anselm pulled her close and claimed her lips with his.

It was a fierce, possessive kiss, unyielding and searing, as if he were claiming what was already his. His lips slanted over hers, parting them with effortless command, deepening the kiss with a slow, deliberate sweep of his tongue. He explored her mouth with devastating skill. Every movement was purposeful as he left no part of her untouched.

It was a kiss born of all the heat and conflict that had simmered between them—hungry, consuming, and utterly inescapable.

They were fire itself.

Anselm tasted dark and enthralling and he created a dangerous current she felt herself drowning in willingly. She wanted him to drown her, to take her and claim her. His hand tangled in her long brown hair, pulling her closer to him. With every kiss he deepened the contact, intensifying the kiss.

"Little temptress..." She heard him growling between kisses.

Her hands clutched at his bare arms and her fingers dug into his taut biceps. He lowered his lips to her throat as she felt him inhaling her deep.

Yet even as her body melted beneath his touch, a sharp thought pierced through the haze of longing.

How could she trust this man?

The Duke kissed her fiercely. Just like everything else he owned, Anselm held her in his unrelenting grip. He was a man who watched, who commanded and decided. He tangled her in his web even now, with lips that tempted and hands that bound.

Desire and doubt warred within her. She wanted him, craved him, but wanting was not the same as trusting.

And in that instant, as if sensing the fracture within herself, he pulled away—abrupt, breathless—as though the same flame scorching her had finally burned him too.

They looked at each other for a few moments with their chests heaving.

Stunned silence enveloped the room and it was broken only by the frantic sound of their breathing.

Anselm stared at her. His green eyes were dark as night and his jaw was tight. She watched as a muscle twitched in his cheek, behind his beard.

"I... Pardon me, Duchess. I... I did not..." He stumbled over his words for the first time since she'd met him.

Quickly, he cleared his throat, straightening his back as he did.

"This was a mistake on my part, Duchess. I apologize," he said formally, and a coldness spread over Marion's chest, like the first winter breeze after the warmest summer.

"Ye daenae need to..." She started but he cleared his throat again, stopping her from continuing.

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry. Goodnight," he rasped. His voice was rough as he turned abruptly and disappeared into his own room.

The click of the connecting door made Marion wince.

Chapter Fifteen

to the

The following morning, as Marion heard the household just beginning to stir below downstairs, a soft knock came from the adjoining door.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and she pulled her covers to her chin.

This cannae be happenin'? What in God's name is he doin' knockin' on me door this time?

She was still in her nightgown and her chocolate locks were as wild as a tumbleweed.

Another knock came, more insistent, and she jumped to her feet. She fumbled for her robe, putting it on and tying it clumsily around her waist as the door opened.

Anselm stepped in, and Marion instantly noticed how impeccably dressed and coiffed he was. His cravat was tied perfectly around his neck where it sat below his freshly trimmed beard. Second, his expression was devoid of any lingering heat from the night before. He looked as if nothing had transpired between them.

He was ever the Duke, calm and businesslike, which only rattled her nerves more.

"Good morning, Duchess. I trust that you slept well?"

Marion's flush deepened as she fumbled awkwardly for words.

Aye, sleep? That is a funny thought.

"Good mornin', Yer Grace. I slept perfectly well. Thank ye," she answered, a small cough escaping her dry throat as they were her first words of the day. "Is there somethin' ye require of me this mornin'?"

He moved further into the room with his hands clasped behind his back. He paced toward the oversized window that looked down upon the London streets. He kept his back to her as he set his hands on the windowsill.

"Only a moment of your time. About last night's..."

"Yes?" Marion answered with a small gulp. Anticipation tingled all over her body.

Perhaps he wants to apologize for the sudden coldness from last night. To start over. More steadily this time.

- "The excursion, with my sister." He turned and his green eyes met hers. She was surprised to see that his expression was sharp and unwavering.
- "Oh. Yes... that." Marion frowned, trailing off as she wrung her hands together.
- Ye're an idiot, Marion.
- "You will not tell Verity that I know about her visit to the printing press. I would like that detail to remain between us," he went on.
- Marion blinked. "Ye... ye want me to lie to her? How could I do that to one of me dearest friends?"
- "It is not a lie, surely. Think of it as a small omission," he corrected coolly. "Like the one you tried with me last night. But yes, I want you to keep this information to yourself."
- Marion felt a shiver go down her spine at the mention of last night, even if the Duke had skirted over their... intimate moment. She had a feeling that whenever she'd recall that night from now on, her cheeks would turn positively red.
- "Why?" Still, Marion pressed. "Why would ye keep such a thing from her? I daenae understand why ye wouldnae just tell her."
- "It is not your concern, Duchess. I only need you to give me your word—"
- "This is somethin' that gives her joy, some purpose beyond the constraints of this life ye have imposed on her. Do ye nae wish to let her share this with ye? Admittedly, she may not react positively to the spying part, but at least ye'll—"
- "I do not wish to alarm her," he explained, his expression tight. "Nor do I wish to stifle her ambitions. Much as I question them, they... As you said, they seem to give her something to strive for. And Verity needs that."
- He paused, and the silence that followed was not empty but thick and expectant. A hush seemed to press upon Marion's chest. She could feel the unsaid words circling and waiting to be spoken.
- "She has been through enough," the Duke finally added. "I want her to feel safe. Not like a prisoner in her own home."
- "That is fair," she said softly.
- Then he pursed his lips. "But I also need to ensure she doesn't act rashly again. The Fanthorpe business was smoothed over well enough, but not without effort. We cannot go through that again."
- "I'm gathering that there's more to ye words, husband."
- He tilted his head and the tiniest curve appeared near the corner of his lip.
- She arched an eyebrow to motion for him to continue.
- He hesitated at first. "Verity trusts you. Far more than she trusts anyone else in this house. Certainly, more than she trusts me." He spoke through clenched teeth.
- Marion could sense he resented that. She'd known Verity for far less time than him. And yet, Verity seemed to turn to her, and

- not her brother. She could understand how that would cost her husband, but a big part of her understood Verity too, as he offered his sister such little freedom.
- "That puts you in a unique position. The position to be useful," he clarified.
- "Daenae tell me ye want me to *spy* on her." Marion's jaw tightened as she considered just what he was asking of her.
- "I want you to keep an eye on her, that is all. To ensure her safety and to guide her when needed. Not to spy. She is young, naive, and fiercely independent to a fault. It is a volatile combination, and London is not a forgiving city for young women with such tendencies, especially those of her station."
- "Oh, so now I am not a bad influence on her?" She crossed her arms over her chest.
- His face fell and he bit his lip while eyeing her carefully.
- "This is an opportunity for you to prove me wrong, then," he retorted.
- She narrowed her eyes at him.
- Heavens, the nerve of this man.
- "I daenae have to prove anything to anyone, Yer Grace. Nae even you," she said, mustering all her courage to lift her chin.
- He was attractive, yes, and he'd turned her legs into honey the night before, but she would not give him the satisfaction of backing down.
- Anselm studied her for another moment. The morning light danced in his eyes which were now illuminated by... amusement?
- This scoundrel. He finds me amusing, does he?
- A moment later, he took a step closer and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Fine. Then take this as a request, Marion. If Verity were to be compromised... or worse, if this publishing scheme were to lead her into some unsavory circle of characters, the consequences would be catastrophic. For her, for this family, for everything I have worked to protect. Even you."
- The sound of her name on his tongue caressed the back of her head, sending warm tingles down her spine.
- She couldn't comprehend this man. One moment, he was infuriating, and the next he made her feel this way.
- "And ye truly think I am yer solution to all that?" Marion challenged. "Tis a tall order, Yer Grace."
- "I will have her watched either way, Marion," he stated plainly, using her name once again as though he'd done so for years. "Surely, it is better if her friend, the woman she confides in, is the one to keep her safe. I think it is a fair trade, for what has been done to help you."
- Marion found herself sighing. No matter how much she wished to challenge him back, she was indebted to him. Indebted to Verity. And the rational part of her knew he was right. She cared for Verity very much, but she could get carried away with excitement. Yes, last night they'd been lucky, but if this publishing business went on, their luck would eventually run out.

"We both want what's best for Verity, do we not? To see her happy, fulfilled, and safe," Anselm offered after a long silence.

Marion stared at him and nodded in agreement. "Aye. Very well," she conceded. "I will see that no harm comes to Verity."

He gave a curt nod. He turned and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

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"Anselm," Emmanuel called as he looked up from his paper and waved.

Anselm walked over. His tall body was rigid as he sat straight as an arrow in the leather armchair beside Emmanuel. Cigar smoke and hushed conversations filled the room of the private club where they most often met. The place was lit by green lamps and meager sunlight that escaped from the drawn curtains.

"You look as if you have run around London twice, and it is not even lunch," Emmanuel said as he eyed him. "What has you so unsettled, my friend? Haven't things been smoothed over with your sister?"

Anselm stroked his beard and sighed in relief as a waiter brought him a steaming hot cup of coffee, which he slurped.

"It is still Verity, of course. She found herself a publisher through a connection she made with that local bookseller she frequents so much. Slipped out in the middle of the damn night like some banshee... and with the Duchess's assistance."

Emmanuel eye's darkened with concern. "In the middle of the night? Why would they ever do that? Much as propriety is not my cup of tea, that is outright dangerous."

"To deliver a manuscript, apparently."

Emmanuel whistled as he set down his newspaper on the side table and gave Anselm his full attention.

"A publisher? Well, I will be damned. That is quite impressive for a lady. She has ambition, that sister of yours. And if her conversation is any indication of her written word, she has talent as well. Is this publisher willing to print her work?"

"It seems so," Anselm grumbled.

"Is she using a pseudonym?"

"Naturally."

"But you still seem perturbed. This isn't a bad thing, surely? As long as she's not using her real name, this is a safe outlet for her energies. A way for her to remain occupied and happy as things blow over after the Fanthorpe fiasco. So, what is the matter?"

Anselm raked a hand through his hair. "It is not the publishing; it is the slipping out part that worries me. This complete disregard for her safety and any sense of propriety, our family, and her name. She could have been seen. Compromised..."

"Yes, I can see how that would be—"

"What if someone followed her? What if someone already knows she was out cavorting at that hour and twists the facts?" He

looked around paranoidly, ensuring no one was listening to them. "I cannot stomach the thought of her name in the scandal sheets ever again."

He'd recalled how he'd found the note she'd left behind on her bed the day she'd gone missing. Anselm had to run to Fanthorpe first. They concocted a believable reason to stall the wedding, then he'd run around London searching for her, only to have the scandal sheets note her 'curious disappearance.' He'd had to go to each and every scandal sheet owner and bribe them in exchange for their silence.

Even then, people read the initial sheets. They'd speculated, whispered, and come up with ridiculous rumors about his little sister. Heavens, he'd worked so hard to keep her safe from the harshness of the world, and she'd gone running away on her own.

And even after he'd promptly brought her back and covered the damage of her vanishing, she'd gone ahead and snuck out in the dead of night.

How was he going to protect her when she seemed to thwart all his efforts?

- "Anselm, the whole world is not out to get you nor watching you at all hours of the day and night," Emmanuel said gently, pulling him out of his spiraling thoughts. "Most people do not care about Verity's movements. You worry too much. You need to relax and spend time with that pretty wife of yours—"
- "I do not worry *enough*," Anselm snapped.
- "Yes, you do, my friend," Emmanuel argued. "I know the burden of Verity's care fell squarely on your shoulders after your parents' death, Anselm. You were barely a man yourself. But that doesn't mean that—"
- "I will not fail Verity. Not again," he ground out. "This city seeks out innocence with a voracious thirst. It has a way of twisting everything good into something ugly."
- Somehow, his grim words conjured the image of Marion in his mind. All she had endured. The threats against her, the appalling betrothal to Gilton.

Gilton.

- "What is it, old boy? Is something else troubling you? I can see it in your eyes," Emmanuel urged.
- "I have not ascertained the source of the threats the Duchess received in Scotland," he said while shaking his head.
- "Has she received more?"
- "No, but I resent not knowing the source and having things accounted for."
- "Well, knowing you this many years, I suppose I can understand that. What is your plan then? I know you have one," Emmanuel said as he crossed his leg and leaned in toward his friend.
- Anselm glanced around them, ensuring no eyes or ears were on them, and he replied in whisper, "I have someone discreetly investigating the matter, but it is a slower process than I care for."
- "Well, patience has never been part of your virtues."

Anselm glared at him. "Look who speaks of virtue."

Emmanuel chuckled. "Oh, I am highly aware I possess no virtues, my friend. I mostly rely on yours to get by."

"There'll come a moment when you'll have to unearth your own virtues from wherever you've buried them, my friend," Anselm said, taking a long swig from his now-cooled coffee.

"Ever the wise one, Your Grace. Here's to that remote and distant hour on the horizon. Assuming I remember where I hid my virtues by then," Emmanuel replied with a smirk as he raised his glass to meet Anselm's with a soft clink.

Chapter Sixteen



nselm, why does it feel like I've stepped into a geriatric convention?" Verity complained, trailing behind him and Marion as they ascended the grand stairs to the Whipple Theatre.

"Do try to behave, sister," Anselm said. There was a sharp edge in his voice. "The *ton* expects you to be seen and to look the part, especially after all you've been through. Can you manage that feat?"

"We shall see," Verity replied with a sly wink. "Thankfully, Marion's here to keep me from making a spectacle of myself. Aren't you, Marion?"

Marion caught Anselm's eye. "Only if ye promise nae to drag me into yer mischief," she quipped. "How much trouble can one possibly find at the theatre?"

"Plenty, if my sister's involved," Anselm said dryly. "But let's leave the dramatics to the professionals on stage, shall we?"

The lobby air hummed with the requisite hushed gossip and flirtation of London society. Anselm took Marion's arm, playing the role of the dutiful husband, as Verity glided gracefully beside them and flitted amongst various conversations before the play was to begin.

He felt a subtle shift in the room's atmosphere as eyes landed on the three of them. He loathed such attention, yet this particular feeling was not an unwelcome one.

The usual flock of unmarried women, their eyes alight with opportunity at the sight of an eligible Duke, no longer followed him. He had first noticed it when they dined at Lord Guildbeck's home just the other week and this evening's engagement confirmed it.

Similarly, the speculative glances from older ladies were less sharp and replaced by something akin to approval.

"They are a handsome couple," Lady Featherstone whispered to a guest Anselm did not recognize as they passed by, just loud enough for him to hear. "They do seem to be getting along quite well."

Perhaps there are more uses for my Duchess than I first realized, he thought as he looked at her then.

Her rich chocolate hair was swept into an elegant twist, leaving her slender neck exposed except for the soft tendrils that framed her face. The deep burgundy gown fit her perfectly. The fabric was a bold contrast to the clear blue of her eyes which were framed by dark lashes.

Others in the room watched her for her beauty, which was unmistakable, but he saw something else. There was a spark in her

gaze and a liveliness that no fine gown or jewels could ever create. It shimmered in her eyes and in the faint, knowing curve of her smile. She possessed a rare, untamed spirit that drew him in far more than her polished elegance.

She was radiant. And worse—he couldn't look away.

Indeed, Marion was a shield and more effective than any curt dismissal he had often given to unwanted attention in public. As they continued to circulate, he did not miss the appreciative nods of several influential gentlemen as well. They were the type of men who valued propriety above all else, and now he was one of them, a married man.

The three of them soon found Emmanuel, who had just arrived alone to join them in their box seats.

His friend bowed deeply to Marion as his eyes twinkled. "Your Grace, I must say it is an absolute pleasure to see you at such an event. Anselm speaks... *most fondly* of you."

Marion offered a bright smile at his words, and Anselm did not miss the way her cerulean eyes gleamed in the room's ambient candlelight.

"You surprise me, Lord Wrotham," she said as she cast a glance at Anselm, who merely raised a brow.

"Do I?" Emmanuel chuckled. "Well, pardon me, Your Grace, but any man who has a wife like you would sing your praises. I am compelled to, as well. May I say you look radiant in that color?"

"Watch yourself, friend," Anselm grunted. His chest itched angrily at the blatant flirting.

Marion merely smiled. "Thank ye, Lord Wrotham. Please ignore me husband. He seems to have an occasional aversion to pleasantness."

Anselm blinked in surprise. Marion only smirked at him.

The little minx.

Emmanuel chuckled. "My pleasure, Your Grace. And don't worry, I am fully aware of His Grace's *several* aversions." Then, he turned his attention to Verity. His eyes roved over her purple dress. "And Lady Verity, you look absolutely stunning this evening, yourself. Please tell me, what scandalous novel are you devouring as of late?"

Verity let out a dramatic sigh. "Oh, please, Lord Wrotham. My reading habits are hardly scandalous. Unless you count novels that actually involve emotion. I daresay they offer more insight into the human heart than all your dreary political treatises combined. You men do love to drone on about policy and power, yet somehow never grasp what truly matters." She arched a brow and her smile grew wicked. "No wonder your debates last all night. None of you know how to end things properly."

"Ah, I'll admit I've been known to read a treatise now and then. Dutifully, as any respectable man must," Emmanuel said while flashing her a knowing grin. "But between us, I'm more of a Shakespeare man. Plenty of scandal and romance there, wouldn't you agree? Perhaps we're not quite so different after all."

Verity arched a brow and her lips curled into a sly smile. "Shakespeare? How very predictable. Every man fancies himself a philosopher once he's quoted *Romeo and Juliet*. You'd do better with Mary Wollstonecraft or Radcliffe. Someone with a bit of spine."

Emmanuel let out a low laugh that indicated he was clearly delighted. "Ah, novels and manifestos... that is dangerous territory.

- Perhaps you might lend me one of your scandalous books? For educational purposes, of course."
- Anselm's jaw tightened, though his face remained composed. He had seen enough of Emmanuel's antics over the years to recognize the direction this was headed.
- There was a glint in his friend's eye and a teasing edge to his tone. It was harmless, perhaps, but not with his sister. Not with Verity. He had no intention of letting such flirtation take root. Absolutely not.
- So, before Verity could reply, Anselm cut in, keeping his tone formal and clipped. "I would advise you to mind your tongue around my unmarried sister, Lord Wrotham. Some sentiments are best kept to oneself."
- Emmanuel gave an elegant bow, though the faint amusement in his smile lingered. "My apologies, Your Grace. Merely broadening my horizons, as any man of the world should."
- Anselm's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as the barest hint of a smirk tugging at his mouth. "Some might say you've already seen far too much of the world, Emmanuel."
- At that, his friend only laughed. "You know me too well, old boy."
- "I think they are goin' to begin," Marion offered with a smile.
- "Agreed," Anselm replied, as they settled in to watch the evening's performance of *The Innkeeper of Abbeville*.
- At first, Marion's attention was wholly on the stage. The actors were lively, the set grand, and she found herself genuinely caught up in the story.
- But then she felt it. Heat prickled at her skin. She didn't need to glance sideways to know.
- Anselm was watching her.
- Carefully, as the scene unfolded before them, she shifted just enough to catch him in the act. His gaze was fixed, direct, heavy, and wholly on her.
- He looked away the moment her eyes met his, turning toward the stage with an expression of perfect indifference.
- Marion couldn't help herself. Her words were just a feathered tease against his ear as she leaned in and whispered, "I saw ye staring, Yer Grace."
- "Did you?" he replied under his breath. His tone was infuriatingly smooth and he managed it without even glancing her way. "I was merely watching the performance."
- "Ye were watching me," she countered softly as her smile curved with mischief.
- His only reply was to shift subtly so that his hand settled on her thigh beneath the cover of her gown and the box's low rail. The weight of it stole the breath from her lungs. Firm and unapologetic, his thumb traced the edge of her garter with scandalous confidence.
- "Behave, Duchess," he murmured, voice like smoke against her skin.

Her heart pounded as heat rushed through her. Every nerve was set alight with the forbidden touch. She knew she ought to pull away, but instead, she sat frozen in the heady tension, unable to think of anything beyond the pressure of his hand and the nearness of his breath.

"Or what?" she managed to retort as she stared straight into his eyes.

Anselm's pupils dilated. The darkness took over the deep lush forests of his irises as he squeezed her leg. Then, slowly, deliberately, he slid his hand up her thigh so that his fingers traced a line between them over her gown.

Her breath hitched.

A startled warmth bloomed low in her belly, where his fingers pressed gently yet insistently. She hadn't known such a sensation could exist—so sudden, so sharp, yet intoxicating in its mystery.

Her fingers clenched lightly in her lap as a flush crept up her neck and cheeks, quickening her pulse.

"Testing me again, little temptress?" he drawled into her ear. "Careful. I might test you in return. See how long you last before you're begging for release."

Marion bit her lip. She wasn't sure what to think. Every nerve felt alive and electric. It was as if he had ignited something deep inside her she never knew was waiting. A tremble rose unbidden and her body ached in a way she didn't understand but found impossible to resist.

Then—

"A thousand pardons," Emmanuel's voice broke in, pitched just low enough to remain between the four of them. He didn't even look their way as he spoke because he was lounging back lazily. "Hate to interrupt whatever riveting conversation is happening in this corner, but you might like to know that half the pit is watching our box."

Marion flushed scarlet as her breath caught.

Anselm, unruffled, withdrew his hand. He fixed Emmanuel with a slow, warning glare.

"Perhaps you should take a stroll during intermission," Emmanuel added, winking toward them with blatant mischief.

Marion barely kept her composure as she turned her attention back to the stage.

Beside her, Anselm sat as though nothing at all had happened.

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"I am relieved it is intermission," Emmanuel said as they rose from their seats. His tone was light but it carried an undercurrent of impatience. "I need to stretch my legs. Will you all join me for a turn about the lobby?"

At first, Marion noticed how he nudged Anselm discreetly, and moved his eyebrows up conspiratorially.

Marion blushed again as her skin tingled at the memory of her husband's touch.

Anselm only glared at the marquess, who took a step back as a show of playful defeat. Then, Marion caught the way his gaze lingered, just for a beat, on Verity.

Hm, she thought to herself.

They filed out of the box and descended to the grand foyer. The air was thick with perfume, candle smoke, and the hum of voices. Elegant couples strolled beneath glittering chandeliers and gathered near refreshment tables along the marble staircases.

Anselm did not utter a word to her. Nor did he spare her a glance. He acted as though nothing had happened.

Marion clenched her fists.

What an infuriating lump of granite, she thought to herself.

It wasn't long before a cluster of young men took swift notice of Verity. They began circling, drawn by her beauty and status, leaving their intentions barely concealed.

Marion noticed Emmanuel stiffen slightly beside her. The movement was so slight that others wouldn't have caught it, but she did. His easy demeanor remained in place, but his shoulders set just enough to betray that flicker of irritation. He watched the scene unfold with narrowed eyes, though he said nothing.

Anselm, standing nearby, observed the gathering suitors with his usual composed detachment. He didn't look pleased, but there was a certain resignation about him, as though he'd accepted this as the inevitable cost of presenting his sister to society.

One particularly eager young lord stepped forward, practically falling over himself in haste.

"Lady Verity," he gushed, eyes wide with admiration. "Your gown is... quite exquisite tonight. It perfectly matches the... the, ah... the sparkle in your enchanting eyes!"

Marion fought back a smile as she watched from just a step away while Verity's expression remained poised and utterly unbothered.

Verity tilted her head slightly. "Thank you, Lord Millis. It is simply a violet dress. As for my eyes..." Her gaze flicked to the nearest candelabrum, then back to him with a faint, amused curve of her lips. "I assure you, it is only the candlelight playing tricks."

Millis flushed but went on. "Ah, well, candlelight or no, you seem to outshine every other lady here tonight," he blurted, trying to recover his footing.

Verity's eyes gleamed with amusement. "How curious," she murmured, her tone sweet but merciless, "that I've somehow never noticed your dazzling brilliance until tonight, Lord Millis. Perhaps the candlelight is playing tricks on us both."

Millis opened and shut his mouth, utterly disarmed.

Before he could find words again, Verity dipped into a graceful curtsy. "If you would excuse me."

She turned away and glided back toward Marion without so much as a backward glance, leaving Millis blinking in her wake.

Marion stifled a laugh, but her amusement faded when she noticed Emmanuel watching the scene, clearly pleased. He wore the faintest smile and a glimmer of admiration flickered in his eyes. The stiffness in his shoulders had eased, though he said nothing.

He caught Marion's gaze then, and though he masked it quickly with his usual charm, the look he'd given Verity lingered in her mind.

Anselm, meanwhile, only gave a small shake of his head, clearly exasperated with his sister.

Then, through the throng of audience members, Marion watched Lord and Lady Harlowe approach her. She noted how their faces stretched into sickly-sweet smiles at the sight of her.

How had I nae noticed how fake they were before? And now that I am married to a duke, they care for me?

"My dearest niece!" Lady Harlowe trilled while extending a hand to Marion as if she had all the love in the world for her. "How absolutely *delightful* to see you! I was just saying to your uncle... well it is just wonderful how you have settled into London society. Your parents would be pleased. We always knew you had such... *potential*. Such grace, given your background."

Lord Harlowe beamed as Anselm approached them.

"Indeed, Your Grace! We were quite heartbroken when the unfortunate misunderstanding with Lord Gilton occurred. But now, seeing you here, one realizes that some things are simply meant to be! We always held such high hopes for you, dear Marion."

Dear Marion, she scoffed. This is the same man who would have sent me to certain death all to be married off if it were nae for...

Anselm.

Marion's polite smile lingered as she glanced up at her husband who stood at her side with the practiced ease of a man born to command a room.

Despite their strained bond, there was no denying the striking cut of him, the crisp lines of his dark coat, the gleam of his cufflinks catching the candlelight, and the sharp sweep of his hair slicked back with impeccable care. But it was his eyes that caught her most. They were green and clear and their usual coolness was softened by the golden glow around them.

Her pulse betrayed her then, quickening as she took him in. There was something unnerving about how easily he unsettled her, how a man so composed could stir something so unsteady in her without even trying.

How irritating, that her body hadn't yet learned to be as guarded as her heart.

"Yer words are very kind," she said as she wrapped her arm around his. "I am most happy with His Grace."

Anselm wrapped his other arm around her, a clear signal of possession that sent a thrill through Marion. She felt her cheeks flush at his proximity.

"Lord Harlowe, Lady Harlowe. A pleasure, as always," he said politely. "Marion, I believe Lady Danvers wished to speak with you about the charity bazaar. Come, we mustn't keep her waiting."

- His voice, though polite, was sharp and for that, Marion set her cheek on his broad shoulder in silent thanks.
- "Of course, Your Grace," Lady Harlowe simpered, her eyes flicking towards Marion. "Until next time, then, dear niece. Perhaps you will invite us to your ducal home soon."
- "Indeed," Anselm said as he guided Marion away.
- "They would sell their own maithers for a higher rung on the social ladder, ye ken," Marion whispered in his ear.
- "I assure you that I have no intention of affording them such opportunities for advancement," he told her. "They have not earned it."
- Then, he offered a rare, fleeting smile as she looked up at him.
- "Good," she replied, and a warmth spread over her chest as she drank him in.
- "Now, let us find my sister and Emmanuel and head back to our seats," he said as they looked around for them.

Chapter Seventeen



"Not yet!" her friend whispered back, though not nearly quiet enough to escape Marion's notice. "But I *must* get my hands on it. I hardly slept last night thinking about it."

"I finished it just this morning," the first girl declared, practically glowing. "It's utterly scandalous—but in the *best* way. I brought it in my carriage; I couldn't bear to leave it behind."

Marion couldn't help but tilt her head subtly. Her curiosity was piqued despite herself.

"I heard the author is anonymous," the second girl said in a conspiratorial hush. "Well, she uses a pseudonym, but no one knows who she really is."

"Eliza Jane Bennet," the first one sighed, savoring the name like forbidden fruit. "Isn't that delicious? And *The Highland Holiday*, oh, you've never read anything so thrilling. Highlanders and romance and danger..."

Marion's breath caught as the name of the title hit her like a gust of icy wind.

She barely registered the shopkeeper chiming in from behind the counter, gushing about how *everyone* was talking about it, or the sudden hush that fell when they realized she was standing nearby.

Marion had already turned away because her pulse thundered in her ears. Without a word, she strode from the shop and lifted her skirts as she hurried toward her waiting carriage.

Eliza Jane Bennet.

She could scarcely breathe the name.

Her fingers trembled as she rapped the carriage door.

"Home," she ordered. Her voice grew tight as the footman rushed to obey.

She didn't dare look back.

Verity!

In the quiet sanctuary of Marion's bedchamber, she saw the novel lying on her dressing table with a ribbon around it.

A single note was written at the bottom.

For Marion, I could not have done it without you.

Verity entered without knocking. Her eyes shone with pride as she rushed to her friend. They embraced tightly.

"Verity, it's magnificent, truly. When I was at the new boutique today, it was all anyone could talk about! I cannae wait to start reading it."

"I'm so excited, but it's a little overwhelming. It's not like I can just blurt out that it's me, can I?" She clasped her hands nervously. "How do I tell the world I am Eliza Jane Bennet?"

"Well, I feel privileged to know the secret."

"I heard Lady Willis herself declared it the most scandalous work she's read in years. But Marion, you must promise me: not a word to Anselm. He'd never allow it if he knew. He'd ship me off to a convent."

"Me lips are sealed," Marion promised..

"Thank you, Marion. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"And I daenae ken what I'd do without ye, me friend. At least we daenae have to think about that." Marion gave her one last, warm hug.

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Anselm displayed masterful control whenever *The Highland Holiday* was mentioned, which was a frequent occurrence.

Each time, he responded with a deliberate nonchalance: a slight nod, a deft change of topic, or a wry comment on the triviality of such gossip-filled novels. Behind his composed facade, he took a quiet, almost private satisfaction in the way Verity would bite back a smile or laugh softly, betraying her amusement despite herself.

If she truly understood how much I knew...

One evening at dinner, Verity brought up the book again and her voice was light while her eyes glinted with mischief.

"It's the talk of the *ton*, Anselm. Surely, you've heard the whispers?"

He maintained his impassive mask, delicately cutting into his asparagus. "A mere diversion for the fairer sex, I imagine," he said evenly, his tone carrying an edge of dry condescension.

Marion exchanged a glance with Verity. The shared amusement was barely concealed behind their polite smiles.

- Verity leaned in, teasing. "You're quite cutting, brother. How does Marion tolerate such a curmudgeon?"
- Marion's lips twitched with a smile. "It's a tryin' task, but I do me best," she replied as her eyes flicked briefly to Anselm's.
- For a moment, Anselm's guarded expression softened and a hint of warmth touched his eyes.
- "A fiery spirit, that Highland lass," he admitted quietly. "I hear there's a character in *The Highland Holiday* with bright blue eyes and dark chocolate hair. Curious coincidence, don't you think?"
- Verity rose gracefully, composing herself with the poise of a woman well used to navigating such delicate moments.
- "If you'll excuse me, I have pressing matters to attend to," she said in a calm voice.

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- A few days later, under a cloudless blue sky, the trio attended a garden party at the sprawling estate of the Duke of Richmond.
- The air was heavy with the scent of roses and freshly cut grass as only a blissful spring day can provide. The sounds of tinkling teacups and the conversations were pleasant against the soft quartet that played under a tent.
- "Have you read *The Highland Holiday*?" a giggling young lady asked another while fanning herself vigorously. "The hero is so frightfully brooding, and the heroine... so utterly spirited! One can only dream of such a passionate affair!"
- "I hope I can find a Highlander myself one day!" Her friend said back, giggling as she devoured a *petit four*.
- Verity was wearing a simple, light pink gown, which matched her complexion as she beamed, taking in the conversation.
- Marion watched how animated she was, chatting freely with a small group of admirers. Surprisingly, it was mostly younger gentlemen drawn to her vivacious spirit as they gathered around her. Marion walked over, as Anselm was involved in a business conversation that bored her, listening from the periphery.
- "Lady Verity," one young lord started, a hopeful glint in his eye. "Do-do-do you find such grand romantic gestures believable? A duke, riding across the country for his love?"
- Verity merely smiled politely and raised her eyebrow.
- "I imagine a true heart, Lord Roughton, knows no bounds."
- "Have you known such love?" A young girl asked.
- "Well, it is aspirational but love such as that is rare. So, statistically speaking, no."
- Marion walked away then to enjoy a quiet moment turning about the grounds when an old friend caught her eye. The sight brought a smile to her face that pushed her forward in a rush to meet her.
- "Catriona! And Yer Grace," she exclaimed. Her face lit up as she embraced her dear friend. "Oh, sweet Lydia! And the twins! Ye are all here!"

Marion noted that Catriona was radiant. Motherhood looked quite good on her. It had not been long since her own nuptials.

Catriona held one swaddled infant, Sarah, while Lydia held Elizabeth. They were both sleeping soundly and peacefully as only babies can be.

- "Marion, darlin'!" Catriona squeezed her. "It is so good to see ye! And how are ye doin' with the duties of bein' a duchess? I swear, it is more exhaustin' than a full day's huntin', which ye ken I would prefer. I ken ye would too!"
- "Especially when you have to carry these little bundles everywhere," Richard chuckled as he gently kissed the top of Elizabeth's head.
- "Marion, I hear there's a new novel causing quite a stir," Lydia said as she smiled at her. "A Scottish romance..."
- "Yes, I may have heard of such a book," Marion answered with a winked and grinned back at her.
- "Do you know where I may get a copy?"
- "Just focus on Elizabeth, for now," Richard ordered as he shook his head. "There will be time enough for such things when the babies are grown."
- Suddenly, a ripple went through the crowd and a hushed silence filled the yard.
- Heads turned to see what the cause of the commotion was. Marion watched Lord Mansfield, a notorious rake, stumble backward, nearly toppling a vase of peonies. She brought her hands to her face to stifle her laughter, which quickly evaporated when she saw the reason for the disturbance.

Lord Gilton.

He slithered confidently through the parting guests like a snake in the grass.

He was impeccably dressed in crimson, which felt a bit out of place at a garden party and despite the fineness of the clothing. He had a faint, almost sickening smile gracing his lips as his eyes landed right on her. He walked with a determined gait in her direction, paying no mind to the frozen glances he left in his wake. Marion felt a cold dread creep up her spine and her breath caught in her throat.

Aye, I have dreaded this moment, much as I ken it would come...

- Just as Gilton reached her, Anselm, seemingly out of nowhere, was by Marion's side. She felt his presence surround her like a wall. She felt safe. His hand instinctively settled on the small of her back. It served as a grounding weight that sent a sense of calm flooding through her.
- "Ah, Your Graces! I wanted to personally extend my sincerest congratulations on your nuptials. A most expeditious and unexpected union." He took her hand and planted a cool kiss on it.
- Anselm's body tightened in response, which Marion could feel in every fiber of her being. She simply nodded.
- "One must admit, seeing you both now, you are remarkably well-matched. A truly handsome couple," he said as he extended a hand to Anselm then. "Truly."

"Indeed," Anselm answered cooly.

With a slight bow, Gilton inclined his head again towards Marion. "Your Grace, you are simply flourishing. London clearly agrees with you, perhaps more than the Highlands."

"Lord Gilton," Anselm stated as he reached out to shake his hand out of obligation. "A pleasant surprise."

Marion managed another stiff nod as words finally came to her.

"Lord Gilton," she said softly. Her voice was tight and barely above a whisper. "Thank ye for yer kind words."

The weight of Anselm's hand on her back was her only anchor to reality as all that she had endured barreled through her mind in rapid fire.

The notes...thank heavens I dinnae marry him...

"Indeed," Gilton replied, his eyes lingering on Marion's face.

Anselm's grip on Marion's back tightened and she arched into it.

"Well, I shall not monopolize your time further. Enjoy the festivities."

With that, he turned and melted back into the crowd, leaving a shadow in his wake.

Anselm's hand lingered on Marion's back, a feeling she savored. The warmth of his palm was palpable even through her dress. It was a welcome comfort after the sight of Gilton, which brought back the trauma that had led her to Anselm.

She assumed he would pull away, yet he just stood there. Marion felt her heart thrumming against her ribs as she turned to face him.

Then, as if snapping out of a trance, Anselm's hand lifted, and he looked around the party as if he had forgotten something.

"We should circulate, Marion," he said, his voice clipped. "There are others we must greet."

"Of course."

He turned and walked away, leaving Marion alone as she looked around for Verity or Catriona. She was in desperate need of company and distraction from all men.

Finally, she saw they were seated at a table enjoying refreshments. As she walked toward them, she found herself placing her hand on the small of her back and soaking in the residual warmth left by her husband's touch.

When will I feel that touch again? She wondered, as the familiar longing filled her and she looked over at him across the lawn.

Chapter Eighteen

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ome on now," Verity called as they hurried to the next stall. "Each vendor is more exciting than the next! Do you not agree?"

The vibrant chaos of the market was a welcome distraction.

From Anselm. From Gilton. From everything.

- She savored the scent of fresh bread mingling with exotic spices and looked at the vibrant hues of flower stalls with eager eyes as her lady's maid trailed behind them.
- "Oh, Marion, look here!" Verity cried, pulling her towards a small, unassuming stall tucked between a fruit stand and a ribbon seller. "This is simply perfect!"
- "Oh my," Marion sighed. "It has been a long time since I set me eyes on that."
- On display was an exquisite art set. Marion ran her fingers over the gleaming wooden box, with an intricately carved floral pattern on the top. She opened it to see an array of watercolors, brushes, and smooth, heavy papers. The colors gleamed in the sunlight. Her fingers ached to use the brushes, but she shut the cover and looked away.
- Her mind instantly went to Reverand McCrae and the fateful day he had taken her supplies from her. He was frustrated that she was not taking his sermons more seriously and thought it prudent to remove any distractions. She remembered the painful tug in her heart as he hauled her canvases away.
- "It is beautiful, isn't it?" Verity murmured, already reaching for it. "You simply must have it. Imagine what you could create with these!"
- Marion pulled her hand back and looked at the price, which was scrawled on a small card. It was exorbitant.
- "No," she said firmly, shaking her head from side to side. "It is far too expensive, Verity. Out of the question."
- "But it is gorgeous!" Verity insisted, turning the box over in her hands as she held it out. "And Anselm has more money than he knows what to do with! You know you are the Duchess of Greystead. You can afford it!"
- "I cannae do this," Marion sighed. "I wasnae raised to be frivolous."
- Her gaze became distant, as she fixed on some phantom mark.

"One doesnae simply indulge in frivolities. It is a sinful act that only breeds selfishness. Ye would do well to focus on compliance so that ye might learn to obey yer future husband."

Her mind then flitted to her uncle, who in some ways was even worse. She thought of his warnings, urging her to be a good wife if she wanted a secure future in the world. When she had asked for a paint set to replace the one she had taken from her, he'd chastised her.

No spending your husband's hard-earned monies flippantly, child. You must learn your place.

Verity sighed dramatically as she handed the box to the vendor. "Oh, Marion! For goodness' sake, look at those blues! Like a Scottish loch at dawn!"

Marion shook her head, though her heart ached with longing. A part of her knew that her friend was right, and yet...

"No, Verity. Put it down. We should go."

With a final, lingering glance at the art set, she steered Verity away from the stall.

Marion guided them through the thronging market, her hand steady on Verity's arm despite the turmoil in her chest, the maid still obediently following.

As the noise faded behind them, Verity's voice broke the silence. "So... My friend. I've been meaning to ask you..."

"Yes, darlin'?" Marion raised an eyebrow.

Verity glanced back at the lady's maid behind them. "Would you mind giving us some privacy, dear?"

The maid curtsied. "Of course, Lady Verity," she said and curtsied at Marion too. "Your Grace."

Once the maid was several paces behind and out of earshot, Verity leaned in closer.

"Are you content?" she asked. "I mean, in your marriage with my brother."

Marion's lips pressed into a careful smile. She forced calm into her tone. "I am content, Verity. I have ye, and me future is secure."

Verity gazed at her with searching and curious eyes. "And Anselm? Does he treat you well?"

Marion's cheeks warmed beneath the question.

She nodded, keeping her voice steady. "He's a good husband."

"But..." Verity pressed, a flicker of apprehension in her gaze, "well, although he's my brother, you're my friend, too. Does he... *treat* you well?" Her voice dropped slightly. Even though Verity was repeating the question it was heavier and more suggestive this time.

Marion's eyes widened, and she cleared her throat with a faint flush. "Verity, that's hardly proper to ask."

Verity blinked incredulously. "Since when do you care about what's proper? You're the one who fled your wedding and ended up in my brother's carriage."

Marion drew in a sharp breath.. "There's a comportment I must observe on occasion. No matter how much I might resent it."

Verity smirked. "I write novels. I know what married—or unmarried—couples get up to. We're friends, Marion. You can tell me. Well, not with the explicit bits, mind, or I'll be sick. After all, Anselm's my brother."

Marion bit the inside of her cheek, desperate to hide the truth that they had not yet consummated the marriage.

She shifted and allowed her eyes to flick away. "He's proper, as ye ken."

Verity rolled her eyes. "Marion. Come on."

She sighed. "We need time. Time to become familiar with one another."

Verity's grin widened. "Well, you seemed pretty familiar in the theatre box."

Marion's eyes shot open in surprise.

"What, you thought that Emmanuel only noticed? Do you take me for a complete idiot?" Verity tilted her head to the side.

"No! I didn't... I just..." Marion stumbled over her words.

Aye, she should've expected that her observant friend would have noticed the tension between her and Anselm. She only hoped she hadn't seen him put his hand...

Blast it!

Her cheeks burned.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I am simply letting you know that I have eyes, Marion," Verity said softly. "It's quite all right. I only hope you and my brother keep your... nocturnal activities to the hours when I'm fast asleep."

"Verity!"

Her friend laughed, unabashed. "There's no need to be coy with me." Then she grew serious. "I only want you to be happy. You did this for me, after all."

Marion shook her head. "Ye should never feel guilty, Verity. I am happy. I am here with you, my dearest friend. As for Anselm... well, he needs a bit more work."

Verity chuckled knowingly. "Don't I know it."

Marion smiled faintly and changed the subject. "What are you working on now?"

Verity's eyes gleamed as she spoke. "It's about a lady promised to a cold earl but in love with a scandalous poet. She risks

everything. There's secret letters, stolen meetings, and our heroine must follow her heart instead of duty."

Marion nodded, though her thoughts began to wander. Beneath the surface of Verity's fiction, she sensed whispers of their own tangled lives woven quietly into the pages.

Her mind drifted involuntarily to Anselm, the man who held her future but also guarded his own heart fiercely.

She swallowed the ache that followed, pushing down the restless longing that stirred whenever she thought of him.

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A few days later, Marion returned to her bedchamber after a particularly grueling morning of household tasks.

On her dressing table, where only moments before a vase of fresh roses stood, now sat a familiar, gleaming wooden box.

The art set...

Her heart gave a startled leap as she walked over to it. Attached to it, with a simple piece of ribbon was a folded note.

She picked it up and her fingers trembled slightly. She hated notes, especially after all she endured with Gilton.

The handwriting was distinctively Anselm's, as bold and decisive as the man himself.

Duchess,

An impractical expense, perhaps, but a necessary one. I believe you mentioned a need for a particular shade of blue.

Anselm

A flush spread to Marion's cheeks. He had listened when she had mentioned the color during dinner a few days ago after she and Verity had returned from their excursion to the market. He had noticed she wanted a hobby, something else to occupy her days than the duties of being his Duchess.

He had remembered and Verity had sweetly intervened.

It was a small gesture yet filled with kindness. She turned on her heel in search of him and found him in his study, immersed in a stack of ledgers.

"Yer Grace," Marion began as she entered with a soft knock. "I... I wanted to thank ye for the art set. It was very thoughtful of ye. Ye really shouldnae have..."

Anselm merely glanced up. His expression was neutral as he set down the ledgers.

"Nonsense. I heard you admired it. And one requires tools for one's pursuits." He waved a dismissive hand, already looking back at his papers. "Verity hasn't gotten up to much trouble, and for that, I thank you."

"Still," Marion pressed. "It means a great deal. Thank ye, Anselm."

He offered a slight nod, and Marion watched the faint tightening at the corners of his mouth, hinting at a curbed smile.

"Indeed. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have pressing matters to attend to."

Marion smiled and left him to his work without another word.

He may feign indifference, but I ken better.

Armed with her new art set, Marion wasted no time getting to work. She enlisted her maid, Beth, to help her to transform one of the townhouse's smaller, sun-drenched drawing rooms on the second floor into a private studio.

Easels appeared as if by magic, canvases were stretched, and the rich scent of paint began to mingle with the usual fragrance of beeswax polish and potpourri that represented the Greystead townhouse.

It was her sanctuary, a place where she could escape the pressures of being a duchess and slip away from her husband.

Much as she sought refuge in her room, it was difficult to relax knowing he was just on the other side of the door, and yet so far away.

She was able to really lose herself in the swirling colors of her imagination in her studio all while recapturing a part of herself she thought long lost.

She thought of her parents and the blissful memories of her childhood while painting the landscapes surrounding Strathcairn Hall.

She smiled when she saw that the azure blue in the kit had captured the nearby loch's hue so well.

Aye, I will get used to this...

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One drizzly afternoon, seeking quiet after a particularly trying social call, Marion walked into the drawing room to lose herself in a novel, only to see there was someone in the corner chair.

Thinking it might be Verity, she stepped in and walked to the windows to throw open the curtains to cast better light.

And then she froze.

Anselm.

He was seated in her favorite armchair and utterly absorbed by something. A single candle was on the side table and in his hands, held at an angle that hid the title, was a book. He was so engrossed, he had not heard her, nor noticed her drawing the curtains.

Marion's eyes narrowed as she inched closer. She recognized the subtle, slightly worn edges of the binding and the distinct font. It was certainly *The Highland Holiday*.

I cannae believe me eyes. He is readin' Verity's novel! This is too good to be true.

A small, mischievous smile played on Marion's lips. She cleared her throat and created a soft, deliberate sound as she walked toward him. She enjoyed startling him, not often having the chance with all of his calculations.

Anselm stiffened instantly. His shoulders tensed as he looked up at her. With a startled huff, he snapped the book shut and shoved it beneath the cushion of the armchair with all the casualness of a bull.

"Duchess!" he exclaimed, his voice gruff and eyes wide as he looked at her. "What are you... what are you doing in here?"

Marion leaned against the wall by the ornate fireplace, crossing her arms, while her smile widened.

"Well, Yer Grace. I was just comin' here to do some readin' meself. Though it appears I have interrupted a rather private moment." She raised a brow and her gaze pointedly dropped to where the book had been stuffed. "Engrossed in some ledgers, I presume? I ken you usually only have time for work matters."

Anselm cleared his throat while looking at the floor. "Indeed. It is a weighty tome on agricultural reform, which I plan to use to...um, well, yes. It is tremendously stimulating. But quite boring for you, I am sure." He coughed again as he shifted in his seat.

"Of course," Marion drawled, stepping closer to him and savoring the subtle shift in power. "Perhaps you should try somethin' new, like a darin' tale on the complexities of love? Something with... hm, perhaps a Scottish settin' is more to your likin'?"

Anselm spluttered while rising to his feet and tucking the book underneath his arm.

Oh, I like seein' him squirm.

"Do not be ridiculous, Marion."

Marion grinned as he walked out of the room, not pressing the matter further.

But Marion noticed that he'd taken Verity's book with him.

She sat down on the warm chair and the residual heat of his body spread through her own. Her eyes twinkled at the thought of him reading his sister's work, let alone something with such insight into the human heart, and the ways of love.

Perhaps there will be some hope for us yet...

Chapter Nineteen

the state

eady for this one?" Verity whispered as she poked her head into Marion's bedroom door and waved a manuscript in the air.

"I have finished my next novella! This one is a tale of forbidden love. I cannot wait another minute. We must get this to the printing press immediately. There is no time to waste!"

Marion sighed. Apprehension and amusement at her friend's intrusion mingled within her.

It was another moonless night. She planned to spend it curled up in bed, waiting to see if there would be a soft tap at the adjoining door to Anselm's quarters.

Instead, Verity stepped in, breaking her from her thoughts, and donning a dark cloak pulled tightly around her shoulders.

Much as Marion worried about their late-night outings, she was happy for her friend and all she had achieved as an authoress. The whole manner of it was most exciting and provided a welcome distraction from her own love life. Or lack thereof.

"Forbidden love? I'm eager to read it! Very well, we shall go. Aye, but we must be swift!"

- They navigated the quiet streets of London with relative ease. The city's usual commotion was dimmed by the late hour. The printing press was only a few blocks away from their townhouse and its windows glowed faintly as they neared.
- Verity skipped over to the sleepy night foreman, whom Marion recognized from the last time, and handed over the rolled manuscript.
- Marion's ears perked up when she caught a faint shuffling from the alleyway behind them. Her head snapped at the sound, putting her senses on high alert as her hair stood on end.
- "Did ye hear that noise?" she whispered. She walked right up to Verity and wrapped a hand instinctively and protectively around her arm. "It was too loud to be a rat or some other animal. Do ye think some *poukha* is followin' us?"

Verity waved a dismissive hand as she continued to work with the foreman.

- "I am serious, Verity," Marion pressed, continuing to pull gently on her arm. "Come now, lass!"
- "It was probably just the wind, Marion! Don't be so superstitious! Besides, I am almost done." She beamed at the foreman, who merely grunted back as they waited for his supervisor to sign off on the delivery.

- "All set, miss," the foreman announced.
- "Until next time," Verity said as they walked away and headed down the empty streets back toward their carriage.
- Next time...aye, what am I goin' to do with this lass?
- As they walked on in silence, Marion couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that twisted in her gut.
- "Verity, this cannae go on. Sneakin' out and riskin' exposure after all ye have been through. Aye, it is settled. Ye must tell Anselm. What if somethin' happened and he dinnae ken where we are?"
- "Anselm? Are you serious, Marion?" Verity asked, pausing in the street and turning to face her. "We have already talked about this. You know I simply cannot do that."
- "Perhaps he'll understand yer passion for writin' and need for this independence. That way there will be no secrets or shadows between the two of ye."
- "Understand what I am doing?" She shook her head. "No, Marion. You do not know him as well as I do. He sees the world as it is, without imagination. All he knows is duty. He's a true straight arrow. He could never understand the art nor the heart of what I put on paper. It is everything I am!"
- "But Verity—"
- "No. He would only see the risks, the potential scandal, and the impropriety of it all. That is all he cares about," she said. Her green eyes cast down on the cobblestones.
- "He cares for yer safety. He just wants to protect ye," Marion pressed. "I ken it is important to him."
- "Protect, yes," Verity agreed. "Do you know a good synonym for *protect*? It's *control*. It is all the same with Anselm. He'd lock me away in the countryside if he thought it would keep me safe, but he knows I would just find a way to escape again."
- "Oh, Verity!"
- "Do not feel bad for poor little me. Things have been so much better since I returned from Scotland and since you came into our lives," she said, grabbing Marion's hands in hers. "I am sorry, but I cannot tell him. Not now, not ever."
- She pulled her hands away and wrapped the cloak tighter around her shoulders .Verity walked a few paces ahead, where Marion could see their carriage waiting.

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- The stillness of the townhouse felt suffocating to Marion as she laid awake in her plush bed.
- She stared up at the ceiling. The shadows danced around in swirls as she imagined they were different shapes.
- Sleep is out of the question, she thought as her mind buzzed. Between that startlin' noise in the alley and Verity's reaction to me request she confide in her brother...

She pushed the covers down and sat up, reaching for her robe at the nearby table. She put it on, got up, and walked down the hall with a single candle in her hand. She was not sure where she was wandering to when she suddenly found herself drawn to the studio.

She lit several more candles once she was inside her sanctuary. Their flickering flames cast dancing silhouettes on the canvases she had been working on that week.

The familiar scent of paint was a balm to her restless spirit. She picked up a brush and began working.

She was lost in the rhythmic sweep of her brush as it moved up and down on the fresh canvas like a dance. She felt like she was a young girl again, safe in her parents' home and able to just focus on her art.

Just as she was about to select her next color, a soft creak in the floorboards startled her.

She took a deep, steadying breath as she heard someone enter. She inhaled the masculine scent of pine and fine soap.

Anselm.

She turned around and her heart began pounding.

He stood, framed in the doorway, wearing a loose cotton shirt and breeches. His dark hair was tousled, as if he too could not sleep.

"Marion?" he asked, a hint of the usual steel beneath his sleepy voice. "What are you doing in here at this hour?" His gaze swept over her, then around the candlelit room.

"What does it look like I am doin', Yer Grace? I am makin' use of the beautiful paint set ye saw fit to give me—"

"And what were you and Verity doing out?"

Marion stiffened. Her hand froze. . She offered a sheepish smile as she set her tools down.

Of course he'd ken.

"Since ye ken we were out, ye also ken what we were doin', Yer Grace," she told him.

He smirked. "I do ken, indeed. I wanted to see whether you'd tell me the truth."

Marion lips drew into a tight line. "Ye have no faith in me, then, Yer Grace?"

He stilled. "Anselm."

"What?"

"Call me Anselm. It's only the two of us here," he said softly.

She exhaled. "Very well, *Anselm*. Will ye answer me question now?"

Anselm crossed his arms, showcasing his broad shoulders. He looked impossibly tall as he casually paced around the small studio.

Then, his gaze shifted to the paintings, and she watched him look at the canvases stacked against the walls.

He paused before a landscape. Its vibrant greens and deep blues created a stark contrast to the muted tones of London. The painting represented a land of nymphs and fairies, of magic and adventure.

"These are... quite remarkable," he said. "You were modest when speaking of your work."

Marion felt a blush creep up her neck, heating the dimples of her cheeks as she rubbed them absentmindedly.

"Well, I... Ye dinnae answer me question."

His smirk dropped a little. "It's not that I don't have faith in you, wife. Apprehension is in my nature."

Marion's face softened. It wasn't an admission of trust, not fully. But it was a step.

She could only nod at him. In return, he glanced back at her landscape painting.

"You are very talented," he said softly.

"Oh, it is... merely a pastime, Yer Grace. Nothin' as grand as what hangs in this townhouse."

She felt shy, humble, and exposed. Surely, a duke was accustomed to far grander works of art than this and she had seen them hung about the grand townhouse. Yet, something about the look in his emerald eyes as he took in her work filled her with a sense of pride.

Aye, he really likes them.

She watched him closely as he turned to another canvas, a misty mountain scene that filled Marion's most tender dreams of home.

"These are in Strathcairn, aren't they? I did not get much of a chance to take it all in, but I recognize these."

"Aye," Marion admitted, her voice soft. "I... I have been a little homesick, I suppose. Paintin' helps to transport me back there, to immortalize me memories on canvas. A bit of the Highlands in the middle of London."

His face fell slightly, and she swore she saw a flicker of guilt in his eyes, but it was gone by the time he looked back at her.

"What was it like? In Strathcairn."

A wistful smile formed on her lips, and Marion glanced away as her mind filled with fond memories.

"Aye, it was a wonderful place to grow up," she began. "Me faither encouraged me to be curious. He allowed me to study geography and history but also to ride to me heart's content on me prized mare, Morrigan, and hunt like any young lad. Me maither encouraged me paintin'. I cannae help but think of her every time I hold the brush."

- "It sounds beautiful," he said quietly. "You've captured it well in this painting."
- "Thank ye," she whispered back.
- Anselm nodded and his gaze stayed fixed on the painting. He then moved to a stack of papers on a nearby table and idly flipped through them.
- Suddenly, he paused, and a subtle but clear tension rose up his shoulders. He pulled out a single sheet, which was beneath a pile of unfinished studies. They were mostly for reference, nothing of consequence...
- Then, it hit her like a ton of bricks.
- How in the bloody hell did I forget that was in there?
- Marion's eyes widened in horror as she took a step back. It was a charcoal sketch, raw and unfinished, of a male torso—suspiciously, and unmistakably, like his.
- Marion's mouth watered as she compared the broad shoulders and defined musculature of the sketch to the very real man who held the paper. She had drawn it from memory after that single, shocking encounter in her room.
- A low chuckle rumbled from Anselm's chest as he turned to face her then. He smiled broadly, holding the sketch aloft, with a devilish look in his eyes as he stepped closer to her.
- "And what exactly inspired this... anatomical study? From what I recall, you said you focused mainly on landscapes and still life," he said as he raised a brow, the smirk widening as Marion's pulse quickened. "I had no idea you were such an expert on the human form."
- "Aye, well... I..." Marion fumbled for words as she reached for the sketch, which he kept just out of range. "I would like that back now."
- "Perhaps I should watch you finish this masterpiece," he added with a sly grin.
- "Oh, blast ye! Give that back!" Marion gasped. Her cheeks flamed bright scarlet as she lunged again for the paper.
- Anselm was quicker than she expected and was able to effortlessly evade her grasp as she lunged repeatedly for the paper. Like two children vying for a prize, he teased her with a mischievous smile, lifting the sketch high above his head, well beyond her reach. The unfairness of his height only added to her frustration.
- "Damn ye, why are ye so tall!"
- "Ah, the question is why are you such a delightful little package, Duchess?"
- Marion was shorter by a significant measure, and yet she jumped, stretching her arms desperately. She was undeterred and fueled by her embarrassment. Her fight compensated for her might.
- When her fingers brushed against his bare forearm, the unexpected contact sent a warm feeling through her body. As she jumped again, she misjudged her footing and stumbled forward awkwardly.

"Whoa!"

As she was about to slip, fall, and hit her face square on the hardwood floor, he caught her in his strong arms.

Upon closer look, I dinnae do him justice, she thought as her hands flattened against his strong chest.

She savored the feeling. The solid heat of muscle mixed with the beat of his heart, which thrummed against her palms. She could feel it quickening beneath her hand.

Their eyes met and with it, her embarrassment dissipated. A part of her yearned for him to know how much she wanted him. She tired of the games between them. Their connection was deep and, in such proximity, undeniable.

He must feel this too...

The piney scent of his skin, as fresh as the forests of Scotland, made her impossibly hot. His thumb gently brushed her cheek, then his eyes dropped to her lips. Her breath hitched in anticipation. She ached for him to touch her more, to kiss her...

But he did not.

Instead, his thumb moved higher so that he might gently tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. His touch was surprisingly soft, reverent; intimate and sweet, which only confused Marion more.

Carefully, he released her and handed the sketch back to her. She savored the feeling of his fingers brushing hers, sending another jolt through her that went all the way to her core.

She looked up at him then. His eyes were dark, as deep as evergreen trees.

He turned abruptly and left the studio without a word.

Marion stood trembling with the charcoal sketch clutched in her hand. It was her only proof that the encounter was real.

She stared at the empty doorway. Her heart ached with frustration and longing.

Aye, the ghost of his touch lingers on me skin. He wants me, I ken it as well as I ken me own name. Aye, but why does he keep pullin' away from me every time we get close?

She walked over to her sketchpad and took out a clean sheet of paper. She reached across her worktable to grab a piece of charcoal, then sat down to work.

If she could not be with him, she would sketch him.

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Anselm shut his bedroom door tight behind himself and took off his shirt then tossed it to the floor. He strode over to the fireplace, which was still roaring to keep away the cool spring air, and reached for the poker. As he stoked the flames, his mind reeled from the recent encounter with his wife.

My wife.

He closed his eyes, and her sapphire gaze flickered to life in his mind, twinkling softly in the candlelit corners of her studio, a surprise he hadn't expected.

Though he knew she had taken up painting again, it was more than her skill with the brush that struck him; it was the raw emotion woven into every stroke. As he'd gazed upon her landscapes, it'd felt as if he were seeing Scotland through her eyes. The rugged peaks of Strathcairn came alive with longing and memory.

And that sketch...

If his body was hot just at the sight of her, seeing the reaction she had to him, and in such vivid form, was more than he could bear. His body began to warm at the thought of how she saw him, how he clearly occupied her thoughts.

She was worthy of more than he could ever offer. Soft, warm, and so... bloody innocent, for all her Scottish fire.

And Anselm?

He was too empty, too cold, too far gone for a creature as radiant as her. Yet still, the thought of another man touching her made his chest tighten with something dangerously close to rage.

The only thing he could give her was safety. He prayed that was enough.

He slammed the poker down. The sharp clang echoed through the room as a curse tore from his lips.

Striding to the bed, he dropped onto it with a heavy thud and dragged a hand over his face. He shut his eyes tight, as if sheer will alone could force sleep to take him.

Yet the image of sapphire eyes and flowing chocolate hair haunted his dreams.

Chapter Twenty

the state

- arion, dear," Verity began while perching on the edge of Marion's bed. Her eyes were bright as if she had not been up half the night making mysterious drop offs.
- "I ken we are friends, but do ye knock?" Marion joked as she rubbed her eyes, surprised by the hour on her bedside clock.
- "I am on a new chapter, you see," Verity said, ignoring her protest.
- "Ye just finished the last one, and already ye are startin' up again?"
- "That is how all the great authors work! But what I need... well...it is about... well, it is about the intimacy between a newly married couple."
- "I beg ye pardon, Verity. But I havenae even had tea and ye are askin' about—"
- "Since you are now, quite officially, a newly married Duchess, I thought you might offer some... particular insights that would aid in my research. I've written such scenes before, but I have you now to improve on them—a person with direct experience!"
- "Direct experience? Verity, what on earth are ye talkin' about?" Marion said as the lingering heat of Anselm's touch from just hours before crept up her neck. "Can ye wait until I have had me mornin' tea?"
- "You know what I mean!" Verity leaned in closer then and dropped her head on Marion's pillow. "The marital bed. The passion! The... ahem, consummation."
- "Oh, bloody hell!"
- "Is it truly as all-consuming as the poets describe? Does one feel a fire burning throughout their body, or is it more like a gentle warmth? Is there a particular sort of sound or sigh that accompanies it? For my heroine, you see, it needs to be utterly authentic."
- "Verity! Really! Such questions are... are highly improper and I am nae an expert," Marion stammered as her face took on a fiery red hue. "While ye are a close friend... this is a deeply personal matter!"
- She clutched her sheets to her chest and Verity pouted. She grabbed a pillow and threw it at Marion playfully.
- "This is for the sake of art, Marion! Surely, a few details wouldn't hurt. Just the general feeling of it," she pressed while batting her eyelashes at Marion. "Is it like a gentle summer breeze, or a roaring Highland storm?"

"If ye must press... well, it is unique to each couple," Marion managed, desperate to appease her so she could change the subject. "Both expressions have their merits... But such matters are not for polite discussion... even amongst the closest of friends!"

"I would tell you!" Verity said as she sighed dramatically. "But fine. Keep your secrets, dear sister. But do not blame me if my hero's passionate embrace falls flat because I lack the appropriate physical details." She stood up, already plotting. "I shall simply have to rely on my imagination. Or better yet, the highly descriptive passages in the Marquis de Sade's *Justine*."

Marion groaned feeling utterly mortified as she rose to her feet and grabbed her dressing gown.

"Ye are incorrigible, Verity! Ye must ken that."

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Thank the gods, Marion thought as the scent of hot tea and toasted bread lured her to the breakfast room one hour later than customary.

Verity was already there, buttering a scone and feverishly jotting notes in her trusty pad. Marion was still reeling from Verity's earlier interrogation.

"I have a story to tell ye," Marion started as she took a sip of earl grey. "It came to me in a dream, after I finally fell asleep."

"You have my full attention," Verity said as she put down her quill and faced her friend with an expectant glance.

"It isnae that sort of story, but I think ye will like it all the same."

"Go on," Verity pressed as she set her chin on her fist.

"When I was a lassie, back at Strathcairn, me faither insisted I be well versed in Gaelic. It became a way for us to communicate when others were around who dinnae speak it. It was handy, especially when travelin'. So, one day, we were at a party with mostly English folk and the most *insufferable* woman I had ever seen. She wouldnae stop goin' on and on about bonnets and the appropriate fabrics for summer curtains."

"Sounds like Lady Featherstone," Verity joked.

"Just the type! Well, when I was walkin' ahead with him, I said *amaideach bò* and she turned at me. Her face was as twisted as a corkscrew."

"What in the devil does that mean?"

"Foolish cow," Marion said as she began laughing at the memory. "I dinnae think she would ken what I meant, but she surely did. Me maither was too entertained to be mad, and luckily, she dinnae call on us again."

"I cannot imagine you calling someone a foolish cow, and let alone getting caught!" Verity erupted into joyous laughter. "Oh, that is good."

The more Verity laughed, the more Marion found herself laughing along. Their giggles kept building upon each other, like only close friends can. Every time they tried to stop, they only roared louder.

From the doorway, Anselm paused and placed his hand on the frame. He watched them. He watched Verity. She had her head thrown back and her bright laugh echoed through the hallowed halls of the Greystead townhouse. She looked like a picture of the young girl he used to know—in the throes of pure, unadulterated happiness.

- And then he looked at Marion. Her ocean-like eyes sparkled as a genuine smile lit up her entire face. Her cheekbones were impossibly delicate and high, a ravishing sight if he had ever seen one.
- A tender warmth spread through him, a feeling he rarely allowed himself to experience. He could not help but be influenced by the moment the girls were sharing, filled with a quiet contentment he had not known in so long.
- He thought back and he realized that he had never, not once, seen Verity so utterly carefree as a young adult. So openly joyful. And Marion's laugh was bubbly, infectious, rich, and captivating.
- They looked at the door then, and the laughter ceased abruptly. Both ladies stiffened at the sight of him. Their giggles turned into polite coughs as they caught their breath.
- He frowned as he realized how quickly his presence had quelled their laughter.
- "Good morning, ladies," Anselm said as he stepped into the room. "You seem to be enjoying yourselves. Pray tell, what is the cause of such laughter?"
- Marion and Verity exchanged quick, conspiratorial glances.
- "Oh, nothing," Verity chirped, picking up her teacup. "Just a rather amusing anecdote Marion was sharing. Nothing that we would waste your valuable time with, dear brother."
- "Indeed," Marion added. "A very silly story, Yer Grace. Nae worthy of yer attention... it really wasnae even that funny. I daenae ken what came over us."
- Anselm raised a brow and there was an amused glint in his eyes. "Silly, you say? It sounded rather animated from where I stood. I can take a joke as well as the next—"
- He was about to press further when the door opened and in came Mr. Lewis.
- "Your Grace," he announced as his gaze swept the room. "Lord Gilton is here to see you."
- The air in the breakfast room instantly froze. Verity dropped her teacup onto its saucer and Marion's smile left her lips in an instant. Her gaze shot to Anselm, whose jaw had tightened.
- "Show him in," Anselm said.
- Moments later, Lord Gilton appeared in the doorway with a charming, serpentine smile plastered on his face.
- "Good morning, Your Grace!" Gilton's voice was smooth and cultured. "And ladies! What a delightful coincidence to find you all gathered here together. I trust I am not interrupting a moment of domestic bliss?" He bowed gracefully to each of them. "Your Grace." He turned to Marion and allowed his eyes to linger on her. "You look exceptionally well this morning. Marriage clearly agrees with you."

"Lord Gilton." Marion managed to make a stiff nod and Gilton's smile widened as did a knowing glint in his eye.

"Now, Your Grace," he said, turning back to Anselm, his voice dropping slightly. "If you would grant me a few moments of your valuable time, I have a matter of some delicacy to discuss with you. Privately, if you please."

"Very well, Gilton. This way." Anselm turned on his heel and motioned towards the hall that led to his private study.

Chapter Twenty-One

to the

ere we are," Anselm said as he led Gilton into his study. The heavy wooden door thudded shut behind them and silenced the faint sounds of the household.

Anselm could already hear the whispers among the staff as they tried to guess the reason for the viscount's unexpected visit.

He kept his posture stiff as he leaned against the lip of his desk. Then, Anselm nodded at an armchair, which Gilton plopped into confidently.

"Now, Gilton," Anselm stated, his voice devoid of the polite civility he offered in the breakfast room. "Get on with it. What is it that you want from me?"

Gilton's smile faltered slightly and was replaced by a look of feigned offense. "Your Grace! Such bluntness. I confess, I am rather disappointed. I came here with nothing but the best of intentions. A cordial visit, an olive branch, if you will, between men of standing." He gestured expansively and may as well have been on a stage.

Anselm was not going to buy this performance. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Spare me the theatrics, Gilton," he said. "I have no patience for them. State your business or I'll be happy to show you the door."

"Very well," Gilton sighed as he put his feet up on the nearby ottoman. "It seems we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, Your Grace. I hold you in the highest regard, a man of your stature and influence. And it is precisely because of that respect that I felt compelled to come here today. To... well, to warn you."

He leaned forward then, as if readying himself to share a painful truth.

Anselm raised a single eyebrow. "You? Warn me?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Gilton continued. "About your... new *Duchess*. During our engagement, you see, I was utterly devoted to her. I sent presents, offered nothing but praise and sincere compliments. Anything to ensure my devotion was clear. There were no... distractions, no frivolous entanglements that sometimes men of our circles get into." He paused and allowed the implication to settle. "However, I noticed certain... peculiarities over time."

"What are you getting at?" Anselm pressed. "Speak plainly."

"Well... Her Grace, my fiancée at the time, received a number of rather unsettling notes that were threatening in nature. And I, of course, was utterly baffled by them. There is no one in my life I could have thought would pen such terrible, awful words."

Anselm's expression darkened as he tried to predict Gilton's angle. It was likely the viscount held information about these notes, and now, he was going to use that information as leverage.

Unfortunately, Anselm was waiting for more intel from Daniels, but the Runner was still investigating.

"I tried to help her, naturally," Gilton went on, misinterpreting Anselm's silence for attention. "But she was rather... defensive about them. Hysterical even, and prone to wild accusations. I found myself wondering, does this woman even want marriage? Wouldn't a truly devoted lady wish to bind herself to her betrothed, no matter the obstacle?"

"Your point being?"

"One would not wish for such burdens to fall upon a man of your responsibilities and station, Your Grace. I merely wish to ensure you are prepared for what may come. Her uncle had warned me of her rather... spirited nature. But like you, I was also mesmerized by her beauty and—"

Anselm stood straight and stepped forward, his hands in fists. The air in the study grew colder, charged with a dangerous intensity as Anselm glared at him. Gilton looked up in return and dared not to speak further.

"Gilton. Let me be unequivocally clear," he growled. "My wife, the Duchess of Greystead, is beyond reproach. She is neither scheming nor hysterical. And should I ever hear *even a whisper* of you casting smears upon her character, her past, or her suitability as my wife... you will find the consequences most severe."

Gilton swallowed hard. His face paled as his bravado crumbled. "Your Grace! I assure you, I was merely attempting to—to act out of concern! A gesture of goodwill, from one gentleman to another! I think you misunderstand me entirely. You know how these females can be—"

"Your goodwill is neither required nor appreciated," Anselm cut him off completely. "We are not friends, and your insinuations are an insult. Get out. Now. And do not darken my doorstep again."

"But I—"

"Now," Anselm growled, and Gilton scrambled to his feet, offering a hasty, undignified bow.

The viscount turned on his heel and practically bolted from the study, leaving Anselm alone in the heavy silence.

He opened a window. The scent of Gilton's cloying cologne lingered like a foul odor he was desperate to be rid of.

A few minutes later, a soft knock came.

"What is it?" Anselm grumbled. He kept his back to the door as he looked out the window.

"Anselm." Marion's voice was hesitant as she entered the room. "What did he want?"

Anselm straightened himself and turned around, smoothing the front of his jacket.

"Nothing for you to concern yourself with, Duchess. It was a trivial matter. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do," he said as he walked around his desk, picked up a quill and sat down.

"Trivial?" Marion scoffed while stepping further into the room. "That visit hardly seemed trivial, Yer Grace. And ye seem quite displeased. What did he say? If this concerns me, I deserve to ken."

Anselm glanced up from his papers at her.

- "He said nothing of consequence. I have it all under control. You do not have to worry about him or anything else."
- "Daenae worry?" Marion's voice rose. "How can I nae worry when ye refuse to tell me anythin'? When ye keep secrets, even when they directly concern me! Was it about the notes? Did he try to imply somethin' unsavory, out of spite?"
- "Marion," Anselm insisted, his voice firm. "It is handled. You do not need the details."
- "But I do need the details. I am yer wife, not some delicate flower to be shielded from every unpleasantness!" Her hands were clenched into fists. "Ye act as if I am incapable of understandin' anythin', of handlin' myself!"
- "You are capable, yes," he conceded while taking a step towards her and lowering his voice. "But like my sister, you are my responsibility. I handle the ugliness, so you do not have to. That is our arrangement."
- "That is nae our agreement, Anselm! I deserve to ken what ye are doin'!"
- Just then, a knock on the study door echoed in the room.

"Yes?"

- "It's the most handsome man in England," Emmanuel's voice floated through the mahogany door.
- Anselm glanced at the clock. He had nearly forgotten their afternoon appointment. He stepped away from Marion and opened the door himself.
- "Anselm, my friend," Emmanuel said as he entered. His gaze flicked between the fuming couple. "Your Grace, pardon me. Am I interrupting something? I was merely here to collect your husband for our meeting with Lord Elston. You remember, old boy, about the shipping contracts?" He paused with a knowing smile playing on his lips. "Though it appears I have arrived at a rather... inopportune moment."
- Anselm grunted in response; his gaze was still locked on Marion.
- "Indeed, you have," he said as he turned to his friend. "Very well. Let's go."
- He strode past Marion.
- "Have a good day, husband," Marion called as he walked out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Two

to the

he whispers started the very moment the Greystead carriage pulled up to the glittering facade of Marlstone Manor.

As Anselm, Marion, and Verity stepped inside Lady Lowdham's grand ballroom, the low hum of conversation swelled, then died down before it was replaced by a hundred eyes tracking their every move.

While Marion and Anselm had frequented many social events together, this was the first major ball they attended since the hurried wedding. As always, the *ton* was ravenous for any fresh morsel of gossip.

Marion felt confident in a gown of shimmering ivory that caught every flicker of candelabras. She had her hair pulled up around her head in braids and the strands were adorned with delicate diamonds. Yet, much as she felt every bit the Duchess, the weight of public scrutiny pulled on her as they were formally announced.

- "Another Scottish Duchess... so unexpected," one onlooker whispered.
- "And the Duke's sister, poor thing, after that scandal..." Another hissed, again pulling on Marion's heart as she had not considered how hard these events must also be for her friend, much as she put on a brave face.
- Marion looked at Verity then, who was as beautiful on the outside as she was on the inside. She wore a delicate lace gown in hues of pink and lavender that accentuated the same green eyes her brother had. She looked like spring herself.
- Marion scanned the room further and her stomach tightened into a knot as she saw that Lord Gilton was indeed present. He was ever a dark shadow in her life, this time in the flesh and near a pillar across the ballroom. She watched as his gaze occasionally swept over their party, but thankfully he kept his distance. Marion had enough on her mind.
- "Ah, there you are!" Emmanuel's cheerful voice cut through the tension she felt, and she smiled at the familiar face.
- "Lord Wrotham, ye are a sight for sore eyes," she said as she gave him a bright smile.
- He approached with a genial smile on his face and he momentarily drew some attention away from the trio. "Your Grace, Lady Verity. You both look radiant this evening. And you don't look so bad yourself, old boy."
- "I occasionally clean up for such occasions," Anselm said dryly as he sipped on a glass of champagne. "Emmanuel. A word, if you please." He gave Marion's arm a brief, almost imperceptible squeeze. "I shall return shortly; we have some business to discuss."
- With that, Marion watched the two men retreat to a secluded corner, their heads bent in earnest conversation.

Left with Verity, Marion found herself approached by a man she vaguely recognized from the garden party. It was Lord Quinn, a young nobleman known for his flamboyant cravats and bad breath. He executed a sweeping bow and his eyes lingered a fraction too long on Marion's face.

"Your Grace," he purred. His voice was a smooth, low drawl as Marion tried not to breathe. "You are truly a vision tonight. I must confess, the tales of your unique charm have not done you justice. I recall seeing you at the garden party but did not have a chance to speak with you."

"Thank ye for the compliment. Ye are too kind, Lord Quinn," she said as she stared in Anselm's direction, silently beckoning for him to come save her.

Lord Quinn took a step closer and his smile widened. Marion looked around to see Verity was engaged in a conversation with someone else and unable to save her at that moment.

Aye, why me?

"Such spirit, such untamed beauty. A welcome contrast to the rather boring ladies of old' London. I have always liked Highland lasses," he said not unkindly. It was more like he was appreciating an exotic pet. "Might I have the honor of the first dance?"

Marion's polite smile tightened.

Untamed beauty.

He saw her as little more than a curiosity, a novelty. Catriona had warned her of how cruel these events could be, and Marion had been unable to fully understand her meaning until that moment. She glanced at Verity, who had begun to listen in.

"You do not have to accept, Marion," Verity whispered as her brow furrowed. "You are your own person and do not have to give into the whims of every man in the *ton*. We can say you have fallen ill!"

Marion, however, knew the rules and did not want to stick out more than she already did. To refuse the first dance, especially from a lord of his standing, would be a blatant snub.

"It would be me pleasure, Lord Quinn," she replied, offering her hand and cursing the forced politeness in her voice.

As they took their places on the dance floor, the orchestra swelled into a lively dance. Lord Quinn was, at first, perfectly charming. He did not step on her feet, and he kept the conversation light.

"So, Your Grace. I trust London society is treating you well? A far cry from the rustic simplicity of the Highlands, I imagine."

- "Indeed," Marion replied, forcing herself to maintain a pleasant expression. "There are certainly differences."
- "Oh, I am sure of that," he chuckled as he spun her in a graceful turn. "One hears such curious things about your country. Where are you from exactly?"

"Strathcairn."

"Oh my, can you pronounce that again for me? I love the sound of your accent," he said as she caught a faint whiff of his alcohol infused breath.

"Strathcairn, me lord."

"Ah yes, I understand now. Well, I think I have always been most struck by the fierce independence, the rather unrefined manners. When I ventured up to Edinburgh I was appalled by the people I met, so rash. And the weather! Positively dreadful, wouldn't you say? Perpetual mist and rain. Quite bleak."

Marion's jaw tightened as he went on and on.

- "The mists hold a beauty all their own, Lord Quinn. And our people arenae unrefined, merely... direct. Honest," she responded.
- "Ah, directness! A charming euphemism for bluntness, I daresay. And honesty, of course, is a rare commodity, especially out here in town. But then, one wouldn't expect the subtleties of polite society to truly penetrate the wilder corners of the world, hm?"
- His smile was patronizing, and Marion could not stand it. She tried to tune him out and focus on the movement and music, but he only continued.
- "One can only admire your fortitude, Your Grace. It must be quite the adjustment, putting away those rather scratchy tartans for proper silks. Although I must say, you wear silk so very well."
- Marion felt a slow burn of indignation rise within her as she watched him look down at her breasts then. She wanted to slap the smug look off his face. To insult her culture and attempt to flirt with her, a married woman!
- The lively music seemed to mock her as it trapped her in this dance with a man who saw her as nothing more than a backward Highlander, an amusing oddity to poke fun at for entertainment.
- She met his gaze and no longer bothered to hide her disdain. She knew her response had to be sharp, but subtle.
- She was, after all, a duchess now. She would not give him, or anyone else, the satisfaction of seeing her squirm.

Chapter Twenty-Three

to the

ou look as though you could use a drink, Your Grace," Lord Thistlewaite said to Anselm with a clap on the back as he handed him his flask. "Do not tell my wife, of course."

"I am quite all right, Lord Thistlewaite, but do appreciate the offer," he said with a raised eyebrow. "I am indeed on my way to find a drink, if you will excuse me."

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug as he shimmied across the dance floor.

After fetching himself a proper drink, Anselm looked around for the sight of Verity and Marion throughout the ballroom.

Prior to his encounter with Lord Thistlewaite, he had just finished a particularly tedious discussion with Emmanuel.

He spotted Verity first. She was by the refreshments, trapped in conversation with Lady Featherstone. He looked about but still could not find Marion, until he looked right in the middle of the dance floor.

There she was, plain as day, looking as intriguing as the most wicked night.

She was resplendent in her ivory gown, which hugged her generous curves as she moved with grace to the playing tune. His chest tightened at the sight of her dance partner as they turned.

Lord Quinn.

He did not care for the way the lord was leaning in as they went about their dance, nor the smarmy smile that was plastered on his pasty face.

A flicker of annoyance, sharp and unexpected, twisted at him as he drained the last of his glass.

"Ah, Anselm," Emmanuel drawled as he followed his friend's gaze "Quinn, isn't it? Rather taken with your wife, by the looks of it. Perhaps you should offer some counsel on the appropriate distance a man ought to maintain with a married woman. Seems the boy has forgotten his place."

Anselm scowled. The rational part of him knew he could not cut in without making a scene, yet the tightness in his chest persisted. It was not just the sight of Quinn's clear flirtation with his wife. That he could handle. No, it was the way Marion held herself. Her smile was brittle and fixed. Her shoulders were stiff, and her eyes, even from this distance, seemed to burn with polite indignation. She was not dancing; she was enduring.

- "She is uncomfortable," Anselm whispered to himself. The words were barely audible yet Emmanuel heard them.
- "She is a duchess, Anselm. She can handle a little attention, and it comes with the territory. She will need to get used to it if she wants to keep up with the likes of you."
- "Not this kind of attention," Anselm snapped. His jaw clenched into a tight line. "I will not allow it."
- He watched Quinn lean in, far too close. His lips were moving as Marion's head drew back. She barely said a word as her eyes grew darker.
- Fury, hot and consuming, ignited within Anselm. He did not care about propriety, scandal, or the *ton's* incessantly wagging tongues. All he saw was his wife, and she was upset.
- He strode across the ballroom. Anselm became a dark, unstoppable force that cut through the glittering dancers as if he were Moses parting the Red Sea. His path was direct, unwavering. Lord Quinn, still smirking, was mid-sentence when Anselm reached them.
- Without a word, Anselm's hand landed right on his shoulder, and he squeezed.
- "My lord." Anselm's voice was low and laced with a chilling authority. "I believe this dance is concluded. Now." He pulled Quinn away from the dance floor a bit too roughly.
- Instinctively, the younger man stumbled at the unexpected intrusion.
- Quinn recovered as he dusted off his jacket and straightened his cravat.
- "Your Grace! W-What is the meaning of this? I was merely enjoying a dance with Her Grace!"
- Anselm ignored him. He kept his gaze fixed on Marion, who was now staring at him with eyes as wide as a doe's. He extended his hand to her.
- "May I have the honor of this dance?"
- She took his hand. Her fingers trembled slightly as he pulled her into the waltz that had just begun. He guided her with expert movement around the dance floor and the band's sweeping symphony created a swirling rhythm around them.
- Her voice was a low whisper, filled with mortification, when she finally spoke. "What was that? Now everyone is starin'! Ye practically shoved him off!"
- He spun her then drew her closer than was proper for a public dance but he did not care. He needed everyone to know exactly whose wife she was.
- His eyes burned into hers. "Let them stare," he rasped, his voice rough. "You are my wife. And no man, no man, will make you feel an ounce of discomfort as long as there's air in my lungs."
- "I daenae need ye to rescue me, Anselm," Marion snapped. "I was perfectly capable of handlin' him meself."
- "Perhaps you were," he conceded. "But I prefer to remove the necessity of such handling. You are mine, Marion. And no one

touches what is mine."

His grip on her waist tightened, pulling her flush against him. He dipped his lips to her neck and inhaled her sweet jasmine scent, savoring the feeling of her breath so close to him.

Try as he may to ignore it, she intoxicated him.

Their dance was no longer just steps and turns. It was a silent conversation, where they were able to share all the things they could not articulate. Each movement was an undeniable acknowledgment of the simmering desire between them.

The ball, the ton, the whispers, all of it faded away, leaving only the two of them. He led and she followed perfectly in time.

The music swelled, demanding a crescendo of intimacy, and for a fleeting moment, he thought he might kiss her. He would do it right there, on the dance floor, oblivious to the hundreds of eyes watching their every move.

Just as the music came to a halt, Anselm's hands lingered on her because his body refused to let go.

Why am I acting like a smitten schoolboy?

"Marion! Are you quite all right?" Verity appeared suddenly at their sides, her brow furrowed with concern. "Lord Quinn looked quite put-out by my brother's display."

Anselm flinched slightly, yanked back to reality now, and he released Marion swiftly.

His wife also blinked and stepped back with a nod, then turned to his sister.

"Yes, Verity. I am perfectly fine," she said with shaky breath. "I am just exerted from all the dancin' and fine champagne."

Anselm turned to his sister as a tight smile formed on his lips.

"Indeed," he told Verity. "I took care of the matter and merely ensured Her Grace was not subject to any undue attention."

"I am glad! Let us grab another round of champagne then. I'm sure it'll alleviate all the unpleasantness from that encounter," Verity announced, and she led them away from the dance floor.

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"Lord Standale," Anselm began as he shook the lord's hand. "It has been some time. I hope your family is well."

Half an hour later, which passed on without any further incident, Anselm navigated the crowded room. Verity stood patiently by his side, while Marion was accosted by some dowager showering her with advice about embroidery.

Then, Anselm spotted Lord Standale, a respectable man of inherited wealth and impeccable lineage. He did not know much about his lordship personally, but the fact that others did not have any ill to speak of him was good enough.

"They are, Your Grace. A pleasure to see you as well," he said as he offered a smile. His eyes were immediately drawn to Verity.

- "May I present my sister, Lady Verity. Verity, this is Lord Standale, an avid patron of the literary arts, as it seems."
- Lord Standale bowed and gifted her with an amiable smile. "My lady, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."
- "And you, my lord. Do you enjoy reading?"
- "I confess, as much as I enjoy the latest fiction coming out of London, my true passions lie in taxidermy."
- "Come again, my lord? Did you say—"
- "Taxidermy. My family dearly loves to hunt, and I find it a fulfilling hobby. It is the only way to immortalize the lives given for the sake of the hunt and to commemorate the time we spend at our country estate."
- Anselm winced. This was not going as he had hoped.
- Verity's polite smile faltered. Her gaze drifted over Lord Standale's shoulder. She was clearly searching for an escape route.
- "Indeed, Lord Standale. I had not considered how...fulfilling such a hobby would be. How utterly fascinating," Verity said.
- Lord Standale, oblivious to Verity's waning interest, brightened at her response. "Oh, indeed, Lady Verity! You would be surprised how intricate the process is. I daresay it requires a steady hand, much like painting. The precision, the patience...it is quite an art form in itself."
- "How riveting," Verity replied. Her voice was pleasant but distant and her polite smile grew more brittle by the second.
- "Why, just last season I had a magnificent stoat preserved. The craftsman did a fine job of capturing its ferocity mid-pounce. You must come see it sometime, my lady. It holds a place of great honor in my study."
- Verity's eyes flicked briefly toward Anselm. She silently pleaded for rescue. But before he could intervene, a familiar voice cut through the droning conversation like a blade through silk.
- "Good heavens, Standale, you've trapped them with your taxidermy tales already?" Emmanuel's voice carried easily. It was warm with amusement as he strolled nearer. Wrotham held a glass of wine in one hand and had a wicked grin playing upon his lips.
- "Wrotham." Anselm nodded at him.
- "Lord Wrotham." Verity greeted with him with a curtsy, barely disguising her relief.
- Lord Standale looked vaguely affronted. "I was merely sharing a passion, Lord Wrotham."
- "Oh, I've no doubt," Emmanuel said smoothly, giving a lazy bow. "Though you must forgive me for stealing Lady Verity away before you tempt her to mount her first fox. She promised me the next dance. Or at least a lively discussion that does not involve stuffed vermin."
- Anselm glared at his friend but halted as he noticed the evident relief in his sister's features. He wanted her to secure a respectable match, yes, but it seemed that Verity was pleading for a rescue.

- His sister gave a quick, graceful curtsy. "I'm afraid duty calls, Lord Standale."
- Before another word could be uttered, Emmanuel offered his arm to Verity with a wink, and she took it gladly.
- Anselm offered a swift excuse to Standale and walked off, but he kept his eyes fixed on his friend and sister.
- Then, his gaze swept across the ballroom, searching.
- There she was.
- Marion stood by a dowager countess. Her posture was composed and her smile was perfectly measured. She feigned interest in the woman's endless chatter, but when their eyes met, something raw flickered in Anselm's chest.
- A fierce protectiveness surged first, as sharp and immediate as a blade.
- She was his. No one could forget that.
- Then, almost against his will, he drank in the sight of her. He appreciated the curve of her neck, the way the candlelight caught the glint in her eyes, and the soft swell of her lips.
- Heat bloomed low and urgent in him. It was distracting and unwelcome.
- He pushed the feeling down, reminding himself of decorum, and of his need to maintain control. He was a duke, not a boy overtaken by his animalistic urges.
- But as their eyes held for a heartbeat longer, he knew one thing with undeniable certainty: no matter the rules, she stirred something in him that was not so easily contained.
- The music swelled around them while voices and laughter filled the space.
- Anselm's breath steadied, and he turned away. The weight of desire and duty pressed heavily on his chest.

Chapter Twenty-Four

hat night, the townhouse was as hushed as the sleeping city itself.

Marion lay in her bed, restless. A common occurrence, which painting could not cure as of late.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep when she was startled by a loud, sudden sound.

It was undeniably a scream. A man's scream at that, filled with terror and pain.

Marion sat bolt upright. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she threw her covers down.

It came from the adjoining room.

Anselm.

Without thinking, she flung back her covers. Adrenaline surged through her as she flew to her feet. She barely paused to pull on her dressing gown before rushing to the connecting door and throwing it open.

She burst into his dimly lit room. The faint glow from the dying fire illuminated the scene. Anselm thrashed in his oversized, four post bed. He was clearly caught in the throes of a violent nightmare.

She looked on while his face contorted with agony, sweat beaded on his brow, and his cheeks grew red. He murmured incoherently as his hands clawed at the air as if he were fighting a ghost.

"Oh, Anselm!" Marion cried as she rushed to the side of the bed. She reached for him hesitantly.

Do I let him wake on his own? Do I shake him? Aye, I daenae ken how to handle these things, but I cannae stand to watch him suffer so!

"Anselm, wake up! Tis only a dream!" She said as she shook him gently.

He gasped, creating a sharp, choked sound as his eyes snapped open. They were wild and unfocused, glazed with the terror of his dark dream. He stared at her confused. His breathing was ragged and his body trembled.

"Mother..." he rasped. "I... I couldn't save you... I couldn't... He was too quick... I..."

His eyes flickered around the room. The delirium still clung to him until he finally remembered where he was. Marion watched him lay back down and dig his hands into the covers as if tethering himself to reality.

"It is all right," Marion murmured, her voice soft and soothing. She reached out and gently touched his hot forehead. "It wasnae real. Ye are safe. I am here."

Without another thought, driven by an instinct to comfort, she leaned over him and sat on the corner of the bed. She reached to hold him and pulled him into her arms. He stiffened for a moment, surprised by the sudden embrace, but then, with an exhale, he collapsed against her. He rested his head on her shoulder and his arms slowly circled around her waist.

She felt his body tremble against hers. The fluttering was fast at first but then it began to slow. This bodily reaction was a stark contrast to his usual formidable composure, which shocked her. She had no idea that he was this haunted.

She felt the desperate grip of his hands and the weight of his grief on her body. She held him and stroked his rich, dark hair.

"It is all right," she cooed while stroking his bearded cheek.

He stayed in her arms. His breathing gradually slowed and the tremors in his body subsided. After a long moment, he pulled back slightly, just enough to look at her. She noted that his eyes were still shadowed, but clear as he released a shaky breath.

"Forgive me," he rasped. "To show such... weakness. You shouldn't have witnessed me in this way."

He tried to pull away fully, surely to put distance between them, to put up his usual barriers but Marion held him fast.

"There is no weakness in grief, Anselm," she whispered, her voice gentle but firm. "Only humanity. Ye lost someone ye loved. There is no shame in that. I ken what that feels like. Ye can trust me."

Her gaze met his as she bared herself to him, hoping he could see what was inside of her. She was open and willing to look past the formidable Duke.

Her eyes searched his. There was a raw vulnerability between them that made her heart ache.

He leaned in and captured her lips in a slow, tender kiss—less about lust, more about something deeper, something unspoken but utterly understood. In that moment, the walls between them crumbled, and resistance felt impossible.

She responded gently at first. His lips were soft and searching, then they moved with growing urgency as she pressed closer. Their bodies instinctively molded together recognizing a silent admission of the bond they'd long denied.

The kiss deepened and heat flared between them. His tongue slid against hers with confident insistence, and she matched him, swirling and tasting, as the fire built fiercely. His hands tangled in her hair when he tugged her closer and drew her down into the bed.

With a swift, fluid motion, he turned her onto her back. His weight settled over her as his mouth left hers only to trail searing kisses down her jawline, along the delicate curve of her neck, and finally to the swell of her chest. Each kiss ignited a trail of shivers across her trembling skin.

His hand moved to the sash of her robe. His fingers were deft and practiced as he loosened the silk. The fabric slipped away effortlessly, unveiling the delicate nightgown beneath, and then, the pale expanse of her skin. His touch was feather-light, tracing the graceful line of her shoulder, down her arm.

- Her breath hitched as her own hands instinctively reached up, grazing the top of her breasts which were aching for more. He slid the gown from her shoulders, letting it pool around her waist, before exposing her completely.
- His gaze swept over her body. His emerald eyes were dark, smoldering, and utterly consuming.
- "You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen," he whispered in her ear. "And I want you. Desperately."
- His hands—strong, calloused—moved possessively over her breasts, palming them with a hunger that made her pulse quicken. Marion arched instinctively into his touch as a soft, breathy gasp slipped from her lips while his fingers circled and teased her sensitive nipples, setting every nerve alight.
- "I had nae idea that this could feel so good," she whimpered.
- "I haven't even started, wife," he murmured against her skin as he lowered his mouth to one nipple, capturing the taut bud between his lips and teasing it with expert, deliberate strokes.
- He alternated between slow licks, firm sucking, and gentle nips, and each movement sent a ripple of fire through her. A tight coil of tension twisted deep inside her, building into a delicious ache she could no longer contain. Her hips lifted and bucked instinctively against him as she was driven by a fierce, urgent need.
- "Yes," she moaned.
- He moved with a devastating slowness despite her encouragement, and she knew that the building pleasure would be well worth the wait.
- She focused on his breath hot against her skin. His lips tasted and teased every inch of her as he moved away from her breasts to her stomach. She whimpered as she moved her hands to clutch his shoulders and urge him onward.
- "Mm, that's it, little tempest. I love that you're so eager," he growled as he placed his hands firmly on her hips. "Tell me what you want, and I shall give it to you."
- "I... I cannae begin to understand what I want," she whispered.
- "Let me show you what I can do for you," he purred as he pulled her gown down her legs and threw it to the floor. "A taste of all that you can feel, my wife."
- "Please, Anselm," she begged.
- "I know, darling. I cannot resist either," he grunted. "I need to taste you."
- He shifted lower down her body and his fingers traced a slow, teasing path over her delicate folds.
- "You are so ready for me," he said. His voice was low and rough as he began stroking her with increasing urgency, sliding from one finger to two.
- His touch was precise yet unpredictable, both gentle and commanding, and utterly overwhelming. A sharp gasp tore from her throat as pleasure, hot and shattering, took over.

- Then, without warning, he lowered his mouth to her most intimate place and inhaled deeply.
- Her legs instinctively snapped shut as panic and desire warring within her when she realized what he intended.
- "Do not ever be embarrassed with me. Not like this," he murmured as he pulled her legs apart. "I know you want this and you... you have no idea how badly *I* want this."
- He sat up suddenly, giving her a clear view of the hard, pulsing length straining against his breeches. Heat burned low within her body, in the places he was trying to touch. That was his... manhood. She knew that much.
- She instinctively reached for him, but he caught her wrists gently and raised her hands back above her head. His eyes locked onto hers with a fierce, unyielding command.
- "Ah, ah. Tonight is about you, Marion. Now lie back like a good girl and enjoy this," he said as he lowered himself back down. "I do not want you to think about me. Trust me, I have been dreaming of doing just this for longer than I care to admit."
- "What do ye mean?"
- "I've wanted to taste you ever since I saw you in my carriage, all trapped in that dreadful wedding gown. Every moment since, I've fought to keep my composure, but the restraint has worn thin. Now, I need to know exactly what you taste like. Every inch of you."
- Marion gasped. The need between her legs completely took over and her back found the bed again.
- Anselm's lips traced slow, deliberate kisses along the tender insides of her thighs. His tongue flicked lightly as she shivered in anticipation.
- Every gentle touch promised something more, something deeper, and she held her breath as he inched closer to the place where she ached to be touched. His mouth settled over her folds with a reverence that made her pulse quicken. The warmth of his breath sent ripples of pleasure through her. When his lips found her clitoris, the sensation was exquisite. The touch was soft, teasing, then firmer as he took it between his mouth and sucked with careful patience.
- His right hand slipped inside her and his fingers explored with a rhythm both urgent and tender. Each stroke pushed deeper, sending waves of sensation that she'd never known, stirring something fierce and new within her. The mingling of his mouth and fingers overwhelmed her senses, making her feel at once fragile and powerful—powerful because she held the power to bring this commanding, controlling man to his knees.
- Her body trembled as it poised on the edge of something she could barely name. She felt herself slipping, losing control, but it was a surrender unlike any other, one that left her feeling luminous, like a goddess awakening in the hands of the only man who could see her completely.
- "I feel like I'm goin' to faint," she moaned as the feeling grew. Her eyes dark as if there were stars glittering past them.
- "I must be doing a good job," he said. "Let go for me, Marion. I want to feel you release on my hand. Be a good girl and do that for me."
- "But I daenae ken how—"
- "I need this just as much as you do. Give it to me, Marion," he commanded, and she cried out as she felt herself ripple with

pleasure.

It surged from deep within her, radiating outward like an electric current to the tips of her toes. Her body clenched and convulsed, caught in a relentless wave that left her breathless and trembling, utterly spent, yet profoundly alive.

Anselm moved beside her, gathering her gently into his arms. He pressed a soft kiss to her temple, his breath warm against her skin.

"Just breathe," he murmured, his voice low and steady. "I have you now."

His lips brushed her hair. It was a soft, comforting touch that made her feel safe. The world outside the room—the *ton*, the scandals, the duties, and even their families—all faded into insignificance.

Marion closed her eyes. She was content to lie wrapped in his warmth, listening to the steady beat of his heart. Yet, something pulled at her. She worried that he would tire of her, that the usual harshness of the Duke would return and she would be cast out.

No, she could not stand that. She would leave on her own terms.

"I should go back to me quarters," Marion started as she tried to get up, only to be pulled down into the bed. "I... I daenae..."

"No."

"What do ye mean?"

"You are my wife, and you belong here in my bed. Now I am exhausted. Let us sleep. We can find time to argue in the morning," he joked as he pulled her closer to him.

"Oh. Very well," she whispered. "Goodnight, husband."

She looked at the fireplace a few feet away and watched the embers cool to a beautiful amber hue. She breathed slowly as she felt her rhythm return to its normal cadence, and Anselm's breathing kept time with her own as she truly relaxed.

She looked out the window then up at the stars, thinking back to the sleepless nights she spent just the next room over while dreaming of him.

Now she knew her wildest dreams and fantasies could not hold a candle to all that would be in store for her in this bed.

I daenae ken what will come next, she thought to herself. But aye, I am ready.

Chapter Twenty-Five

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S unrise cast a soft glow across Anselm's bedchamber, coating it in hues of gold and rose. He blinked his eyes, awaking slowly. He rubbed a hand over his eyes and glanced at the nearby clock.

Seven in the morning.

Instead of feeling guilty for sleeping past his usual early rise, a deep, unfamiliar calm stretched through his limbs, enveloping him like the soft duvet that covered him.

For the first time in years, perhaps decades, he felt truly rested. He lifted himself up onto an elbow. Then, he saw her.

Marion.

She was sleeping still, curled up onto her side and facing him. Her breathing was soft, sweet, and even. A long curl fanned across to his pillow. Her face was serene and immaculate.

Innocent.

He felt a sharp, swift pang in his gut. Guilt pierced through his brief tranquility as he remembered the events of last night.

The nightmare, her intervention, and then...

How could I have allowed myself to let things go so far...

He cursed himself for letting his desperate need for comfort overwhelm him. The chilling memory of his nightmare, and his raw vulnerability, shamed him. He prided himself on control and somehow, he managed to bare his deepest fear.

As he was about to rise, and come to his senses, a soft, sleepy moan escaped from Marion's lips. She burrowed deeper into the duvet and drew his attention back to her.

His breath was taken away at the sight of her. She looked so peaceful, there, in his bed. It was surprising and captivating. He could not look away, nor let himself be drawn away by his usual melancholy.

He reached out a hand, but his fingers hesitated just above her rosy cheek. He pulled back for a moment before bringing his hand down again and gently stroking the soft skin of her face. She stirred faintly at his touch but remained peacefully asleep. A small smile formed on her face, which spread to Anselm's.

He let his hand linger for a moment and trace down the delicate curve of her jaw, before reluctantly pulling away.

How could I ever be worthy of her?

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"Good morning, Verity," Anselm said absently as he sipped his morning coffee while reading a newspaper. "Duchess."

The clattering of silverware and swift movements of servants filled the breakfast room as Marion entered behind Verity. She looked at Anselm. He was impeccably dressed, and his expression was as composed and unreadable as ever.

Aye, he looks as if nothin' happened between us, and that I dinnae wake alone in his bed.

As Marion took her seat, she could feel the residual, lingering heat of him on her skin. She crossed her legs under the table as she thought of what he had done, and all he had shown her. They had been so close and connected, intimate and open. His formality confused her, and she took a sip of earl grey to steady herself.

Is it regret he feels? Or embarrassment?

She grabbed a scone and began to butter it as her mind continued to reel, ignoring all else around her. If she was going to figure out the puzzle of her husband, she needed sustenance. She finished it quickly, then grabbed a small serving of cut stone fruits.

Is this coolness simply his default? Aye, a sort of wall to protect himself from the inconvenience of actual emotions?

She set down her napkin and glanced up at him across the table. He had finished reading his paper, buttered his toast with meticulous precision, and was now discussing the day's agenda with Verity.

But he did not look at her. Marion's confusion quickly twisted into frustration.

Aye, I ought to demand an explanation for this sudden coldness, she thought, the words lodging stubbornly in her throat.

Verity smiled politely as Anselm spoke in a low, measured tone about upcoming social engagements and the latest political gossip.

"I hear Lord Waltham's estate is hosting a gala next month. They expect most of the *ton*," Anselm remarked. "It would do well for us to attend, for appearances if nothing else."

"Yes," Verity agreed softly. "It will be quite the event. So many eyes upon us all, especially with the new Duke and Duchess."

Anselm shifted slightly in his seat, his gaze finally flickering toward Marion.

"And what of you, Duchess?" he asked smoothly, as a servant approached to replenish her teacup. "Have you any thoughts on how to occupy yourself in the weeks ahead? Any pursuits or plans?"

Marion hesitated because she was caught off guard by the question. "I suppose I shall keep to me paintin' and, well... try to stay out of trouble."

He gave a small, almost imperceptible smile. She detected the faintest curl of amusement around his lips. "Good. Keeping to

- one's passions is a wise choice, especially for a lady newly settled."
- Verity reached over and offered Marion another scone, which she accepted gratefully.
- Anselm rose slightly from his seat and called to a nearby servant. "Fetch some more of that cherry jam Her Grace favors from 'the cellar."
- Both Verity and Marion's eyes turned sharply to him.

The servant bowed and hurried away.

Later that afternoon, Marion returned from a long walk in Hyde Park. She had gone with Verity to get some fresh air and enjoy the seasonable warmth of late spring.

It was a welcome diversion, but one that had tired her. All she wished to do was sit and write in her journal, which she had been neglecting. She was ready to curl up in her favorite corner of the drawing room and get lost in her thoughts. As she crossed through the doorway, she found Anselm alone and idle. He was gazing out the window at the small garden that was below it.

This is me chance. Be brave, Marion.

- "Anselm," she began. She kept her voice soft as she approached him cautiously. "About last night...well, ye should ken that I... well, ye see..."
- "I wanted to talk to you as well," he said as he turned to face her. "I am glad you are here."
- "Ye are? I mean, ye did?"

"Yes."

- Just then, Beth, Marion's maid, suddenly appeared in the doorway. Her cheeks were flushed from exertion and she looked as though she had run up the stairs in a rush.
- "Your Graces! Oh, please pardon the interruption, as well as my appearance, but the cook has a question about this evening's dinner that requires your immediate attention. Mrs. Clarke sent me to fetch you at once. Something about the number of servings, or dietary preferences. I cannot recall..."
- Marion sighed as Anselm looked deep into her sapphire eyes. A silent exchange passed between them.
- "Of course, Beth. I will see to these questions and leave His Grace to the rest of his afternoon," Marion said she approached her. "It is no problem at all."
- "I will see you at dinner," he said with a nod.
- "Yes, at dinner," Marion said in reply.

She walked to the doorway and turned around, lingering in the threshold for a moment and looking at her husband longingly. He was impossibly handsome, tall and strong, which was all made only more evident in the warm light of afternoon behind him. Everything about him drew her in. His scent, his appearance, and his dry humor. How she longed to leap into his embrace and stay there forever.

"We'll talk later, Yer Grace?" she said, a question more than a statement, to which he only nodded.

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- "Anselm," Marion whispered from their adjoining door later that evening, after the rest of the household had retired.
- "Anselm," she called again after receiving no response. She kept her voice low as she opened and closed the door behind herself.
- He turned from his fireplace to face her. He had a book in his hand and held the novel as if to throw it at the intruder. His expression softened at the sight of her which melted her nervous heart.
- "How could ye expect anyone else from our shared door?"
- "That is a good question. Much as I enjoyed dinner, the excitement of my sister and Emmanuel's spirited argument was a lot. I will not let her imbibe quite so much wine in the future."
- "Aye, she was a bit in her cups. But it was an excellent vintage," Marion said as she looked at the man in front of her. "I cannae blame her."
- He was shirtless. His broad chest was on full display and the shadows of his cut muscles glowed in the ambient firelight. His pants hung low on his hips, a sight she was unable to grow accustomed to. She wished she had her sketchbook handy and a charcoal pencil so she might capture his shape in that light. He was a perfect specimen.
- "We need to talk," he said, shaking her from her thoughts. "I assume that is why you are here?"

"Yes."

- Suddenly, a faint cry drifted down the hall and pulled their attention. The sound of hurried feet came next, then a loud knock at Marion's door.
- "Marion? I cannot sleep!" Verity's hushed voice came through. "I have had a most dreadful thought about my heroine's next dilemma and how untrustworthy a thief would be. I think I should go back to my previous outlines about the unexpected romance with her long-lost brother's friend and—"
- Her voice was low, likely because she thought that Marion's adjoining door was closed.
- Anselm nodded. "Go ahead. We'll speak tomorrow."
- And he closed the adjoining door.
- Marion sighed and went to the door of her bedchamber. She opened it wide to see Verity standing there with a thick pile of smudged papers in her hands.

"I'm sorry, my friend," she told Marion. "Could I bother you for just a few minutes? I really need a second set of ears, and you have become my most trusted advisor."
"Very well, lass," she said as she led Verity in, before shooting a yearning look at the door that separated her from her husband.

Chapter Twenty-Six



cannae believe ye would go to such lengths for me," Marion gushed as she embraced him after opening the box before her. "I cannae wait to see Master Jordan's paintin's. The dress is also exquisite, Anselm. I love it."

Three long days had passed since that night and each time Anselm tried to engage with Marion on the subject, so that he might try to broach the topic of what happened between them, they were interrupted.

It was almost as if they were the subject of an eerie curse. His sister, the butler, and everyone else in the household was in on the plot to keep them apart. After a while, he gave up altogether.

Perhaps some things are better left unsaid, he decided. How can I explain myself to her? Will she ever understand how inept I am in the ways of true intimacy and how I am incapable of staying away from her?

Yet, he needed her to know that he felt fond of her and appreciated her. The need to show affection was foreign to him, and while it did not come easily, Anselm found that the more he did it, the more he wanted to continue. It filled him with purpose and brought a spring to his tired steps.

It started with a vase of freshly cut roses on her nightstand one morning. He had been walking through the estate garden and saw them. Realizing how beautiful they would look in her quarters, he had the gardener snip a bundle. Next, he was speaking with an acquaintance who mentioned an art exhibition coming to London, featuring an artist of some renown, and Anselm could not wait to arrange a surprise for his wife.

Instead of mentioning it in passing at breakfast, or just asking her to go, he had a better idea. He sent for a new gown from the clothier and ordered that it be cut in the latest style and made from a shade of sapphire that so perfectly matched her striking eyes.. In the dress box, he had a handwritten note asking that she would wear the dress while joining him at the gallery opening.

"It is no problem."

"Thank ye all the same, husband," she murmured and he admired the twinkle in her bright eyes.



A lass could get used to this, Marion thought as she considered the significance of Anselm's latest gesture.

Flowers are one thing, but a new gown and an invitation to an art exhibition are much more personal. It is as if he really sees me for who I am.

It started subtly, but Marion felt the air between her and her husband shift.. It was not just the luxuries he had provided. It was

something more and undefinable.

She found herself starting to linger in the hallway at the precise moment she knew that Anselm would emerge from his study in the afternoon. A hot pulse throbbed through her body at the thought of him. She craved a shared glance, or even a small nod. She savored every opportunity to be nearer to him.

That afternoon, without explicit invitation, they began to walk. She followed him down the hall and before she knew it, they were roaming the streets of London.

- "I had nae idea how many people ye employ with yer estate," Marion remarked one afternoon. "Aside from yer family there are many who depend on ye. I think it is a beautiful way to give back to the community, with good jobs, wages and opportunities."
- "It is true," Anselm said as they paused in front of a large oak tree and a warm breeze swayed through the green leaves. "But even with all I have to manage, I am learning it is important to stop and look up once in a while."
- "Very wise, Yer Grace," Marion said as they turned to face each other. "I imagine ye would be more productive if ye regularly took time for such things, to keep yer mind fresh. Me faither swore by it! He went for two long walks every day, rain or shine. He said there was no such thing as bad weather if ye have the right clothin'."
- Anselm's mind then drifted to his own father and of the years he spent pouring over his work and the sorrowful fate of his memory. He shivered at the thought.
- "I think there may be something to your line of thinking, Marion. I will consider it," he said as they began walking again.
- There were other changes that Marion noticed. What had once been non-negotiable working hours in his study sometimes concluded earlier, especially if the day was pleasant or the work could just as well be completed the following day.
- He started to appear in the drawing room at precisely four o'clock each afternoon, just as Marion and Verity were settling down for their daily tea.
- He would pour himself a cup, join them on the opposite settee, and spend time in their company.
- "But Anselm," Verity insisted one afternoon, gesturing with her teacup at him. "Do you not see it clearly? If we invest in academies for all children and not just the privileged few with means, we will nurture young minds. Imagine the innovation and progress if education were accessible to all!"
- Anselm considered his sister's words instead of dismissing them and his gaze grew thoughtful.
- "An ambitious proposal, Verity. And costly. Where would the funding originate?"
- "I can think of one such benefactor," she retorted with another sharp gesture with her teacup.
- "I think Verity has a point," Marion chimed in. "Perhaps it is worth talkin' about with yer associates to see if there is a way this could be done."
- "Very well, I will think about it," he said as he set his teacup down on the saucer.
- "Pardon me, but you have a guest," Mrs. Clarke announced as Emmanuel entered the room.

- Anselm shifted uncomfortably on the velvet sofa where he had a teacup perched precariously on his knee. Emmanuel paused in the doorway and a broad grin spread across his face at the sight.
- "Well, well," Emmanuel drawled as he stepped into the room. "Am I to believe my eyes? The Duke has abandoned his ledgers? I thought for certain the world must have stopped turning, but it appears we are all still here."
- Anselm grunted as he set his teacup down with a controlled thump on the nearby table. He rose to his feet and crossed his arms against his chest.
- "Do not be absurd. I am merely taking a brief respite from my work, dear friend. Even I am allowed such luxuries, albeit occasionally."
- "Luxuries, indeed," Emmanuel chuckled as he sat in the chair closest to Verity. "I must say that I have also heard whispers of daily strolls around London, and now these afternoon tea parties. One might almost believe you were actually enjoying yourself. For the first time in your life, I might add."
- Emmanuel cast a knowing glance at Marion, whose cheeks flushed instantly at the comment. Anselm in turn shot Emmanuel a withering look.
- "I am ensuring my household runs with the efficiency and propriety expected of it as a family man. Something your bachelor ways would know nothing about I suppose."
- "Of course, Your Grace. I quite understand where you are coming from, even if I do not know of the particulars myself."
- Emmanuel winked at Marion, then smiled at Verity. Then, he leaned closer to Anselm and dropped his voice as he feigned a whisper. "You are entirely smitten, aren't you, old friend? This wife of yours... I fear she is actually chipping away at that iceberg you have encrusted around your heart."
- Anselm huffed, then stood abruptly and straightened his jacket. "Now, if you will all please excuse me, I have duties awaiting my attention. Unlike some gentlemen I know."
- "Very well," Emmanuel announced as he rose to his feet. "I only came here to see if you were all going to be attending Master Jordan's exhibit tomorrow."
- "Aye!" Marion said as she shot to her feet. "I am so excited. Will ye be joinin' us?"
- "If that is all right with your husband," Emmanuel said with a wry smile. "I would be delighted to see something that makes you so happy."
- "Oh, how exciting," Verity cooed. "Some actual culture for once instead of another dinner party or some cursed ball."
- "I, for one, am still having dreams about that mutton stew," Emmanuel complimented. "I love a good dinner party."
- "You have my dear wife to thank for that," Anselm said, turning to the group. "She has done a tremendous job acclimating to her duties in managing this household."
- "Thank ye, Anselm," Marion whispered as her cheeks tinged a deep crimson.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

to the

he light Master Jordan captured in this paintin' is quite remarkable," Marion said as she cooled herself with her feathered fan

- The weather was unseasonably warm that day, but it could not stifle her excitement as she moved to the next painting.
- "Oh, and this one! I daenae ken how he gets such strikin' colors."
- "No color is quite as striking as your gown," Anselm said as she blushed. "That shade of blue really suits you so well."
- "Ye only have yerself to thank for that," she said with a smile, as she pointed back to the painting. "But truly, Anslem. I daenae ken how he got that shade of red to be so...cherry."
- "Indeed, I am beginning to see what you are referring to with those colors and deft strokes. There are so many variations on color."
- "The possibilities are endless. Aye, I am so inspired here."
- "These are surely remarkable works, although I am more partial to yours. I did not realize I had so much to learn about art." Anselm offered her his arm and she accepted him. "I am grateful for your tutelage."
- Marion's body heated at the contact causing her cheeks to warm so she fanned herself more. Suddenly, a booming laugh came from behind them, announcing Emmanuel's arrival before he appeared.
- "Your sister has a vivid imagination, Your Grace," he said as Verity trailed behind him. "Her interpretations of these works are absolutely fantastical; the backstories she creates are more colorful than the paintings themselves."
- "And what, pray tell, is art without a healthy dose of fantasy, my lord?" Verity asked as she joined them. "It would be positively medieval!"
- "Good day to ye, Lord Wrotham," Marion said as she offered a polite curtsy. A smile played on her lips as she turned to greet him. "I am glad ye found Verity. She started wanderin' off when I took too long lookin' at these paintin's."
- "Yes, you are flitting around the room a bit much, Verity," Anselm chastised as he gave her a sideways look. "Thank you, my friend," he said as he turned his gaze back to Emmanuel.
- "Oh, you go too slowly, Marion! I am shocked at my brother's patience." Verity teased.

- "Well, what do you make of this piece?" Marion asked, desperate to avert attention to art and away from their relationship.
- "It is a man and wife on a large ship, facing a tempest on a raging sea. Yes, they are fleeing some dastardly man with a mustache, who is intent on destroying all they hold dear. Just look at those clouds!" Verity explained animatedly. "So ominous!"
- Emmanuel waved a dismissive hand. "Storm clouds are for poets, not painters. I do not know how you came up with such a tale, but this abstraction is not to my taste. How did you know they were clouds?"
- "Anyone can see that!" Verity argued. "It is as plain as day!"
- "Give me a portrait that captures the soul, or a still life that makes one's stomach rumble with hunger at the sight of fruit. That is talent."
- "Oh, is that so?" An older gentleman asked as he joined them.
- "Oh, my goodness gracious," Marion said as she removed herself from Anselm's arm to face the gentleman. "It is a great honor to meet you, Master Jordan. I am a great admirer of your work!"
- "I am most honored, Your Grace," he said with a small bow. "Thank you for coming to see my paintings."
- "I meant no disrespect, sir," Emmanuel offered with a wide smile.
- "Oh, it is the critics that keep me going. Do not worry, my lord. I can take it as well as I can dole it out," Master Jordan said with a laugh. "Please, enjoy yourselves."
- He left them then and joined another group who were busy making pleasant conversation. Marion watched as he engaged with people who were discussing his work. She admired his bravery at being so open to feedback. She longed for the day when she might be able to do such a thing.
- "What are you thinking about?" Anselm asked.
- Marion looked around and realized that Verity and Emmanuel had already gone on to greet some acquaintances who had just arrived at the exhibit.
- "Oh, nothin'," she said, shaking her head. "Just lost in me thoughts."
- "Tell me," he pressed, again wrapping an arm around hers. "I want to know your thoughts."
- "I was just thinkin' how brave Master Jordan is to put his work out there in such a vulnerable way," she explained. "I daenae ken if I could be so brave..."
- "Perhaps we just need to get you warmed up to the idea, because I believe that the world deserves to see your art one day. When you are ready, that is."

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The quiet companionship that had begun to blossom between Marion and Anselm found a new, unspoken outlet in her art in the days that followed the exhibition.

She found that the more time she spent with him, the more he intrigued her artist's eye. She was more careful in observing him, whether in his study as she passed by or walking with him in the gardens. She was drawn to the rigid lines of his posture, the sharp angles of his bearded jaw, which were both offset by the allure of his sparkling green eyes.

The thought of trying to capture the raw power that lay beneath his polished exterior exhilarated her.

Aye, he is a most compelling subject, she thought to herself as she began sketching his face one day during afternoon tea.

She moved the charcoal, trying to capture just the way his brow furrowed when he was deep in thought and arguing some point with Verity.

The next day at tea, she tried to complete a charcoal study of his hand. In the movements of her lines, she aimed to capture how strong and capable it was as he turned the pages of a book. She was so very inspired by him.

She started carrying a small sketchbook with her in her pocket, so that she might become a silent observer who captured fleeting moments as she went about her days. While he likely had noticed her attention, he never commented or questioned her outwardly. Although sometimes, she would catch his gaze upon her. She felt a heat in her belly at the flicker of curiosity in his green eyes. Ever the gentleman, he would quickly turn away and pretend not to notice.

Then came the morning she found him in the enclosed yard on the estate, practicing his fencing. She awoke earlier than usual, due to some unseemly noise from passersby who had clearly had an exciting night in the city.

She wandered the halls until she made her way to the balcony, drawn by the metallic clang of steel that echoed through the crisp morning air. She watched him spar with a dummy as he moved around it with a fluid, lethal grace. His strikes and thrusts held such an intensity that the sight took her breath away.

The reaction could have also been drawn from her, perhaps, because he was shirtless. His powerful shoulders and muscled back gleamed with sweat and his trousers clung low to his lean hips. It was the body she had sketched in secret and carefully placed in the back of her sketchbook. As she flipped to those pages, she looked up at the image before her—brought to vibrant, living reality.

Aye, me memory couldnae do justice to this sight, she thought. I cannae waste the opportunity.

Marion hesitated for only a moment. She ran to her studio and retrieved her larger sketchbook and charcoals. She placed a portable easel discreetly beneath the shade of a large oak tree that bordered the training yard. The servants and household staff would be busy preparing for breakfast and none of them would expect her to be up at such an hour.

This is it.

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Anselm felt her presence on the balcony immediately that morning. He could smell the sweet notes of jasmine and lavender in the air, mingled with whatever hint that was uniquely her. He breathed deep as he practiced his fencing and channeled his energy.

He heard her shuffle away after a few moments and continued his workout, which had become a necessary means to keep himself focused. His own draw to Marion was nearly more than he could take, and physical exertion the only way to restrain it.

A few minutes later, he was alerted by the subtle rustle of her skirts nearby. He paused mid-lunge and turned his head around to locate where she was. Then, he saw her.

A faint flush rose on his cheeks. She had an easel and charcoal in hand. Her gaze was fixed on him with an artist's intense focus.

For a beat, he simply stared back. His chest heaved from exertion, but also the sight of her. He simply nodded once, then turned back to his practice.

Let her, he thought as he continued, going harder and stronger in his movements. I never would have thought me to be a muse, yet here I am.

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And so, Marion sketched an outline of him to later paint in her studio. She sketched the powerful sweep of his muscled arm as he lunged and the taut lines of his back as he twisted back from the strike. She tried her best to capture the concentrated intensity in his profile and the downward point of his nose.

He moved with such brutal elegance. Every inch of him was so defined, every movement purposeful. She worked quickly. Her charcoal flew across the page, as she attempted to capture the raw energy and disciplined strength.

She feared that the silence between them would be awkward, but it was not. It was hot. It was charged. They existed in that moment, a shared space of observation and creation between subject and artist.

- "Your Grace," Mr. Lewis called from the entrance to the yard. "Some important mailings have arrived that require your attention prior to breakfast. I only wanted to alert you as you have gone roughly a half hour over your usual practice time."
- "Thank you, Lewis," he said as he picked up a nearby cloth and dabbed the sweat on his brow. "I will be just a moment."
- "Thank you, Your Grace. I am sure Her Grace and Lady Verity will be down any moment to join you to break their fasts."
- Marion began packing up her supplies furiously then. She skirted off through a hidden trail to a little used entrance.

She did not want to explain to anyone why she had been up and in the yard at such an hour, nor have anyone ask what she had drawn.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



A ye, this home is more tastefully decorated than I had imagined, Marion thought as she looked around the grand dining room, taking in the elegant paintings, lush drapery, and ornate candelabras.

Crystal chandeliers dripped light onto the polished mahogany of Lady Featherstone's London home. The hum of polite conversation mingled with the clinking of glasses as everyone took their seats at the long, rectangular table.

Marion had selected an elegant gown of deep emerald, which had drawn her in like Anselm's verdant eyes and the hills of Scotland she so missed. It was cut in a way that emphasized her curves without flaunting them. Her hair was swept up in an elegant arrangement with small rhinestones that glittered in the light.

She found herself seated near the head of the table and to Anselm's left. The familiar current of awareness sparked between them as he took his place next to her.

She had difficulty getting comfortable in her chair, a product of sitting so close to him. Despite the formal setting, and the propriety it required, she felt hot and flushed. She looked at him then, realizing he was wearing a newly cut suit that perfectly fit his every line. Her eyes were drawn to the lapel, which had a small green fabric adornment.

It matches me gown perfectly. Her heart skipped a beat at the sight, and he looked at her with a small smile.

Aye, this man affects me so. I will have to trouble Lady Featherstone for a fan!

As if on cue, she made her way to the head of the table and gave a small nod for the party to begin the first course.

The conversation around them drifted from political gossip to the latest scandalous novel, which produced knowing smiles from both Anselm and Marion. They remained mostly silent as they moved from the first course to the second, their own unspoken conversation pulsing between them.

Marion observed how he maintained his dignified composure, offering concise, often dry, remarks when appropriate to the other guests at the table. She took a steadying sip of Portuguese wine, letting it sweep over her like a breeze.

As she savored a bit more of her glass, she found herself in a more whimsical mood. The day leading up to it had been pleasing enough. She had spent the afternoon in her studio testing paint colors to begin bringing her sketches to life. It was a far cry from her time with Reverand McCrae as she thought for a moment of the day he took her supplies from her. She shivered at the thought.

With Anselm next to her, she felt lighter. She was more connected to him and herself than ever. She was truly happy.

What would I have done...if the marriage to the Viscount had happened? While there is so much unsaid between me and Anselm... I cannae deny there is nowhere else in the world I would rather be than by his side.

As a particularly pompous lord, whom Marion literally could not name to save her life, launched into a lengthy monologue about the superiority of his many hounds, she drained the last of her wine glass. She leaned slightly towards Anselm while a playful fire rolled in her belly.

"Do ye ken..." she whispered, her blue eyes twinkling bright. "Do ye ken why dogs make the best arborists?"



Anselm, who had been half listening to Lord Bowman with detached politeness, stiffened at the sound of Marion's voice in his ear. A faint muscle twitched in his jaw. He was unsure if he heard her correctly.

- "Can you kindly repeat your question?" he whispered back with a tight smile.
- "Do ye ken why dogs make the best arborists?"
- "Yes, that is what I thought you said... And I have no idea what you are getting at but—"
- "Because...they are experts in bark."

A soft, foreign, and unexpected sound escaped from deep within Anselm. It took a moment for him to realize it, but yes. It was a low chuckle, which he quickly stifled with a forced cough. He turned his gaze back to Lord Bowman, who was still going on about his dogs.

His shoulders gave him away though. They shook, almost imperceptibly, as he tried desperately to stifle his laugh, which percolated under the surface. The more he tried to suppress his amusement, the more his shoulders began to shake. His lips curved into a genuine, unforced smile as his eyes met Marion's. She smiled back at him, and he returned to the pheasant on his plate.

He took a bite and looked up around the table. He noticed that the guests were not looking at Lord Bowman, but they were intently watching him and Marion.

Lady Featherstone, who had been dissecting her meat with surgical precision, looked right at him. She raised her eyebrow as her fork hovered in mid-air.

- "I must be clued in on whatever has made His Grace so amused," she said with a whistle as she turned her gaze to Marion.
- "Oh, I assure, you, my lady, that there was just something caught in my throat," Anselm said as he took a sip of his wine. "I am perfectly fine now. Thank you for your concern, but it is not needed."
- "Surely, not our dinner! Everyone is enjoying our main course, yes? I had Chef Paquet come in from France just for the season!"

Heads turned to Lady Featherstone, and they nodded frantically in approval. Guests began to obligatorily stuff themselves. Yet even before her intervention, Anselm registered the collective realization that the formidable Duke had just laughed. And in public. And it was clearly at something *his Scottish Duchess* had said.

- "I do apologize, Yer Grace," Marion murmured once polite conversation had resumed around them. "I seem to have rattled yer perfect composure."
- He merely inclined his head as a hint of a lingering smile still played about his lips, even as he tried to hide it.
- "On the contrary, Duchess," he replied. "You merely proved that even the most insufferable of bores must break eventually."
- Lady Featherstone narrowed her eyes, clearly overhearing his statement. Yet, contrary to her flamboyant nature, she did not push. A smile crossed her plump face and reached her dark brown eyes.
- "Come, let us eat dessert," Lady Featherstone announced as the servants brought out slices of pound cake with Chantilly cream and strawberry compote to the guests.
- "This is most delicious, Lady Featherstone," Marion said as she devoured each bite. "Truly a feat!"
- "Well, I am glad we are able to satisfy her Scottish appetite," Lord Bowman said with a chuckle as he drained his glass of port wine.
- Anselm stiffened at the insinuation that his duchess was anything less than a perfect lady. It took everything inside of him not to stand up and show the old codger some manners. He set down his napkin when Marion shot him a knowing look.
- "It is fine," Marion said as she took his hand in hers. "Let them say what they want. They will be tired of me Scottishness one day. Just nae this day."
- "I do not like it," Anselm said as he took a small bite of the dessert. "But you are right. This really is excellent cake."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Finally, the day is done, and I can settle by the fire and enjoy a small brandy, Anselm thought to himself as he left the drawing room where his sister was reading.

The day after Lady Featherstone's dinner party had passed without consequence many of his stray thoughts drifted back to the event. He thought of the unexpected laughter and the reactions of the other guests.

Am I so unabashedly serious that it is a shock for me to laugh in public? Worthy even of the gossip sheets?

Yet, he kept coming back to how good the feeling settled in his chest. He felt lighter and almost jovial. He had forgotten how healthy a good laugh could make one feel.

He was wandering the halls, intending to retire to his chambers, when a soft glow came from the door to Marion's studio. It caught his attention, and he was drawn to it like a moth to a flame. The gas lamps cast long, dancing shadows which were offset by her work. He paused for a moment to watch and noticed how her brush moved with practiced ease across the canvas like a waltz in the light.

He stepped closer and the scent of paint welcomed him, reminding him of her. He reached the door to peek in and saw that she was engrossed in a landscape. She was painting the rugged beauty of Strathcairn again, each hill taking shape under her hand.

Anselm entered with a soft knock and as soon as his eyes landed on her, he was full of gratitude at the sight. They had missed their afternoon walk due to a meeting. Until this moment, he had not realized how much he had longed to see her because he had missed the now familiar ritual. He walked to stand beside her and quietly observed her work for a moment before speaking.

"Things have been looking up for Verity, you know," he said, a hint of relief in his tone as he loosened his collar. "I have received word that her newest novella is receiving excellent notices, even amongst those who usually disdain such work. And I am not sure if it is just me, but she seems... happier." He paused, then continued with his gaze still resting on her painting. "Would you agree?"

"I think ye are right," Marion said as she continued her strokes. "She seems comfortable here and I too have noticed a change in her for the better."

"You have done well, Marion. Which is why I have come here. You do not have to report to me anymore. I do not need you to tell me of her comings and goings. I need to trust that if she needs my intervention...that she will come to me directly."

Marion lowered her brush and set it on a nearby palette before turning to face him fully.

"Thank ye, Anselm," she said as she threw her arms around him unexpectedly. "That truly means a great deal. But... I think ye

should tell her yerself. She would be so relieved. So proud that ye feel she is wise enough to be her own lass."

He sighed as he pulled back from her hold and walked to the window so he might open it to let in the evening air.

"It is more complicated than that, Marion. I have been responsible for her care for so long. Since she was a small child. It is difficult to... to simply stifle that instinct even though she is a grown woman now. In fact, to see her as an adult now, capable of navigating her own life and her own choices... is a lot to grapple with."

"What do ye mean?" Marion asked.

Anselm hesitated, his jaw tightening at the thought of opening up. Yet, once the first words came the rest flowed like a waterfall.

"After our mother's death..." he began, his voice low as he paced the room. "You see, our father was not fit to manage the duchy. Not truly. If I am being honest, even before that.

"What do you mean, Anselm?" she asked as she walked across the room to join him by the window.

"The responsibility fell to me, even before he was gone. Verity was so young. So vulnerable. I could not let her see..."

He did not elaborate more because he couldn't. He could not put words to the depths of his despair when they realized his father was slowly losing his cognition. He did not know how to explain how his mother had truly died, yet he knew the implication was clear that there was more to the story than most knew.

"But Verity is not that lassie anymore, Anselm," she said softly. "Obviously yer family has been through more than I ken... but I also ken that she is a woman who is finding her voice. She needs to see that ye trust her too, to feel it."

"I suppose," he said. "I will think about it."

"Perhaps... perhaps if ye simply reached out to her. Spoke to her and told her that ye truly see her as she is now. Ye might be surprised at her reaction."

"I will... I will try, Marion."

A comfortable silence fell between them, broken only by the soft brush of wind against the open window.

"Do you miss him?" she whispered.

Anselm's breath hitched as a faint sigh escaped him. He looked away again, towards the shadowed corners of the room. He nodded slowly.

"I have been missing him for a long time now. Even when he was still here."

"I miss me parents too," she said softly. "Every day. It never truly leaves ye, does it?"

Anselm watched her walk over and stand in front of the Strathcairn landscape on her easel. She looked at it and then toward him.

"I remember when me maither used to paint with me in the fields behind Strathcairn Hall. And me faither... he always had a story for everything. Even the rocks in the stream had a purpose, things they had seen in the centuries they had sat there. And then one day... they were just... gone."

Anselm's heart ached for her as her voice trembled. He recognized the effort it took for her to recall what had happened so many years ago.

"I felt utterly alone," she continued. "I had no siblin's to look to, only meself. It was like I was adrift in an endless sea, with nothing to hold on to. I was passed from the McCrae's to the Harlowe's...then the Viscount..."

Anselm listened. His expression grew darker with each word and his hands clenched into fists by his sides.

"And the notes before the weddin day... they just confirmed everythin' I feared about me future. That I was somehow tainted, ruined, and undeservin' of happiness... without me real family on this earth."

When she finished, her voice was low but strong and unwavering.

Just like her, Anselm thought.

"You will want for nothing ever again, Marion. Do you understand? Nothing. And you are safe. Here. With me. I promise you that if nothing else. I will give you the world," he said as he closed the distance between them and grasped her hands.



Marion looked deep into his eyes, seeing the raw protectiveness that flowed inside of him for her. She had seen his concern and care for her, with the gestures and their growing time together. But this was a flicker of something else, something she had dismissed before. She took a breath and her heart pounded with sudden, reckless courage.

"And what do ye want, Anselm?" she asked.

"Do not ask me that, Marion," he rasped.

He swallowed hard. She watched his eyes widen as he recoiled slightly before moving a few paces away from her. Marion thought he looked as if he had been struck by lightning the way he shook his hands.

"And why nae? Ye are nae as formidable as ye think and ye cannae ask all the questions. Ye ken what I want. As hard as I try to be composed, it is as plain as day. I cannae masquerade as you can. Ye ken what I desire, husband. Do ye?"

"I have wanted you most desperately... Since the moment you sat in front of me in that blasted carriage in Strathcairn as another man's bride," he said as he took a step toward her.

"And since the second I heard your sweet voice. The way you sound when you speak Gaelic..." He took another step toward returning to her. "Since the moment I tasted you..." He closed the remaining distance between them.

"I...I...I daenae ken what to say—"



He did not wait for her to say anymore. He could not wait.

His lips descended, hot and demanding on hers. It was a searing kiss that swept away all logical thought, along with any residual hesitation. She was his to be had.

Marion's arms wrapped around his neck as she pulled him closer to her. She clung to him as if they were tethered together, intensified by the relief of his touch. The passion that had simmered between them for so long finally erupted, hot and needy.

They moved about the room as they kissed passionately. The easel tilted until it fell, and brushes clattered as they hit the floor. Neither of them noticed or perhaps they did not have the capacity to care as they reached for each other feverishly and kissed wildly.

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All she could feel was the fire between them as she savored the taste of his tongue in her mouth. It was salt and wine and she devoured it. He lifted her effortlessly into his arms and carried her to the plush sofa nearby. He took off her gown with efficient speed before placing it on a nearby chair and leaving her in her undergarments.

"You are a sight to behold, wife," he said as he licked his full lips. "In fact, you are every fantasy I did not know I had. You are everything. I cannot ignore the pull between us any longer. Can you?"

"No," she said breathlessly. "I think I may die if we daenae act on this now. I have never wanted or needed somethin' so badly."

He took his shirt off then and lowered his trousers to the floor. Marion looked at him with eager eyes as a sense of fear percolated in her chest at the sight of him naked in front of her.

How will that fit inside of me? She wondered nervously as she wrapped her arms instinctively around her body. How will I ken what to do? I ken this is primal, but I feel so unprepared...

"We will take it slow, my tempest. I will make sure every moment we share together fills you with sheer bliss," he said as he walked to her, leaned over her on the sofa, and kissed her cheek reverently. "You do not need to worry. Not now and not ever. I will make this perfect for you."

"I daenae ken what to say...I...."

"Say that you are mine, my tempest."

"I am yers, Anselm."

"That is a good lass," he said as he lowered his body onto hers. "Kiss me."

She raised her mouth to meet his so that they might resume the hot, tender deluge of soft kisses, licks and nibbles. She wrapped her teeth around his bottom lip and tugged slightly enjoying the fullness of it.

"I need to...to stop." He pushed himself away from her abruptly.

"What in the bloody hell is the matter?" Marion asked, startled at the pause. "You cannae stop now!"

"We cannot do this here, much as I need you as soon as possible. Quick, put on your clothes." He dressed hurriedly, grabbing his breeches and stepping into them. "We are going to my room. I will not let our first time be on your studio sofa. There will

- "Aye, ye are right!"

 She jumped to her feet and began to dress, even more quickly than Anselm, throwing up pieces of fabric and hoping they covered the appropriate places. As soon as she was somewhat decent, he swept her up into his impossibly brawny arms and she let out a giggle.
- "Are you ready for this, wife?" he asked as he kicked open the door of the studio and carried her quickly down the hall.
- "Somethin' tells me you have done this before," Marion said with a giggle.

be time for that later."

- "Not a chance," he whispered in her ear, tickling her neck with his beard. "There are going to be many more firsts between us, Duchess. You are the only woman for me."
- Marion leaned forward, her hand fumbling for the handle before she managed to turn it.
- The door swung open with a soft creak, and he swept her inside, kicking it closed behind them. He placed her down gently before undressing her, more slowly this time. It was as if the hot urgency of their earlier exchange tempered him, allowing him to savor the moment.
- "I have never seen such perfect breasts," he whispered as he brought her undergarments down her body and threw them to the floor.
- "Ye really think so? I have never given it much thought—"
- "Surely you are joking; you are the perfect woman," he said as he took off his clothes in front of her, casting them on the floor with her scraps. "I am a very, very lucky man."
- "Ye are one to talk! I think when they spoke of Adonis, they really meant Anselm Drummond!"
- "Are we going to talk all night and dole out compliments, or can I finally make you my wife completely?"
- Marion nodded then and a wide smile pulled on her cheeks. He lowered himself onto her and smothered her with tender kisses —first at her neck and then he trailed lower to settle on her breasts.
- "Oh, me goodness," Marion said as she tightened her legs together to quell her need to feel him there. "Your lips there... it is an incredible feelin'."
- "I cannot tell you how much you please me, just by being you."
- He continued to suckle her pert nipples, alternating between the two and palming them hungrily. He subtly shifted his weight to put himself between her legs as he rubbed his hard length up and down her wet sex.
- "You are so ready to take me, wife. Do you feel it?"
- "Aye." She closed her eyes tight in response to the reeling sensations. "I think I am, although I daenae ken what to do. Ye will have to be patient with me."

- "Don't worry, darling. I'll take care of you."
- He trailed his finger down and settled on the soft bud in between her legs. He circled it gently, applying pressure with his thumb and thrusting his hard length in a rhythmic motion at her entrance. She bucked at the pressure, trying to pull him into her.
- "Not so fast," he whispered in her ear. "I want to get you good and worked up for me, my Scottish tempest."
- "I am ready," she said as he pressed perfectly on her, pushing her over the edge. "I am ready for ye, I promise. Please."
- He slowly pressed his hard length inside of her, closing all the space between them until they were one being.
- His movements were small and precise, which Marion knew had to be in sharp contrast to the urges he felt. He was tender and respectful of her as she adjusted to the fullness inside of her.
- "Are you all right, my tempest?" he asked as he pulled out slightly to gauge her comfort. "Because if you are not, please...just say the word and I will stop—"
- "Keep goin'," she said, wrapping her legs around his waist and pulling him tight against her. "Daenae stop."
- He picked up his pace then, filling her to the hilt again and again as she pulled him closer and closer with her strong legs. She looked up at him. The strength of his body was so hot as she felt him drive into her again and again.
- It is as if we are meant for each other, she thought.
- "You take me like the good girl you are, Marion," he said as he picked up his eager pace. "I am close to release, but I need to feel yours again and on my cock."
- "Oh, I am right there with ye, husband," she cried.
- "Marion," he growled huskily. His body convulsed as hot sweat dripped from his brow onto her full breasts.
- He lowered himself onto his side next to her. After a moment or two of catching his breath, he rose to his feet to grab a cloth and wash basin. He dipped it in the cool water and began dabbing it on her, cleaning her almost reverently.
- "Ye daenae need to do that," she said as she tried to rise, which was useless as he guided her back down onto the bed.
- "I told you, you will want for nothing ever again, my tempest," he said as he dipped the cloth in the water and ran it over her hot sex. "I will take good care of you."
- After he finished washing her, he covered her with the lush duvet and walked over to a table that held watered wine. He poured her a small glass and offered it to her lips.
- "Drink," he said, and she did.
- He crawled back into bed and pulled her close. She settled her head on his chest as they looked up at the ceiling. She had not noticed before the beautiful intricacies of his four-poster bed and the fabric on the ceiling. There were tiny golden stars that created a pattern along a deep crimson fabric. She found her eyes getting lost as she moved from one star to the next, creating shapes that morphed into moving comets.

- "I like to look up at the stars, too," he said. "Ever since I was a young boy."
- "I loved to go out to the fields and lay in the grass on warm summer nights to do just that."
- "We will share it together, my tempest," he whispered in her ear.
- "I like the sound of that," she said as her heavy eyes began to close. "Aye, let us talk more of that... in the mornin'..."

Chapter Thirty

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arion woke the next morning, nestled against Anselm's side as they lay in his bed. She felt the weight of his arm around her. It was a warm, anchoring presence across her waist that pulled her tight against his body. She arched her backside into him, earning a sleepy, satisfied sigh from her husband.

Aye, I could get used to this, she said, feeling every bit the goddess Anselm said she was.

- She looked up to the soft light of dawn. Her eyes followed the rays of sunshine that painted the room. She realized it had been too long since she just laid still and observed the light. She took a deep breath, realizing that she was utterly content. Anselm's embrace was the embodiment of peace, something she did not know she needed so badly.
- "Good morning, wife," he whispered in her ear.
- "I dinnae ken ye were awake," she said as she turned around to face him. "Good mornin', husband. It seems about time for yer fencin'."
- "I think I will be skipping that today," he said as he ran a hand over his eyes, shaking off his heavy sleep. "If I recall, I exerted myself quite a bit last night and think I earned a reprieve from exercise. What do you say, Duchess?"
- "I am happy to grant ye a reprieve," she said. There was a silly, playful tone in her voice.
- "Tell me though," Anselm started, his tone serious. "Do you feel all right this morning? Are you feeling well?"
- "I hate to tell ye, but I daenae feel so good..."
- He sprung up from the bed and ran to a nearby chair to fetch his dressing robe. He threw it over his shoulders quickly and then fumbled for his slippers, nearly falling onto the floor. A laugh escaped Marion's lips at the sight.
- "Why the devil are you laughing at me?"
- "Ye dinnae let me finish. I daenae feel so good... I feel fantastic, husband. Completely and totally fantastic."
- He plopped down onto the chair and smiled at her as a small chuckle came from deep in his chest. He shook his head from side to side and wagged his finger at her.
- "I do not know what to do with you," he said. "But I think I will find a way to sort that out. One thing is for sure... will never again sleep elsewhere. You belong in my bed, wife. Do you not agree?"

True to her word, from that night forward, Marion only slept in Anselm's bed. The vast, intimidating room transformed into their shared sanctuary. She brought her favorite pillows and some paintings, combining his aesthetic with her own to make a room that was truly theirs.

At first, she assigned it to coincidence, but slowly Marion noticed that the only thing absent from their bed was his nightmares. She knew in her heart that something about her presence steadied him, just as he did for her.

She thought of all he had been through. The many years of nightmares, like the one that had led to that raw, agonizing scream that brought her to him. They had simply ceased. She watched him most nights and found joy in how he slept deeply and restfully. She knew it was something he had not done since his childhood.

Perhaps we are meant to be, Marion wrote in her journal one morning before she went down for breakfast. Our movements and lovemaking are as if we are one being. The way I sleep with him is so restful and pure, as if we have been together since the beginning of time. I cannae wait to see what the coming weeks bring.

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"If I have to look at one more number, I think I may go blind," Anselm said with a frustrated sigh.

It was a blustery afternoon, with rain lashing against the windows of his study. The world outside seemed to match the tempest within Anselm, furious and unyielding. He had been hunched over his desk, poring over ledgers trying to account for a small overage in his account.

"I know I should not obsess about having more money than anticipated, but I do not like it when numbers do not perfectly add up," he said as he closed the heavy book with a soft thud and pushed it aside. "I will have to look at it with fresh eyes later."

He turned fully to Marion then, who was sketching quietly in an armchair nearby. He liked her presence in his study. He grew fond of the scratching of her charcoal and the steadiness of her breathing. He was fond of *her*.

"Marion," he began, cutting over a crack of thunder. "There is more you should know about my father. About my mother. As I have been going through these ledgers, there has been more on my mind. I think...I want to talk to you about them. Is that all right?"

"Oh, Anselm!" she said as she put down her sketchbook, the charcoal stick rolling silently onto the plush rug. "I am all ears. Please, I would love to know more."

"Well," he said, trailing off as he looked out at the rain pouring onto the distant London streets in thick droplets. "It is not pleasant."

"Ye daenae have to, Anselm, if it is too painful," she offered, her voice soft with concern. "But I am here if ye are ready."

"No. You deserve to know. All of it." He took a deep, shuddering breath, as if steeling himself against the storm itself. "After my mother's death... it was not just that he struggled to manage the duchy. He... he was a broken man, Marion. Utterly."

"How was he broken?"

"His mind began to deteriorate long before my mother passed, when I was about fifteen years of age. It was subtle at first, hard to see. He would forget something that was obvious, like the name of a nearby town, or repeat himself. I thought he was tired." Anselm shook his head.

"One day he caught a terrible cold and mother called a physician to examine him. After he finished his examination, he asked to speak to my mother, who in turn fetched me. They explained that the cold was benign, and we were so relieved but confused at the look in his face. I can still see that look."

"Oh Anselm, was he sick in the mind?"

"Yes, the physician explained that he was experiencing a wasting of the mind, which would ultimately render him incapable of running the estate and fulfilling his duties as Duke. Mother bribed him to keep it a secret, knowing well there was no treatment and even if we were to empty our coffers in search of it. We managed the best we could, keeping him concealed. To save his reputation and legacy, the good name of our family. It was the only way. And Verity..." His voice tightened. There was a raw edge to it she had not heard before.

"It must have been so hard for her as well..."

"She was just a child. Lost most days, wondering where her father was. Yet, mother and I kept it a secret. We made sure she saw him, but only in short visits. But then, he got worse..."

The thunder cracked and Marion rose to her feet. She walked to Anselm's desk chair and sat in his lap. They shared a long embrace and the silence was broken by another crack.

"He became angrier as his condition became more grave. He would suffer erratic episodes where he would yell or lash out. One day, mother was trying to comfort him during an especially bad one. He...he pushed her too hard, at such an angle that she fell and hit her head on the stone."

Marion made the sign of the cross.

"I was the first to find him and he was beside himself with grief. I held him in my arms, forced to grapple with the fact that my father had murdered my mother...and that I had to cover it up."

"Does anyone else ken this?"

"Just you, and Emmanuel. He has been my closest friend all these years. Without him I do not think I could have endured it. From that point on, I was Verity's guardian for all intents and purposes. And when father finally succumbed to his disease, it was official."

"How long after did he pass?"

"He did not pass until I was one and twenty. Verity has no idea of this and if I have it my way, she never will. This is my burden to carry, and I thank you for lessening it."

Marion fell to her knees in front of him then and took his hands in hers.

"Oh, Anselm," she whispered. "Ye carried such a burden. All that time. All that grief. You were just a lad... I cannae imagine how hard that was for ye. I ken in me heart yer parents would be so proud of the man ye have become and how well ye have cared for yer sister."

She squeezed his hands gently as he pulled her up to her feet. He held her tight against him as he buried his face in her shoulder. He felt the weight of decades of suppressed agony release.

He did not cry, but his body shook slightly. Showing his vulnerability was a new sensation, but something about her presence steadied him.

She continued to hold him as he shook and her arms wrapped tightly around him. Slowly, as the rain began to subside, so did his tremors. His breathing became more even before he finally gave a silent nod.

"Ye are so brave, me husband," she said, planting a soft kiss on his warm cheek. "Thank ye for trustin' me and confidin' in me. Much as I hate that ye have kent so much pain, I am grateful to be here with ye."

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The following evening, Verity, Marion, and Anselm shared a quiet moment in the drawing room. The fire in the hearth cast dancing shadows, and the only sounds were the crackle of the logs and the rustle of pages. Verity was engrossed in a particularly romantic passage of her own writing and when she suddenly looked up, her eyes narrowed playfully at her brother over the top of her manuscript.

"Anselm," she announced, her voice laced with a mischievous curiosity. "I have finally figured it out. You look... well less like a thundercloud these days. What exactly has changed? Because as I was reading this passage, I decided you have finally discovered the joys of a well-written hero."

Anselm cleared his throat. A faint blush touched his cheekbones which was a sure tell that he was caught. He knew it. And better yet, he knew that Verity knew it.

"Yes, I suppose my disposition has changed, Verity," he said as he set down his paper. "And while most of my reading remains focused on matters of substance, I perhaps have read a certain novel that has been the talk of the *ton*. It has been quite the education."

He glanced at Marion. There was a spark of amusement in his eyes because they both knew full well she had caught him, just the other week, poring over the pages of *The Highland Holiday*.

Verity exchanged a knowing look with Marion. A silent communication ran between them.

"Well, whatever the source of your new countenance," Verity continued, a soft, genuine smile gracing her face, "it suits you, big brother. In fact, it suits both of you! You seem... so very content."

The word hung in the air, simple yet profound.

Content.

It was a new feeling for Anselm, and he knew the same was true for Marion. It was something they would learn to embrace together.

"Yes, that is a good way to put it. I am content and...hope you are too," Anselm said as he looked to his sister, before picking up his paper and reading furiously. "But do not think I have gone soft on you, because I have not!"

"Oh, I would not dare dream of such a reality. I have known you my whole life. Much as men's hearts can change pigs cannot

fly."

The room erupted in playful laughter, covering them all like a warm blanket.

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I cannae waste this light!

One particularly bright morning, the kind that promised a respite from London's relentless grey, Marion was in her studio and hard at work. She had skipped breakfast and as long as the sun would keep was determined to skip lunch too.

Sunlight streamed through the large window, illuminating the intricate floral arrangement she was sketching with perfect definition. She hummed softly, lost in the delicate curve of a rose petal, when the door creaked open.

Anselm entered, his movements unhurried as he strode about the space. His gaze swept slowly over her canvases, taking in the vibrant landscapes of Strathcairn she often painted, his eyes lingering on the familiar hills and glens she had so lovingly rendered.

"Your work is truly outstanding, Marion," he said, his voice soft, almost reverent. "You capture such... life. These scenes, even something as simple as a blade of grass, is so...I do not know the word for it. Poignant?"

Marion smiled, a genuine warmth spreading through her at his praise. She threw her shoulders back with pride, swirling around to meet his gaze.

"Thank you, Anselm. It is my escape."

"Surely you do not need such an escape from me?"

"Oh ye, me darlin'... ye are me muse. But ye ken that already. Ye have caught me from time to time, sketchin' ye."

He approached her, a thoughtful expression on his face that quickly morphed into something else entirely. It was a look that pulled at her hips and pooled in her belly.

"I have a proposition for you, Duchess."

He paused, then his lips curved into that rare, captivating smirk she had come to adore, a flash of the mischievous boy beneath the Duke. Marion liked that lad.

"I was thinking... since you are so adept at capturing... subjects." His eyes gleamed with undisguised mischief. "Perhaps you might consider a new commission. Something... private. Just for me."

Marion felt a blush creep up her neck, a delicious heat spreading through her that thrilled her. She knew exactly where this was going, her heart quickening its rhythm.

Oh yes, she thought. I have been waitin' for this.

"And what subject did ye have in mind, Yer Grace?" she asked, clearing her throat playfully. "A model perhaps?"

I will make him work for it though...

He walked around her easel. His steps were slow and deliberate until he stopped directly behind her sofa. His hands gently rested on the back of it, his thumbs stroking the plush fabric as she desperately wished it was the skin of her neck. He leaned down onto it, the sight of his strong arms, even in his shirt, sent a shiver down her spine.

"I believe you have already captured my essence quite admirably in a certain charcoal sketch I recall discovering. In fact, I seem to recall multiple sketches over the last several weeks," he said, his voice was a low rumble.

"Perhaps such things exist."

"But a mere torso, Marion? Surely, my wife, a true artist, could capture the entirety of her muse."

Marion's heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat in her ears. Much as she wanted this, hearing the words was a different experience entirely. She felt the heat of his body from across the room, the intoxicating scent of him enveloping her. She inhaled the scents of pine, musk, and crisp linen, mingling to form something uniquely Anselm. She closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the teasing intimacy, letting the full weight of his suggestion settle over her.

"Are you suggesting, dear husband," she whispered, "that I paint you as you truly are?"

The implication hung in the air, audacious and thrilling.

He chuckled, a rich, deep sound that vibrated through her, making her lean onto her easel to steady herself.

"Precisely, my tempest. Or perhaps, more accurately, like one of your Highlanders. But in the privacy of our chambers, of course. No clothes required. Will that work for you?"

He strode over to her. His green eyes were dark with the desire she had come to crave. She liked the way she looked in his eyes.

"Would that be agreeable to you, madam painter? Surely, I will pay whatever fee you require."

Marion's gaze lingered on his full lips, considering his most tempting invitation. A thrill, potent and undeniable, shot through her, igniting a fire in her veins.

"More than agreeable, Yer Grace," she breathed, her voice husky with anticipation. "A privilege, in fact. My brush awaits and I will waive the requisite fee as repayment."

"As you wish," he said as he planted a kiss on her head, and walked out of the studio, leaving her breathless.

Chapter Thirty-One

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ell me again why we have to go to these bloody things," Verity sighed as she sipped on a glass of champagne.

"Verity! You cannae let yer brother hear ye speak like that. "Marion whispered as she threw a playful elbow into her. "Ye are incorrigible; I swear it."

"What are you two going on about?" Anselm said when he joined them in a corner. "Is this party a bore or what?"

- The three laughed as they clinked their glasses, looking around at the stodgy company.
- "At least Emmanuel should be here soon," Verity sighed. "He always livens things up a bit."
- "If one did not know better, they would assume you were interested in him. Be careful sister, I know better, but most do not."
- "Oh, can you stop!" Verity said as she walked off to greet a friend.
- Lady Thistlewaite's evening soiree was, as expected, a glittering but stifling affair. The air was thick with the scent of summer lilies and ambition, the drone of polite conversation a constant hum. Lord Thistlewaite, as ever, was sipping from his flask in the corner and telling jokes inappropriate for, well any situation really.
- Marion, now accustomed to the ton's discerning gaze, navigated the crowded rooms of their grand estate with newfound confidence. While the whispers of her Scottishness followed, they had grown infrequent. More than that, she did not care. Anselm's subtle presence was a compass, one with which she navigated through any storm.
- "Let us keep turning about until we find some suitable company," he joked as he pulled her closer. "And if we cannot, are you able to feign a headache so we can retire early?"
- "Oh, what a splendid idea! I left my supplies ready so we can resume my work."
- "Agreed then. Let us stay another hour and no more. That should be enough to distract the vultures from finding any such fault with us. Although I must say, it is taking everything inside of me not to find a vacant room and take you...right now. You are a vision in that sapphire dress."
- "I ken I am supposed to alternate my wardrobe, but I do so love this gown you selected for Master Jordan's exhibit. Perhaps because I ken ye picked it for me."

He gave her an imperceptible squeeze on her full backside as they moved through the throngs with effortless grace. While they

conversed with varying guests, he was never far from her side.

She looked out and noted that Verity, too, seemed more at ease. Marion assumed that her recent literary success, albeit anonymously held, provided a glow that outshone any diamond in the room. And there were many competing baubles in that room, strewn around the necks of the women clamoring to be seen.

The inevitable topic of *The Highland Holiday* arose and circulated like a forbidden secret and only a select few new the true authoress. Marion watched as a young Lord Davidson, known for his inherited wealth and unearned arrogance, cornered Verity near a particularly ornate mantelpiece. She grimaced as she looked up at its carved cherubs, who were also wincing at his presence.

"My lady," Lord Davidson began as Marion eavesdropped. "You are a woman of the world. Have you, perchance, indulged in this salacious novel... *Highland Holiday* everyone is raving about? Utter nonsense, I daresay. A woman writing such passionate prose? Unthinkable. And under a false name, no less! This Eliza Jane Bennett is nowhere to be found, so clearly, it is a pseudonym. One must question the courage, or indeed, the legitimacy, of an author who dares not attach their name to their work. What a coward!"

"Well, I am sure she has a good reason for it and—"

"Surely, if it were truly worthwhile, they would proudly claim it? It only affirms my suspicions that it is trite rubbish," he said as he laughed at his own joke. It was a high-pitched sound, grating like fingernails on a slate. "Give me an author with conviction any day. Shakespeare for instance!"

"Well, they say there were many authors who may have used that name!"

"Oh rubbish, dear girl," he said, acting as though they were not the same age and of equal standing.

Verity's smile tightened. There was a dangerous glint in her eyes that Marion knew well. Marion saw her hand clenched at her side, a clear sign of her rising indignation. She was afraid Verity might punch him, and she prepared herself to intervene.

"Lord Davidson." When Verity spoke, her voice was carefully modulated. "Perhaps the author chooses to use a pen name for reasons you cannot possibly comprehend. Perhaps they have more to lose than a mere reputation."

She cast a quick, meaningful glance at Marion, who nodded imperceptibly, a silent reassurance.

"Oh, do not take it so personally," he said with a dismissive wave. "It is merely an observation on the nature of authorship. One should not allow oneself to become so invested in mere flights of fancy. It is most unbecoming, especially for one I assume is in search of a husband."

Before Verity could retort, a shadow fell over them and Marion saw him standing there. Anselm.

He had approached silently, drawn by the rising inflection of Davidson's voice, like a predator sensing weakness. Marion knew he had heard everything but had no idea how he would react.

"Lord Davidson," Anselm's voice was low and laced with a chilling authority that cut through the din like a sharpened blade. "It seems you hold rather peculiar, or dare I say pedestrian notions, on literature. If one judges a novel's worth solely by whether a name is attached to it, rather than by the skill of its prose or the power of its narrative, then one clearly does not understand literature at all. Perhaps you should stick to your account books."

- "Oh, Your Grace! It was only a bit of passing conversation, not some pronounced statement. In fact, I merely meant to imply. Well, it is to say that... ummm..." He stammered and suddenly became unable to form a coherent sentence under Anselm's unwavering, icy gaze.
- "What was it you were saying?" Anselm pressed as others began to circle around them like vultures. "I am most curious now. I think we all are."
- "I... I must excuse myself, Your Grace. I just remembered a most urgent engagement and I must use the restroom," he said as he bowed hastily, almost tripping over his own feet as he bolted from the conversation.
- Verity stared after him, then turned her wide eyes to Anselm. She raised an eyebrow and shrugged. A mixture of surprise, gratitude, and a hint of bewildered admiration crossed her face.
- "Anselm," she began, "you know... you know that you did not have to do that."
- Anselm merely offered a curt nod and adjusted his cufflinks. His expression had already returned to his customary composure, as if chastising lords was a daily chore.
- "He was being foolish, Verity. No one speaks to my sister that way."
- He met Marion's gaze across Verity's shoulder, and Marion offered him a warm, appreciative smile.
- Well done, she mouthed to him from the small distance away. Let us go home and I will show you just how proud I am of you.
- "I think we should get out of here, Verity. There is no sign of Wrotham, and I think this party is a bit boring for our exciting taste. Would you agree?"
- "I like this version of you, Anselm. Let us be off!" She said as they linked arms and worked through the crowd to Marion.



- Later that night, after they had returned to their own residence and Verity had retired to her chambers, Marion found Anselm in the library with a half-empty glass of brandy in his hand. The room was softly lit by a single lamp.
- "That was rather... unlike ye, Anselm," Marion ventured, approaching him. "I also thought you were goin' to meet me upstairs for another art session."
- "To defend one's family? I should hope it is not so unlike me," he said as he swirled the amber liquid in his glass.
- "No," she clarified, a small smile playing on her lips. "To be so... public in yer disdain for that foolish young lord. Usually, ye simply freeze them out with a stare. But that, that was attacking."
- He took a slow sip and set the empty glass down on a nearby table.
- "Perhaps I grow weary of such talk going unchecked. And his words were most offensive to Verity. And to... the authoress I mean."
- He looked at her then and a flicker of something she could not quite decipher flitted in his dark green eyes.

"The author," Marion echoed softly, sensing a deeper confession. "Much as we have hinted around it... Ye ken it is her? I havenae said it so plain, but it is her."

"I had my suspicions from the start, Marion when I heard of it. Then when I read it, the descriptions of Strathcairn, the nuanced understanding of certain emotional complexities..." He paused, then finally met her gaze. "Verity spoke of a love for the name Donald as a young girl. In fact it was her pretend friend's name. That was the final tell. But there were also some intimate details, of confinement in carriages and other such things that felt... most personal."

Marion felt a blush creep up her cheeks. "I tried to be discreet."

He let out a soft chuckle. "You were. But I have always been rather observant, even if I do not always speak about what I observe. I knew you helped her with some of the finer points, and she did well capturing some of that."

"I see," she said softly, trying to wrap her head around that point.

"Does it displease you, that I know you helped her conceive some of this?"

Marion shook her head and moved closer to him. "No. It... it feels rather freeing, in fact." She reached out, her fingers tracing the lapel of his coat. "It means you truly see her, not just as your sister, but as the remarkable woman she is. And you also see us."

"Indeed," Anselm murmured, his hand coming up to gently cup her cheek. "I see you, Marion. More clearly than anyone else." His thumb stroked her skin. There was a quiet promise in the gesture.

"I daenae have the energy to paint, me husband. But I would very much like to kiss ye in our bed."

He stood on his feet then and scooped her up into his arms.

"Ye ken I can walk, right?" she joked as she kissed his cheek.

"I very much like watching you walk, but I also like this."

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The next morning, Marion decided it was time for a more direct approach to mending the chasm between Anselm and Verity, much as they had made progress on their own. After a simple breakfast, as Anselm retreated to his study with the air of a man facing a mountain of paperwork, and Verity headed towards the library with a stack of new, eagerly anticipated books, Marion intercepted her.

"Verity," Marion said, her voice bright. "I was just about to explore the Duke's more... academic collection in the library. Perhaps ye could offer some guidance? Ye are so much more knowledgeable about literature than I."

Verity, clearly flattered by the sincere compliment, readily agreed, her eyes lighting up at the prospect.

"Oh, I would be delighted! I know those tomes like the back of my hand!"

They entered the vast library; its towering shelves filled with leather-bound volumes that seemed to hold centuries of thought within their spines. Marion then set about subtly, almost imperceptibly, ensuring Anselm and Verity would be left alone. She had a plan.

While Verity sat at a desk to review an old favorite book she had rediscovered, Marion found a large book on Ancient Roman law and placed it strategically on Anselm's desk. She attached a note suggesting its relevance to a recent parliamentary debate he had mentioned at breakfast a few days before.

Meet me in the library to discuss this further. Love, Marion

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Anselm entered his study a few minutes later, frowning at the unexpected book on his desk. He looked up, his gaze sweeping the quiet room when he picked up the note. After reading it, he picked up the book and ran hurriedly to the library.

As he entered, he saw Verity browsing the shelves. She was utterly engrossed in each title and emitted a faint hum of contentment as she scanned them. He sighed, prepared to retreat, and vanish back into the haven of his ledgers... but then he remembered Marion's gentle encouragement and the quiet promise he'd made to her... as well as the cursed note.

This is her doing, he thought to himself. Best to go along with my wife's wishes.

- "Verity," he began, his voice a little gruff, catching her attention.
- Verity turned, a flicker of apprehension in her eyes, as if bracing for a lecture. "Anselm. Were you... looking for a book? Is there something I can help you with?"
- He cleared his throat, feeling awkward in his own library. He set down the book and put his hands in his pockets. He walked toward her then stopped a few feet away.
- "No. I... I saw you here," he said hesitatingly, then gestured vaguely at her pile of books. "Are you finding anything... suitable?"
- Verity's apprehension eased and was replaced by a tentative smile.
- "Oh, yes! Mr. Hawthorne procured a first edition of *Sense and Sensibility*. I was finding a good home for it here and felt inspired looking around at all the books we have here."
- "That sounds wonderful, Verity."
- "Yes, it really is! And I have been considering a new direction for my next work. Perhaps something with a more... intellectual heroine."
- Anselm found himself nodding. He was genuinely interested in hearing her talk about her next project...
- *Perhaps there is some sense in this girl after all,* he thought as he sat down at the nearby desk.
- "Indeed. Intellect can be a formidable quality, ," he said before springing up to walk towards the shelves and running a hand over the ancient spines of his own collection in the corner. "You seem to... understand these works. More than I do, perhaps."
- Verity's eyes widened slightly at his unexpected admission. This was a rare crack in his formidable façade.
- "Well, I enjoy them. They offer... different worlds." She picked up a slim volume and turned it in her hands. "Do you ever read

for pleasure and diversion, Anselm? Or only for business?"

He turned to her, a faint, almost imperceptible smile touching his lips. "Occasionally, Verity. Occasionally. Though my definition of reading for pleasure may differ from yours." He paused, then gestured to the volumes of poetry. "Have you ever considered the classics as inspiration? There is much wisdom to be found in their words."

Verity tilted her head, a thoughtful expression on her face, considering his words with a surprising openness. "Perhaps. If they are presented in a manner that does not make one's eyes glaze over with boredom."

- "It is all in the reader," Anselm teased. "If you find this boring, you only have yourself to blame."
- "All right, fine. Go on, brother. Tell me what I should be reading then."
- Anselm found himself chuckling. He produced a genuine, soft sound that filled the grand library.
- "I shall endeavor to select a volume that avoids such a dire fate as being a bore. Perhaps something by Lord Byron? He, at least, understood passion."
- Verity's eyes lit up with a true spark of excitement. "Lord Byron! You read Byron, Anselm? I never would have guessed! I thought you were all Socrates, Sophocles, and Hippocrates."
- "I think there is much you do not know about me...and that is my fault. Come, let us look at this one together," he said, motioning to the desk.
- They continued to talk as they read poetry. The conversation flowed more easily than it had in years.
- Anselm looked up to see Marion listening from the hallway outside the library. She wore a small, knowing smile on her face.

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- "The roses are quite magnificent this year, aren't they, Verity?" Anselm remarked, his voice softer than Marion was accustomed to hearing when he spoke to his sister as they sat in the drawing room one afternoon, some days later.
- Verity looked up. Her brow was furrowed in concentration on her writing. "Indeed. Though I can never quite capture the exact shade of crimson when I try to write of it."
- "Try bein' a painter," Marion joked as she worked on a cross stitch.
- Anselm turned from the window to face Verity.
- "Mother used to say the same thing about the honeysuckle. She would try to paint it, but always claimed the delicate yellow was impossible to translate to canvas. I bet it is a similar feeling, is it not?"
- Verity's hand stilled as she set down her quill. Marion watched, holding her breath. The mention of their mother, usually a topic skirted around, hung in the air.
- "She... she was quite talented, was she not?" Verity's voice was barely a whisper. "I do not remember much..."

"She was," he said as he walked over to a small, ornate table in the corner and picked up a framed miniature portrait. It was a depiction of a young woman with kind, green eyes and a gentle smile.

Their mother.

He had not touched the frame in years, or at least, not when others had been present.

"Yes, she was," he confirmed, his voice thick with tenderness. "She had a particular fondness for the small, wildflowers that grew along the banks of a small lake she used to take us to some miles from here. I have not been able to go back, but I can see it if I close my eyes."

Verity looked up at him. Her eyes were wide with a fragile emotion.

"Oh, Anselm! I remember... she used to make us daisy chains! And tell us stories about the fairies that lived amongst the heather." A faint, almost wistful smile touched her lips. "I had thought... I had imagined those things, trying to create a memory that may not be real. I cannot tell you how it warms me to hear that."

"And talk of fairies," Marion chimed in. "Perhaps there is a bit of highlander in yer family after all. She sounds like a grand woman."

"Perhaps Marion... and you did not forget, Verity. We simply... stopped speaking of them because it was too hard." He lowered the miniature but held it gently in his grip. "There were so many things we stopped speaking of, mainly because I did not know how to face myself. But, I am changing that now. Will you forgive me for the walls I put up to survive?"

Verity rose slowly and moved closer to him. "Why, Anselm? Why did we cease to be... a family? Why did you erect those walls in the first place?"

Her voice was raw with the question that had plagued her for years.

Anselm sighed, a deep, weary sound. "Because I believed I had to be strong. To protect you. To protect what little remained. I built walls, Verity, and I believed they were necessary. But I never truly considered... what they kept out." He looked from the miniature to her face. There was a profound regret etched in his features. "I deeply regret the years we lost, sister. There is much darkness that I hope you never know."

Verity's eyes welled with tears. They were not tears of sorrow, but of release. "As do I, brother." She reached out and placed a hand gently on his arm. "Perhaps... perhaps we might begin to remember those things again. Together."

"Perhaps," Anselm said as he looked to Marion. Silent gratitude passed from his heart to hers.

"I think I need to take a turn about the grounds to clear my head," Verity said as she rose to her feet. "If you both would excuse me, I will be back before it is time to dine."

"Of course," Marion said as she stood. "Would ye like me to join ye?"

"I am happy to join you as well," Anselm said as he walked to them.

"I think I would like that," she said. So the three family members went out into the sunshine and warmth of early June.

Chapter Thirty-Two

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re ye quite certain this is wise, Verity?" Marion whispered as she glanced over her shoulder up and down the dimly lit alleyway. "It is rather late and somethin' about this air is givin' me the willies."

"Oh nonsense, Marion!" Verity retorted, though Marion noticed her voice was higher than usual. "It is just your Scottish superstitions. Everyone knows this is when real work happens! You know this business is terribly fast paced!"

"Very well," Marion conceded as she looked around. "I ken how much this means to ye, but I still daenae ken why we have to be out at such an hour!"

The rhythmic thud and clang of the printing press echoed through the narrow, cobbled street as they continued to wait. Gas lamps cast pools of sickly yellow light, illuminating the damp cobblestones and the occasional scurrying rat in search of sustenance.

- Marion pulled her dark cloak tight against her chest, bracing herself from the chill of the night air. In contrast, Verity practically vibrated with excitement. Her cheeks were rosy and a smile crossed her delicate face.
- A stout man that Marion did not recognize from their usual dealings emerged from the printing house. He had a small canvas bag clutched in his hand.
- "Good evening, my lady," he puffed, his breath steaming in the cool air. "Your latest publication was a tremendous success, if I may say so. The demand is quite unprecedented and especially for such work. You have quite a talent."
- He handed her the bag with a smile, which she returned as she took the bag.
- Verity's fingers closed around it. There was a look of pure, unadulterated triumph on her face. Despite her unease, Marion found herself smiling as well at the exchange.
- "Thank you, Mr. Murray. Truly," Verity said, her voice but a whisper.
- "Just keep working," he said as he took the manuscript Verity handed to him. "I know you will have a very successful career, especially for one so young. I will be in touch."
- "Understood, sir! You have no idea how many stories ruminate in my mind and are ready to be put to pen and paper. I will surely reach out as soon as my newest story is complete and I can assure you that it will be my best yet."
- "I have no doubt," he said as he bowed to them. "If you will excuse me."

- "I ken I gave you a hard time, but I can see why ye are so excited and I have to say... I am very proud of you, lass," Marion said as soon as they were alone.
- "I cannot tell you how much it pleases me to hear that. It is so wonderful to share this with someone. You are truly the dearest friend I have ever known. I do not know what I would do without you."
- "And ye will never have to ken," Marion said. "Let us be off though. I daenae wanna be out any longer than is required. We best make haste."
- As they turned to leave, the clinking of coins matched the lightness in Verity's steps, which was almost a dance. Yet, Marion could not shake the prickle of unease that sat in her chest. The street, usually occupied by passersby even at this hour, was disconcertingly quiet. She glanced over her shoulder time and again, sure that there was someone following them.
- Then she quickly remembered that Anselm always kept an eye on them whenever his sister was out of the house at night, so she imagined this was someone in his employ.
- She saw a cloaked figure. It was indistinct in the shadows but seemed to be following them. Marion realized that the shadow's pace quickened as they did, keeping time with them at a distance.
- Still, even if they were Anselm's employee, something about the way they approached them didn't feel right to her.
- "Verity," Marion whispered, breath hitching. "We must quicken our steps. Now."
- Verity, still giddy from their little adventure, gave a dramatic twirl, the coins in her canvas bag clinking together. "Oh, do stop worrying! We've done this walk countless times, Marion. You mustn't let shadows frighten you."
- "I am serious, Verity," Marion urged, her voice sharp with fear.
- Verity gave a breathless laugh. "You sound like my brother."
- "Just walk, Verity! For the love of—" Marion's hand shot out, gripping her arm tightly and dragging her forward.
- They quickened their pace at once, their boots slipping slightly on the damp cobblestones. Marion's heart thudded wildly as she cast a glance behind them—and saw the cloaked figure keeping pace, far too close.
- Her breath came faster. The next alley. Just reach it. Then the main street—then people.
- "Marion, honestly—" Verity began again, but her words cut off in a gasp as the cloaked man suddenly lunged ahead, blocking their path and cornering them.
- He was tall, looming in the narrow alley, his face hidden by the deep hood of his cloak. In his gloved hand, something glinted —a blade.
- "The bag," he growled, voice low and rough. "And any other valuables. Quickly now, before someone gets hurt."
- Verity clutched the canvas bag tighter against her chest, frozen in shock.
- But Marion, though trembling, stepped carefully—not between them, but alongside Verity, half-shielding her, half holding her

arm.

Her mind raced. They had no escape, no time.

"Verity," she said in a calm, steady tone that barely masked her fear, "give him the bag."

"What?" Verity choked out, her voice high with panic.

"Do it," Marion whispered firmly, locking eyes with her. She squeezed Verity's wrist as a signal to trust her. "Slowly now."

Verity, shaking, fumbled to loosen her grip.

Marion's gaze didn't leave the man's hidden face. She kept her voice even as she slowly lifted her reticule as well, drawing his attention.

"There. You have what you came for," she said, holding both items just slightly out from her body, just enough to distract him.

The man's focus locked on the bags. He reached toward them.

And then—from the shadows behind him—another figure appeared.

Before Marion could blink, a hand gripped the thief's shoulder and yanked him back violently before he could close in on them.

The man let out a grunt of pain as he was slammed into the brick wall, the sound of impact echoing through the alley.

Marion's breath froze in her chest.

"Run!" came Anselm's voice, cutting through the chaos like a blade.

Relief, fierce and overwhelming, surged through her.

Anselm.

The cloaked figure recovered and scrambled to his feet in an efficient shuffle. And as quickly as he had appeared, the man vanished into another offset alley Marion had not even known was there.

His footsteps faded into the distance as Marion sought to catch her breath. She placed her hands on her knees and inhaled deeply.

Anselm stood there, his chest heaving from exertion and his hand resting on the hilt of a concealed walking stick. He looked at Marion and Verity and scanned them for injury.

"Are you both unharmed?" he demanded, his voice still tight with concern. "Please tell me you are all right. Did he..."

Verity only nodded in response. She continued to clutch the bag to her chest as if it was a prized trophy. Marion felt a surge of relief so profound that it almost buckled her knees.

"Oh, Anselm! Ye... ye arrived just in time!" Marion said in relief. "We are quite all right now, thanks to ye."

He merely gave a curt nod because his gaze was still fixed on the alley where the would-be thief had disappeared. He shook his head and ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Let us return home. Immediately," he ordered.

The roaring fire was a welcome balm for Marion's weary bones. The warmth of the drawing room was a stark contrast to the cool alley. A pot of steaming tea sat on the low table as a maid served them silently. Marion and Verity were seated on the sofa with a blanket across their laps.

"I simply cannot believe it," Verity breathed, her voice still a little shaky as she took the cup from Beth and raised it to her lips. "He simply... appeared. Like a guardian angel!"

Verity looked at Marion with a bewildered expression on her face.

"Do you think he was just passing by?" Verity asked. "What an odd chance that he was there just at that time."

Marion glanced at Anselm who stood by the fireplace. His back was to them and he was seemingly staring into the flames as he stoked the hearth with the poker. Marion knew the truth, that his appearance was no mere chance, but the words felt heavy on her tongue. Instead, she brought the tea to her lips and gave a nod to Beth, who wordlessly excused herself.

Anselm turned then. His expression was unreadable as Marion worried what he meant to say next. She wanted to walk to his side and throw her arms around him, when he spoke.

"No, Verity," he said, shaking his head in anger. "I was not merely passing by."

Verity's eyes widened as she clearly considered his words before rising to her feet to meet him at the fireplace.

"Then... then you followed us... You followed us? Like a... a spy?"

Anselm's jaw tightened and he set the poker down next to the fire. He turned to meet his sister, and they looked at each other eye-to-eye.

"I was ensuring your safety because it is my duty. This city is not safe for two ladies unescorted at night—especially when one is carrying a substantial sum of money. How could you be so reckless as to think I would allow you to wander off like that?"

"Ensuring my safety?" Verity's eyes flashed. "Or ensuring I remain tucked under your thumb?"

She let out a sharp breath, struggling to rein in her temper. "I know it was foolish—of course I do. I know the risks here better than you think. But for once, I wasn't thinking about danger. I was thinking about freedom. About what it felt like to earn something entirely by my own hand."

Anselm's mouth tightened, but before he could speak, Verity turned to Marion, her voice still heated but less accusatory.

"And you. You knew, didn't you? You knew he was watching us, and you said nothing." Her tone held more hurt than anger now. "You could have warned me."

- Marion's heart twisted as Verity's gaze softened just slightly.
- "I only wanted a taste of freedom, Marion. Just for a moment."
- Marion rose, her hands outstretched in an offering of peace. "Oh, Verity, no! It is nae like that at all. Yer brother, he was concerned. After... after what happened with Lord Fanthorpe and everythin'... he only wanted to protect ye. He loves ye, even if he cannae say it. I ken it as well as I ken me own name. I promise ye."
- "Protect me? Or control me? Of course you would not know. He controls you as much as he does me!"
- "You will watch yourself, sister," Anselm warned as he crossed his arms across his chest.
- "Is this what my newfound freedom entails? That I am to be constantly watched by some guard dog? Or better yet, constantly judged and *protected* from myself? From being who I truly am?!"
- "You are overreacting," Anselm barked.
- "And you, Marion! My friend and confidante... You kept this secret from me? How long has this arrangement existed between you?"
- "Verity!" Marion called as she walked toward her.
- "You allowed him to treat me like a prisoner?" Her voice cracked as a single tear went down her delicate cheek. "How could you do that to me?"
- "Verity, please! I need ye listen to me!" Marion pleaded, stepping towards her once more. "It was out of care, not control. He was worried, truly. All we want is to see ye safe..."
- "I cannot believe this! I cannot believe either of you!" Verity yelled as she turned on her heel and stormed out of the drawing room.
- "Verity! Wait! Let me explain!" Marion called as she followed her up the grand staircase, yet Verity did not slow nor turn to face her.
- Marion reached Verity's bedchamber just as the door slammed shut with a thud in her face and was followed by the distinct click of the lock. The metallic sound reverberated through the quiet hallway as Marion's blood raced through her body. She stood there frozen with her hand hovering over the polished wood of the door.

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- "She has to eat," Marion said to Mrs. Clarke as she finished the last of her morning tea. "I ken she is stubborn, but we must have somethin' brought to her."
- "Of course, Your Grace," Mrs. Clarke said. "I will have one of the servants leave a tray—"
- "Please, I must do it."
- "Very well, Your Grace. As you wish it. I will have an assortment put together from the breakfast buffet at once."

Breakfast had been a strained affair, with Anselm picking at his toast and Marion staring into her teacup. The usual morning banter was missing, only amplified by Verity's absence. In fact, Marion had barely eaten anything at all, and she was grateful that Anselm did not press.

Marion excused herself in a rush once the tray was presented and she hurried to Verity's bedchamber.

"Verity," Marion called as she set leaned forehead against the heavy door. "Ye daenae have to answer, but I am leavin' you a tray of food. If ye cannae leave, ye must eat."

Marion waited a moment or two, but there was no response. She left the tray in front of the door and set off to her studio. She had hoped that she would be able to lose herself in art and distract herself from all that was swirling in her mind and find some solace. Yet, each time she set charcoal on paper to begin a sketch she could only see him. As if on cue, a roar of thunder sounded from the cracked window, making her startle.

The hooded figure, the cloak that hid his snarlin' face. Yet, somethin' about him was familiar and uncanny... I cannae shake the feelin'.

Resolute in not letting the hooded figure occupy her mind any longer, she allowed herself to sketch him. She drew the curves of the cloak and the glint of a knife in his hand. She brought life to the alley behind him, accentuating the detritus and meager light that surrounded them.

I willnae let ye bother me anymore, ye bastard.

She rose then and took the sketch, setting it on top of a candle on her desk. She let the flames rise until they danced in front of her eyes before tossing it in the nearby fireplace.



Later that afternoon, Marion found Anselm in his study. Instead of being absorbed in some correspondence, he was staring out the window at the freshly rain-swept gardens. His hands were clasped behind his back, accentuating his broad shoulders. The ledgers on his desk lay untouched.

"She willnae speak to me," Marion said softly, her voice heavy with weariness. "She also dinnae touch the tray I had left in front of her bedchamber door. I checked as I walked over here from me studio..."

Anselm did not turn. Instead, he set his hands on the windowsill and Marion watched as his knuckles whitened.

"Nor to me. I suppose I deserve it." His voice was flat and devoid of its usual confidence.

"You daenae deserve her anger, Anselm," Marion countered, moving closer to him and placing her delicate hands on his shoulders. "Perhaps frustration but not anger. You acted out of concern for her wellbein', as ye have for a very long time, me love."

He turned, his gaze meeting hers. Marion could see the weariness coating his emerald eyes.

"Concern that she perceives as control. And she is not entirely wrong, Marion. I have always sought to control her circumstances, to shield her from the world's harsher realities, particularly after... after our father's decline. It became a habit, a reflex." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I believed it was my duty. But I never considered how it stifled her. I could have been more honest, more—"

"She feels betrayed by me, too," Marion said, her voice breaking slightly. "That I kept your... vigilance a secret."

"That was my request and not of your making. I did not wish to alarm her unnecessarily, or to have her feel... watched. I asked you to keep it quiet and as my wife, you kept that promise."

"Yes, but—"

"I am sorry, Marion. I placed you in an impossible position. It was not fair of me to ask of you, regardless of my intentions."

Marion shook her head. "No. I understood yer reasons! And I still do. But she feels... violated." She paused, then looked at him earnestly. "Ye must find a way to speak to her, Anselm. Not as the Duke, but as her brother. And ye must apologize, truly apologize, for not trusting her with yer concerns... for not allowing her the autonomy she deserves."

Anselm looked away, his gaze returning to the rain. "It will not be easy. She is stubborn."

"Aye, it seems to be a family trait as you are too," Marion jested. "Yet, ye are also capable of great understanding, Anselm and I have seen it." She touched his arm, a silent plea. "The walls ye built to survive all those long years... ye are slowly dismantling them."

He remained silent for a long moment. The only sound was the drumming of rain against the lawn outside the window. Finally, he gave a slow, almost imperceptible nod.

"Perhaps... perhaps you are right." He turned back to her, a flicker of his old resolve returning. "I will speak with her. But only when she is ready. I will not pound at her door day and night; she is a grown woman... as you like to remind me."

"She will be. She loves ye, Anselm."

Chapter Thirty-Three

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cannae believe it has been four days...

The days that followed bled into one another, marked only by the relentless rain and equally persistent silence from Verity's room. No matter how Marion tried, it was of no use. Her gentle knocks, whispered apologies through the keyhole, and even leaving a tray of Verity's favorite pastries outside her door, were to no avail. The lock remained resolute, and Marion's guilt gnawed at her like a woodpecker working on a tree. The feeling became a constant, dull ache beneath her ribs.

Early one morning, before the city had fully roused itself, Marion slipped out of the house unnoticed before breakfast. She needed air, space and solitude. She craved a moment away from the suffocating tension of Greystead.

She walked briskly towards Hyde Park. The damp air was cool on her face as she pulled her cloak tighter around her body. While late spring was upon them, the frigid rain made it feel more like late fall.

At first, the solitude of the park soothed her. She inhaled deeply, savoring the fresh air. The trees dripped softly in the breeze. The only sounds were the distant chirping of birds and the crunch of gravel beneath her leather boots.

Aye this is a peace me soul needed, she thought. Never have I been so happy to be in the pleasure of me own company.

"Your Grace," a familiar voice called from behind her as she froze in her tracks. "I must say, it is a pleasure to find you enjoying such solitary amusement."

Marion's blood ran cold. She turned slowly and her heart leapt into her throat, making it feel thick and lumpy. She swallowed air in hopes of moving it back down.

Standing a few paces behind her, impeccably dressed, was Lord Gilton. His smile was polite, almost mocking, but his eyes held a serpentine flash. Instinctively, Marion wrapped her cloak around her and took a step back.

"Lord Gilton," Marion replied, her voice steady despite the sudden tremor in her hands, which she concealed inside her cloak. "I wasnae aware ye frequented the park at such an hour. From what I recall, it was quite a challenge for ye to rise at an early hour."

"I have realized that one finds inspiration in the quiet," he purred, taking a step closer to her. His gaze swept around the park, and Marion knew he was confirming their isolation.

Marion watched as the mask that covered his face dropped, revealing his true self. His gaze hardened and twisted into a sneer of fury.

"But let us dispense with pleasantries, Your Grace. We have unfinished business, and I think now is the time we address it. What do you say?"

Marion stood in silence as she felt the tone of his voice rush over her. He was no longer polite. He was sinister and startling.

"I was promised a handsome sum, Your Grace. A dowry, in exchange for taking a problematic bride off her family's hands. If you recall, there was to be a wedding, which, thanks to your rather dramatic disappearance, was cancelled with no notice. And no money was received." He took another step and his presence loomed over her like a shadow. "I believe I am owed compensation. *Substantial* compensation for my hardship."

"Ye will get nothing from me, Gilton."

His eyes narrowed. There was a dangerous glint in their depths. They stood in charged silence for a few moments as Marion's eyes darted around the park. She was desperate for another person to be present.

"Indeed?" Gilton pressed. "Perhaps I shall be forced to reveal certain... shall we call them inconvenient truths? Such as the fact that the Duchess of Greystead is, in fact, a runaway bride. A woman who abandoned her vows and her family. Imagine the scandal that would follow. Your reputation, and that of your esteemed husband, would be utterly and irrevocably ruined."

Marion felt a wave of icy panic creep down her spine, yet she willed it not to show as she summoned the power of her ancestors to grace her with the bravery of a fiery mare.

"Me reputation is beyond yer reach, Gilton. And I fear ye overestimate yer influence."

Her response clearly enraged him as she watched him snap like a twig, as his composure shattered. With a swift, terrifying movement, he pulled a small, gleaming knife from within his coat pocket. He lunged toward her, pressing her back roughly against the rough bark of a large oak tree off the path. She felt the cold steel of the blade pressing against her throat, just beneath her jaw.

"You will claim it was a common robber," he snarled, his breath hot and foul against her face, as if he had been drinking. "And you will pay. Or I will ensure you regret the day you ever thought to defy me."

His grip tightened on her arm as the knife pressed harder on her skin. She closed her eyes and willed the moment to pass. She breathed deeply and prayed that someone would appear.

"It was I who sent those notes, Marion," he whispered in her ear, his lips tickling her lobe. "The ones that made you so... hysterical and paranoid. They were meant to break you, and I will say, it was an excellent idea."

"But why—"

"Oh, of course it was to ensure you were deemed mad, so that after our marriage, you could be promptly dealt with."

Marion shivered as a silent tear went down her cheek.

"Oh, nothing as bad as that. Here you are again with the hysterics. I would have made sure you were just sent away... perhaps, to a quiet asylum. Just somewhere you would never trouble me again," he said as a cruel laugh came from deep in his chest. "And your dear uncle and aunt were quite amenable to the plan, I assure you. After their more recent financial troubles, they expected a generous cut of your dowry for their cooperation in this matter."

Marion's mind reeled at his admission. The betrayal, the sheer depravity of his plan, and the involvement of her own family... She knew that the Harlowes were struggling a bit this part year, yes. Indeed, this year, they'd been more persistent in marrying her off.

It was a sickening revelation that made her stomach turn. Yet, she looked up to stare into his furious eyes. She knew him well enough to know that her defiance would only fuel his rage further.

He pressed the blade deeper into the thin skin at her throat. "Still defiant, are we, Your Grace? Very well. If you will not pay, then perhaps your beloved sister-in-law will. Imagine what the scandal sheets of London would pay for the truth of her story. That the esteemed Lady Verity Greystead, the Duke's only sister, is the one writing those filthy novels under the thin veil of a pseudonym. *The Highland Holiday*, indeed! I saw her with my own eyes, leaving the printer's, clutching her ill-gotten gains across her chest like the trollop she is."

"You wouldnae—"

"Oh, I assure you that the ton would be most interested to learn of her literary pursuits."

Chapter Thirty-Four

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e mean?" Marion asked. "Ye cannae possibly be sayin..."

"Oh, yes. You have not figured this out yet?" Gilton teased. "I was the one who followed you both just the other night, Your Grace. If only your cursed husband had not shown up to ruin it all, I would have been able to exact my plan there and then!"

Suddenly, a heavy walking stick swung with brutal precision and connected with Gilton's arm. He cried out in pain and the knife he had clutched in his grasp clattered to the stones on the ground with a clank.

Anselm's face was a mask of fury as he stared at him. His green eyes were piercing and cold. Behind him stood Mr. Lewis, panting slightly as he surveyed the situation.

Marion realized with a jolt that Anselm had indeed had her watched, just as he had Verity.

There will be time for that later, she thought as gratitude seized her chest. Thank the heavens that he is here!



Anselm grabbed Gilton by the lapels and yanked him away from Marion before throwing him to the ground. Gilton landed with a grunt as he scrambled to sit up.

"You pathetic worm," Anselm snarled as he enunciated each syllable. He raised his walking stick again. Then, he brought it down with controlled viciousness on Gilton's arm before hitting his leg with a loud crack.

Gilton whimpered. He clutched his arm and then his leg before raising his hands in surrender.

"You... you cannot do this!" he begged. "You have ruined me! Have you not done enough?"

Anselm stood over him. His breath was even, and his composure was chillingly calm despite the violence he had just unleashed.

"Ruined? My dear Gilton, you have no idea what ruin truly is. While you were busy plotting your petty schemes, my Bow Street Runner, Mr. Daniels, has been quite thorough," he said as he gestured to the quiet, efficient man standing a few paces away underneath a tree. "He has uncovered every last one of your debts. To be clear—every fraudulent dealing and sordid detail of your pathetic existence. In fact, I was quite impressed by just how pathetic you are."

"How dare you..."

"In fact, your creditors are already on their way," Anselm said as he took a pocket watch out and glanced passingly at the hour. "It seems your time is up. Your reputation, what little there was, is in tatters. This is all your own making, Gilton. Your name will be mud in every respectable circle in London by noon. You have my word on that."

Gilton's face went ashen. "No... no, you would not dare!"

"Oh, I assure you, I would dare," Anselm pressed. "Now, listen carefully, Gilton. You will leave England. Tonight. You will never set foot on these shores again. If I ever hear so much as a whisper of your presence, if you ever dare to approach my wife, my sister, or anyone connected to my household again, you will regret it deeply. More deeply than you can possibly imagine. Do you understand me?"

Gilton merely nodded as he attempted to scramble backwards on the damp grass. "Yes... yes, Your Grace. I do believe I understand." He pushed himself to his feet, clutching his injured arm. He fled and quickly became a pathetic, limping shadow before disappearing into the misty park with his tail quite literally tucked between his legs.

Anselm watched him go for a moment, then turned. His eyes snapped to Marion as he was brought back, crashing down, to reality. His cold fury instantly evaporated and was replaced by a raw, desperate concern to see her safe. He rushed to her with his hands reaching out, gently cupping her perfect face.

"Oh, Marion! Are you hurt?" His gaze fell to her neck, where a thin, red line marred her delicate ivory skin.

I cannot fathom how this happened, how far this all went. This gaping wound is nothing more than another testament to my failure. How did I let this happen to my tempest?

"It is nothin', Anselm," Marion whispered. "I promise it is just a scratch. Truly, I will be quite all right once me heart slows down. It is beatin' as fast as a mare in an open field! I cannae believe what ye did for me."

He moved his hands from her face to her shoulders, then down her arms in search of unseen injuries. His green eyes were wide, haunted and filled with terror, as he considered just what could have happened.

"A scratch? Marion, the man had a knife at your throat! He could have... he could have killed you! I almost... I almost lost you!"

His voice was hoarse, thick with emotion that he could no longer keep at bay. The rigid control he usually maintained was completely gone as he held his breath to steady himself.

He pulled her into a fierce embrace, holding her so tightly she could barely breathe, and burying his face in her chocolate hair.

- "Oh my God, Marion. My God."
- "Your Grace," Mr. Lewis offered as he stepped up to them. "I took the liberty of sending for a carriage, which will be here momentarily to bring you home."
- "Thank you, Lewis," he said as he scooped Marion into his arms. "Please also be sure that a physician is sent to the house to do a full examination on Her Grace. We must ensure that she is all right. There may be injuries we cannot see...additional wounds we must care for—"
- "I am fine, Anselm," Marion said as she put a hand to his cheek. "I appreciate yer concern, but that is not necessary. I would tell ye if there was somethin'—"

- "I will decide what is necessary," Anselm insisted. "Be off now, Lewis."
- "I will see it done immediately, Your Grace," Mr. Lewis said with a small bow as he set off with speed.
- "Please, Anselm," Marion said once more. "I am beggin' ye to relax. Ye have saved me from a fate worse than—"
- "Do not finish that sentence, Marion," Anselm said as he looked away from her. "Do not dare."

Chapter Thirty-Five

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hat night, the house was even quieter than it had been in the days that followed Verity's quarrel with them. Marion felt as if a heavy blanket of silence had settled over it, like an impossible layer of thick snow. She sat by herself in the drawing room, a book unread in her lap, as she stared at the fire casting flickering shadows on the walls.

Aye, the flames dance like me uneasy thoughts.

She jumped slightly when Anselm entered causing the book to fall on the rug with a thud. She could instantly feel that he was distant because of something in the slowness of his gait. For all that had changed between them, a rigid, almost brittle stiffness surrounded him as he strode toward the fireplace. He did not look at her but instead stared into the flames.

- "We have gone too far, Marion," he said, his voice low, flat, and devoid of emotion.
- He may as well be talkin' to a business associate, Marion thought as her heart constricted.
- "What are ye talkin' about, Anselm? Gilton is gone now, thanks to ye. He is ruined. We have nothin' to fear from him now."
- She rose to her feet then, taking a tentative step towards him and meeting him in front of the fireplace.
- "He confessed to everythin', Anselm," she pleaded with him. "He told me about the notes, me uncle and aunt, and his vile plans. It is all over. We are safe. Ye have made us safe..."
- He shook his head from side to side as he stepped away from her and crossed to the far window.
- "Not from him. From... whatever this is," he said as he finally turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers. "Our marriage, Marion. It was a convenience, which is something we had established from the start. It was a unique solution to a problem that needed to be solved. It was never supposed to be... all this."
- He gestured vaguely between them. His words failed to describe just what had grown between them.
- "It was a duty, nothing more," he pressed. "A temporary arrangement to secure Verity's future and protect my family's name."
- Marion felt a sharp, piercing pain in her chest, as if his words may as well have been Gilton's blade. Her breath caught in her throat.
- "Anselm... what are ye sayin'? After everythin'... after what we've shared?" Her voice was barely a whisper and her heart shattered with each word as it came out of her mouth. "You cannae mean it! I daenae believe ye! Not after... after I saw ye in

the park. After ye held me."

- "I am saying..." He paused and walked to the beverage cart to pour himself a brandy. He took a long sip before speaking again. "I am saying that we have allowed ourselves to become... entangled in a manner that is not befitting the bounds of our original agreement. It was a mistake. A profound error in judgment on my part."
- "Error in judgment? I am a human bein', Anslem. Ye willnae talk to me as if I am some business matter."
- He looked away again, as if the sight of her pain was unbearable, or perhaps, as if he feared his own resolve would break.
- "This... this closeness, it jeopardizes everything. It makes us vulnerable."
- "Vulnerable?" Marion cried. "Or human? Is that what ye fear, Anselm? To feel? To allow yerself to be loved by someone?" She stepped closer, reaching out a hand. He flinched, a movement that stung her more than any harsh word.
- "Once Verity is settled," he continued, ignoring her plea, "once she is married and secure, there will be no further need for this arrangement. You may return to Scotland and live your life as you wish. As you always intended, I am sure."
- Marion stared at him. Tears stung her eyes, blurring his rigid form. She blinked, hoping that this was all a cruel nightmare, and that she would awake in his bed and in his arms. And yet...
- The coldness in his voice, the stark finality of his words, was a wall more impenetrable than any he had built around his emotions before. Much as things had changed between them, she knew Anselm and what he was capable of. The detachment. The unrelenting sense of duty.
- Duty. How about your marriage? But what duty is owed to a farce?
- Her throat tightened A painful knot formed there preventing any further debate as she realized there was some truth behind his words. She would not beg. Not for his affection, not for a love he now so cruelly denied her. The silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken grief.
- She nodded, once, giving a single, sharp dip of her head.
- "As ye wish, Yer Grace," she said. Her voice was thin and brittle. She turned her back to him, and walked slowly, deliberately, towards the door. Each step was agony as it represented a silent farewell to a future she had only begun to imagine. She waited for seconds that felt like minutes, yet she heard nothing from him. There was no word or sound, as she left the drawing room.
- The moment her bedchamber door closed behind her, she leaned against it and slid slowly to the floor. She buried her face in her hands as wrenching sobs tore through her like a knife. The tears came, hot against her cool cheeks. She cried to mourn the love she had found, the intimacy they had shared, and for the crushing reality of its sudden, brutal end just when things seemed to fall into place.
- Marion stood up and walked to her desk, where she retrieved her journal. She sat herself up in bed and as emotionally spent as she was, began to write. She wrote until she could no longer hold the quill in her hand. A feverish stream of consciousness flowed from her as she sought to unburden herself.
- I daenae ken how I could have fooled myself into thinkin' I would be a duchess or that all this could truly be mine. The call of Scotland appeals and yet, sours in my mouth as I consider how much this place feels like... home. Yet, is it this place, or



Chapter Thirty-Six



ill Her Grace be joining you this morning for breakfast, Your Grace?" Mrs. Clarke asked as she looked around at the empty table.

"No, I do not believe so," Anselm said as he finished his coffee. "Please be sure to leave the breakfast buffet out for her to come down when she would like."

"As you wish, Your Grace," Mrs. Clarke said with a raised eyebrow. "And what of Lady Verity? Shall we be expecting her as well at a later hour?"

"I have no indication of that," Anselm said as he set down his cup. "That will be all, Mrs. Clarke."

Anselm sat at the head of the long, mahogany table as Mrs. Clarke left him alone with his thoughts, which were most unwelcome company. The usual clatter of crockery and conversation were absent, replaced by the unrelenting tick of the grandfather clock in the hall and the distant sounds of household staff. Anselm knew they were talking about him and the quiet turmoil that had enveloped his household.

He picked at his breakfast. The food was tasteless in his mouth so he finally pushed it away.

This distance is for the best. This coldness is a necessary shield.

Yet, the quiet gnawed at him. He felt a hollow ache where Marion's presence, her quiet smiles, her insightful comments, used to be at the opposite end of the table. For the first time in months, the house felt truly empty. He was empty.

He poured himself into his work and fencing in the mornings as the days bled into a week. The three of them lived under the same roof yet existed in separate worlds.

Marion always seemed to know when Anselm was in a particular room, and she would subtly alter her path to avoid him. She spent most of her time in her studio, a place where Anselm could not find reason to intrude. Somehow, their paths never crossed in the hallways, at meals or in the gardens.

The silence between them grew like rain clouds: heavy, dark, and suffocating.



"Marion? Are you there? It is Verity."

Marion had been sitting by her window, lost in yet another journal entry as she sought to make sense of her life. Much as she

craved conversation with Verity, after all they had both gone through, she could not bring herself to get up from the chaise on which she sat.

"Marion, please," Verity pressed. "I know I was angry. And I... I was wrong to lash out at you. I so desperately would like to speak with you, and I am sorry for being so cross. Please, open the door..."

After a moment of hesitation, Marion set down her journal and walked to the door. She opened it a crack, revealing her tear-streaked face to Verity.

"Oh, Marion! What is going on, my dear?" Verity gasped, pushing the door open fully and pulling Marion into a tight hug. "I am so sorry for any pain I may have caused you! I was terribly horrid to you. Can you ever forgive me?"

Marion clung to her, burying her face in Verity's shoulder. She breathed deep, taking in the sweet vanilla scent she associated with her. It was a welcome sensation after so much heartache.

"No, Verity, I was wrong. I should have told ye what was goin' on, even if I was actin' in yer best interest. I shouldnae kept it from ye. Ye deserve more than that." Marion's voice was muffled by her tears, yet she managed to speak her peace.

Verity pulled back and held Marion at arm's length.

"No, my dear. I do understand why you did it. Anselm can be... formidable and persistent. And I was so caught up in my own pride that I could not see straight. Please, let us forget it."

"I would like that," Marion said as Verity squeezed her hands tight.

"We are friends first. Always."

"Always," Marion replied as a shaky smile touched her lips. "Well, let us not stand here all day."

Marion pulled Verity further into the room and gestured for her to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I know it is not just me that has caused you such grief. Please, tell me what has happened in my absence," Verity said softly.

"I fear I daenae ken where to begin," Marion said.

"Start wherever you like," Verity said with a smile. "I have all day, and you have my full attention."

And so, Marion began. She was slow and tentative at first. Yet, the more she spoke, the more the words came out like a flowing waterfall.

She started by telling Verity about Gilton's true nature. She detailed how the threats came from him, how he was the man in the alley that night, and all about her uncle and aunt's betrayal. Verity listened and her face grew paler with each revelation.

"I knew something was not entirely sane about that man."

"I ken...I ken..."

"Oh goodness, I can tell by the expression on your face. Is there more that has happened? Are you unwell?"

- "Aye... it is yer brother..."
- Verity was downright furious and outraged by Anselm's cold pronouncements.
- "He said what to you?" she demanded, her green eyes blazing hot. "He told you to... to go back to Scotland? That your marriage was merely a convenience?" She leapt to her feet and paced the room like a caged lioness.
- "I dinnae realize this would make ye so upset, but there is more to it. He is very—"
- "He is very much a fool! This cannot be! After everything you two have become over these weeks...I have seen you with my own two eyes. And after he almost lost you in the park... he said such cruel things?"
- "I think he believes he is protectin' me somehow," Marion whispered as she let her gaze go distant while looking at the curtains blowing in the breeze by the window. "Protecting us both from... entanglement. From the vulnerability that comes with real intimacy. I daenae think he can handle it."
- "Vulnerability be damned!" Verity snapped, her fists clenching into fists in the duvet. "He is surely a fool! And a coward, if he cannot face his own feelings!" She stopped and fixed her eyes on the door. "This is unacceptable. I will not stand for it."
- Before Marion could stop her, Verity marched out of the room. Her footsteps echoed with purpose as her heels connected with the marble. Marion knew exactly where she was going.



- Anselm had been absorbed in his work when a resounding boom came from the entrance to his study. He looked up to see the door had been slammed open, connecting with the wall behind it.
- "Verity," he said flatly, unwilling to give credence to her thunderous entrance. "I trust you are here to apologize for your recent outburst. If so, I am all ears," he said as he closed his ledger and looked up at her.
- "Apologize? To you!" Verity scoffed, striding towards his desk, her hands on her hips. "I am here to demand answers from you, Anselm! What did you say to Marion last night? What is this nonsense about her returning to Scotland?"
- Anselm's jaw clenched as he set his hands down onto his desk in tight fists. He was not prepared for this line of questioning, evident by the perspiration at his brow.
- "That, my dear sister, is a private matter between my wife and myself. It does not concern you and I would appreciate you to focus on your own matters."
- "It concerns me when you break her heart!" Verity snapped, her voice rising. "And when you speak of her as if she is merely a... a temporary fixture! She is your wife, Anselm! And I know it if you do not see what is plain in front of you...she loves you!"
- Anselm rose slowly then. He walked to the door and shut it to close them in. This conversation was not for the ears of passersby, and certainly not for Marion.
- She... loves me? He thought. No, this is Verity's creative mind running away with her. My life is not a novel, and my marriage is not her business. I will see things are made simple, and right.

"You cannot meddle in my marriage, Verity!" Anselm said, his eyes narrowing. "You have no understanding of the complexities involved."

"Complexities?" Verity cried, throwing her hands up in exasperation. "Is it complex to admit you care for someone? To admit you were terrified when she was in danger? I saw you with her, Anselm, all this time! You cannot lie to me about this, even if you are somehow able to deceive yourself. You are in lo—"

"My concern for the Duchess's safety is a matter of duty, Verity! Nothing more. And I will not have you confusing sentiment with reality any longer."

"But--"

"But nothing," Anselm snapped as he pointed a finger at her, which may as well have been a rapier. "You would do well to focus on your own future. You must find a respectable lord to marry, one who can offer you the stability you require. And you may, of course, agree with your husband to continue your writing, if he permits it. It will not be of my concern then."

Verity stared at him for moments that felt like hours before speaking.

"Is that what this is about, Anselm?

You are afraid, are you not? The big, strong Duke is afraid to feel anything that might make you... vulnerable."

Anselm's composure finally cracked as fire clouded his vision. His eyes flashed with a dangerous anger, turning from sparking green to dark forests.

"That is enough, Verity! You are overstepping your bounds! Leave my study. Now. My words are final, and I will not speak of this matter again. You must heed me, sister. You are treading on thin ice."

Verity recoiled, pacing backwards toward the door.

"Fine!" she snapped, her voice trembling in a way that was most unlike her. "But I cannot leave without saying that you are a fool, Anselm! A blind, stubborn fool!"

She turned on her heel and stormed out. The door slammed shut behind her with a thud that echoed through the silent house.

Anselm paced over to his brandy decanter and poured himself a glass of amber liquid to still his nerves. He took a deep sip and walked to the window, staring out at a couple on the street below. They were walking arm in arm, without a care in the world.

"Fools," he said, as he threw back the last of his drink.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

to the

is Grace requests your presence, Your Grace," a footman announced as he entered Marion's chambers after a quiet knock. "He informs me that you have been invited to Lady Aberton's soirée this evening and has asked me to fetch Miss Beth to help you dress."

Marion, still raw from the previous night, felt a fresh wave of hurt at the cool invitation. He was treating her as a mere obligation for social appearances, an adornment to be worn at a party.

"Please inform His Grace," she replied, her voice carefully neutral, "that I am feelin' rather... indisposed this evenin'. I regret I cannae attend and will remain in me quarters for the time bein'."

"Very well, Your Grace," the footman said with a bow as he departed without asking any further questions.

Marion knew it was a lie as she spoke it, but she could not face him. Not yet. Not after his cruel words and cool actions. She needed more time to think of what to say and do next.

Marion heard clamoring in the hallway, and she walked to her door. She placed an ear on the heavy wood to see if she could hear what was happening.

"Lady Verity," the footman called from down the hall with a soft knock. "Your brother would like you to attend Lady Aberton's soirée this evening as Her Grace is indisposed. He would like to see you ready and in the foyer within the hour... if that is acceptable."

"Very well," Verity said in response as she cracked open her door. "Seems I am unable to defy His Grace's wishes, so I will not put up a fight. Please send up my maid to help me dress and I will be down within the hour."

"Of course, my lady," the footman said as Marion heard his footsteps pitter patter down the hall, and Verity's door slam shut.



"Lovely weather we are having this evening," Verity joked as they entered the carriage. Light rain poured around them as the sun had begun to set.

"Indeed," Anselm said as he sat across from her, taking off his gloves and looking absently out the window.

The ride was stiff, marked by long, awkward silences. Luckily, it was not a far jaunt to Lady Aberton's London estate, and they would soon be swept up in conversation with more willing partners.

The ballroom at Lady Aberton's was a dazzling spectacle of light and music. Anyone with eyes could see that.

He moved through the crowd with Verity as a reluctant shadow at his side. He dutifully introduced her to a series of eligible, if unremarkable, lords and to her credit, she looked every bit the part of a beautiful lady. He could only hope that she would be amenable to his introductions.

"Lord Fairworks," Anselm announced, presenting a young man with a receding hairline and a nervous cough. "My sister, the Lady Verity. Lord Fairworks is known for his keen interest in...what was it again? The breeding of prize-winning cattle or something of the like?"

"I am most honored that you remember, Your Grace," he said with a wide smile. His nervous cough disappeared with the compliment. "I very much take pride in the abilities of our estate to produce such fine stock."

Verity offered a polite if strained smile as she looked between the two of them before finally speaking.

"Indeed?" she said, more as a question than a statement. "How... fascinating."

"And Lord Percival," Anselm continued as he waved another gentleman over, moving on to a portly chap whose eyes seemed to glaze over like a French pastry. "Dear sister, Lord Percival here is a noted collector of ancient coins."

Verity's smile tightened once more, and Anselm knew the expression on her face well. She was bracing herself, trying not to say something unseemly.

At least she is trying to soldier through this painful ordeal, he thought to himself as Lord Percival went on about coins.

It was clear to Anselm, and to anyone with an ounce of wit, that none of these men possessed a fraction of his sister's intelligence or her vibrant spirit. He felt a flicker of frustration himself and acknowledged the futility of his efforts, even as he pushed them forward.

Why must everything be so bloody hard? he thought as he took a glass of champagne from a passing servant and downed it in a single gulp.

Just as Anselm was attempting to introduce Verity to a particularly vapid Viscount, whom he secretly despised for the ostentatious color of his clothing, and only out of sheer desperation, a booming laugh cut through the polite chatter.

"Well, Your Grace! One finds you surrounded by such interesting, if earnest, company this evening!"

Emmanuel, his leanly muscular frame clad in a rather elaborate yet elegant waistcoat, materialized beside them with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

"Lord Faircranks, is it?" Emmanuel asked, his face as serious as cardiac arrest.

"Yes, Faircranks, my lord," he said in response before correcting himself, the nervous cough returning to his throat. "It is Lord Fairworks. I am sorry, but I must—"

"Oh, of course, a thousand apologies, my dear boy. And Lord Percy?"

"You know well that it is Percival—"

- "Well, I do hope they are not discussing the merits of cow manure, or the intricacies of Roman coinage, for her lady's sake."
- "You are incorrigible," Verity whispered as she walked closer to him.
- "And you, my dear, are looking entirely too serious for such a festive occasion," Emmanuel retorted, then turned his gaze to Anselm. "Though I daresay, your brother here looks as though he has just swallowed a sour lemon. What is the matter with you, my dear friend?"
- "Your usual charm is, as ever, overwhelming." Anselm grabbed another passing flute of champagne on a servant's tray.
- "Oh, I strive for consistency, Your Grace," Emmanuel chuckled. He then turned back to Verity and lowered his voice. "So, my lady, have you found any inspiration for your next literary endeavor amongst these fine gentlemen? Quite a cast of characters I do say."
- "Anselm, if you would excuse me," Verity said as she turned to her brother. "I believe I shall procure a beverage. All this stimulating conversation has made me quite parched."
- "I think that is a wise idea," he said as she offered her brother a nod and slipped away into the crowd.
- Emmanuel watched her go, then turned his full attention to Anselm, his expression fading.
- "And where, pray tell, is Her Grace this evening? I confess, I rather miss her insightful commentary on the various artistic merits of the assembled company. She is quite funny. Funnier than you at least, which I suppose is not all that difficult and—"
- Anselm stiffened, which silenced Emmanuel.
- "Marion is... indisposed this evening."
- Emmanuel raised an eyebrow as he shifted his back to passersby, creating a more private conversation.
- "Indisposed?" he asked. "Ah, yes. A sudden chill, perhaps? Or a headache of the most inconvenient variety?"
- Anselm knew that while his tone was light, his eyes were sharp and probing. He had known Anselm for years, and he easily understood when something was amiss. Anselm's jaw clenched as he considered his response.
- "Oh... I am sorry for my jest. Is it serious? Is Her Grace all right?"
- "She is simply not feeling well, Emmanuel. It is nothing of consequence nor of your concern." His voice was dismissive, a clear attempt to shut down the conversation.
- "Nothing of consequence?" Emmanuel pushed as he took a step closer and dropped his voice further. "Anselm, I have known you for long enough to discern when a matter is nothing of consequence and when it is a rather large, uncomfortable elephant in the room."
- "I assure you, Emmanuel, my private affairs are precisely that. Private. And you would do well to remember your place," he said as he drained the last of the champagne flute.
- He realized his tone was louder than he intended as a couple of nearby guests, sensing the shift in atmosphere, cast curious

glances their way. Emmanuel, for once, seemed to genuinely falter. There was a flicker of surprise in his eyes at Anselm's raw anger. He took a small step back, raising his hands in silent surrender. He did not say another word.

Anselm, realizing he had drawn unwanted attention, instantly regained his composure as he straightened his waistcoat. His face smoothed into its customary, formal mask as he paced away from his friend.

"Now, if you will excuse me, Emmanuel. I believe I saw Lord Barrington near the refreshments. A man of considerable intellect, I assure you. Perhaps you might find his company more stimulating. I must find my sister," he said as he turned abruptly, leaving Emmanuel standing alone.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



s unwelcome as I feel in this grand home, this room is an absolute sanctuary for me soul, Marion thought as she threw open the heavy curtains to bring light into her studio.

She looked around at how the rays of sunshine danced on the floor before her eyes. There was beauty to behold even in the worst of circumstances; she just needed to remember where to look.

She walked over and locked the door, then sought to begin her work. Her easel stood waiting in the middle of the room, a blank canvas mocking her with its emptiness.

It is time to put these emotions of mine in color, she thought.

- She moved with a quiet, determined purpose as she gathered materials. She was unsure of her direction but knew what she needed to get rid of.
- First, she gathered every sketch, every half-finished painting, and every single charcoal study that depicted Anselm.
- Curse this bloody bastard, she thought as she piled them on a nearby table.
- She looked at the quick, intimate sketches of him reading by the fire, as well as the more formal portraits she had begun, and even the playful caricatures she had drawn during their lighter moments. Those moments seemed a lifetime away.
- She stacked them carefully on the table, then carried them to a large, unused trunk in the corner of the room. She placed them inside, one by one, covering them with linen cloth before lowering the lid. She pushed the trunk beneath a heavy table.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Or so she hoped.

Then, she began to paint. Not the vibrant landscapes of Strathcairn, not the delicate floral arrangements, and certainly not *him*. Instead, she found herself drawn to make abstract swirls of color. The strokes started off dark and small, then spun into brooding shades of indigo and brown. She found a lovely crimson color that seemed to fit, and interspersed flashes of the angry hue at the heart of it.

She painted until her hands ached and every inch of white was covered. She painted until the emotional chaos within her found some release on the canvas.

- She grew absorbed and painted for two days straight. She barely ate, slept, or bathed. The only sounds that came from the room were the scrape of her brush and the occasional, muffled sob that escaped her lips.
- The only person she allowed into her self-imposed exile was Verity. Verity, after her own heated confrontation with Anselm, understood Marion's pain with fierce empathy.
- "Marion, my dear," Verity said softly, entering the studio on the second afternoon, carrying a tray with tea and biscuits, "you must eat something. The air is thick with oil paint and turpentine, which cannot be good for an empty stomach. Please..."
- Marion, her face smudged with paint, looked up from her latest work. She knew that her eyes were red-rimmed and distant, but she could not muster a smile for her dearest friend.
- "I am not hungry, Verity. But I do thank ye for yer kindness," she said as she wiped stray paint from her cheek which was streaked with salty tears..
- Verity set the tray down on a table, then dragged a stool beside the easel. She sat down, gazing at the turbulent canvas for a few minutes before speaking.
- "This is powerful work, much more abstract than you have ever done. You are truly a marvel with paint and brush," Verity said softly.
- "Thank ye."
- "But it is so terribly sad," she said as she reached out, gently touching Marion's arm. "He is a fool, Marion. A complete, utter fool. Believe me, I have told him."
- "He thinks he is protectin' me," Marion whispered, her voice hoarse from lack of use. "From... from the vulnerability of feelin'. I am tryin' to make sense of it—"
- "And what of *your* feelings?" Verity countered, her voice sharp. "Does he not consider the pain he inflicts on you? Has he not been up here to see for himself?"
- "No, he hasnae come. He only sends word with a footman or Mrs. Clarke. Aye, I cannae think of what to say. He doesnae understand emotion. Perhaps it will be easier when I return to Scotland... Perhaps I could stay with Elspeth for a bit..."
- "Does he truly believe that a life devoid of emotion is a life worth living?" She sighed. "I promise you that I have tried to speak sense into him. He was like a stone wall; one I cannot break down."
- Marion shook her head before turning back to her painting. She walked over to her paints and mixed hues to develop a new shade of green.
- "It is no use, Verity. He has made his decision. And I... I cannae fight him for a heart he does not wish to give. Even if it kills me..."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

will sleep here all night if I must. Anselm cursed to himself as he sat back in his leather chair.

That night, Anselm sat alone in his study. The only source of light came from the flickering gas lamp on his desk which accentuated the half-empty decanter of brandy beside it. He poured another glass and the amber liquid glinted. He swallowed it quickly.

So much cursed silence.

The silence of the house was oppressive, a reminder of Marion's absence, and of his sister's cold disapproval. He hated it all. He loathed the emptiness and the gnawing sense of wrongness. Yet, he knew what was best.

I must protect them. I must protect myself.

A knock, tentative at first, then firmer when no response came, interrupted his grim solitude.

"Your Grace? May I enter?" a deep voice called as the door swung open.

Emmanuel.

Anselm sighed while running a hand over his face. He did not want company.

"Come in," he bit out, in spite of himself.

Emmanuel walked quietly to the chair opposite Anselm's desk and sat, his expression unusually grave. Anselm set down his glass and sat up straighter so that he might do Emmanuel the honor of having his full attention.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. Genuine worry caught in his throat.

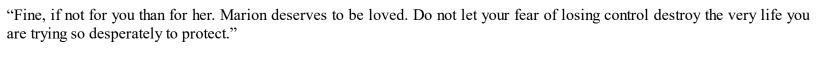
"Yes, Anselm," Emmanuel began, his voice soft. "This... this cannot continue. I know that Her Grace is heartbroken. Your sister is distraught. The very air in this house is thick with misery. I can feel it in my bones."

Anselm took another swallow of brandy and shook his head, realizing that the source of his friend's unease was him.

"My domestic affairs are not your concern, Emmanuel. What I could use is a drinking companion. Care for a glass?" He reached for another tumbler.

- "Everything that affects you, affects me, my friend," Emmanuel countered. "And this all, I know that it affects you deeply. I saw you last night. You were a man possessed. There were clouds in front of your haunted green eyes."

 "I do not need you to remark on the finer points of my eyes—"
- "And today, you look as though the weight of the world sits wholly on your shoulders. As it has for far too long." He leaned forward. "You love her, Anselm. It is as plain as those green eyes. Why? Why are you pushing her away?"
- Anselm slammed his glass onto the desk and the sharp clang echoed in the quiet room.
- "You know nothing of it! Our marriage was a contract, a necessity to avoid scandal and ruin. It was never meant to be... to be anything more than that. We have gone too far. It is dangerous."
- "Dangerous?" Emmanuel scoffed. "What is so dangerous about happiness, Anselm? About love? I wish to make light of this, to bring balance to your dark thoughts... but I find myself unable to come up with anything worthy of a laugh. You worry me, Anselm."
- "Love makes one vulnerable!" Anselm retorted, his voice rising, a raw edge to it. "It makes one weak! It makes one lose control!"
- Emmanuel stood and walked around the desk to stand before Anselm. He placed a hand on Anselm's shoulder, his gaze unwavering.
- "Anselm, I need you to listen to me. Truly listen."
- Anselm shook his head before looking into Emmanuel's eyes. He felt pulled to him in that moment and gave a nod.
- "Your father... he was a sick man. His mind was failing him in a way I would not wish on my worst enemy. And your mother's death... it was an accident. A tragic, senseless accident. None of it was your fault—"
- "But, but I—"
- "It was not your fault."
- "I could have done better. I could have—"
- "You were a boy. You did what you had to do. But you cannot carry the weight of their misfortunes, of all the world's misfortunes for that matter, as your sole responsibility. You cannot control every outcome, Anselm. You cannot prevent every sorrow. And you cannot punish yourself, or Marion, for a past that was not yours to command."
- Anselm stared at him.
- Emmanuel squeezed his shoulder again, shaking him slightly as if trying to ward off a ghost.
- "Do not throw away happiness, Anselm. So few have the luxury of knowing it. Do not sacrifice the very thing that could heal you because of a disease that was never yours. You deserve to be content."
- "I deserve—"



He paused, then sighed, before dropping his hand to his hip and placing it in his pocket.

"I have said what I came to say. Just promise me one thing?"

"What?"

"Think on it, my friend."

Emmanuel turned and left. The door closed softly behind him. Anselm was once again alone in the silence but now the weight of Emmanuel's words hung in the air and swirled around him.

Anselm sat there for a long moment in silence. His past pressed on him, as well as the idea of a future. Then, with a sudden, guttural roar of frustration, he swept his arm across the desk. Books, papers, quills, and the decanter of brandy crashed to the floor. He stood and hurled his chair backward onto the floor. He was breathing heavily and his chest heaved.

A moment later, the study door opened cautiously. A familiar face peeked inside the room.

"Your Grace? Is everything... in order?" Mr. Lewis asked softly as he stood in the doorway.

He looked to the floor and with quiet efficiency, he moved to begin cleaning.

"Leave it!" Anselm barked. "Leave it, Lewis! And leave me be! I will ring for assistance if and when I require it."

Mr. Lewis, having been with the family for many years, raised an eyebrow but did not fight. While he hesitated for a moment, he bowed.

"As you wish, Your Grace," he said as he withdrew. "My apologies."

Anselm stood amidst the wreckage of his desk. His anger deflated as he realized that he was as much of a mess as the floor. He knelt, slowly and picked up the books first. A heavy tome on economics, a treatise on Scottish law, a collection of parliamentary debates. Then his fingers brushed against something softer, something out of place. He picked it up.

It was Verity's book, *The Highland Holiday*. Its cover was slightly bent from the fall. He had started it, weeks ago, in a moment of rare idleness, and then dismissed the work after his wife caught him reading it.

He walked to the nearby sofa, sank onto its plush velvet cushions, and opened the book to the page where he had left off. His eyes scanned the words, then stopped because he was suddenly arrested by a passage that struck him.

"He had built his life with his bare hands, brick by brick. As a result, he was surrounded by walls, all of his own making. He believed that control was the only shield against the chaos of the world, as much as he believed in the Lord above.

But what good is a fortress, if it holds only solitude? And what is power, if it cannot protect the one thing truly worth losing?

Love. True love."

Anselm's breath hitched. He set down the book and wrapped his arms around himself. The words resonated with a terrifying accuracy. All he could hear were Emmanuel's and Verity's voices.

Perhaps he was not the only man to wrestle with the danger of love, or the fear of losing control.

And the need for control... it was destroying him.

Chapter Forty



our Grace," Beth said softly one morning while retrieving a tray of untouched toast and tea from a small table in Marion's studio. "You really should try to eat. You will make yourselfill."

Marion sighed while pushing a stray strand of her chocolate locks from her paint-smeared face.

"I am nae hungry, Beth. Truly. I will eat if I feel like it. Ye can just leave the tray."

Beth wrung her hands.

"But... you are fading, Your Grace. And His Grace, he looks like a specter himself. The whole house feels... wrong. Please, do pardon my bluntness."

Marion offered a weak smile.

"It will pass, Beth. Everything passes."

"Perhaps a walk, Your Grace? The air might do you good! Or maybe, we could have the carriage readied and you could go into town to see if there are any art supplies—"

Marion shook her head.

"No. I prefer to remain here. Thank ye for yer concern."

Beth sighed, then her eyes lit up with a sudden thought.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Lady Verity asked me to tell you that she found some truly exquisite new orchids in the conservatory. She thinks they would be quite lovely for you to paint. She said something about the colors in the light. She requests your presence there at eleven o'clock."

"My dear, that is only five minutes from now."

"I apologize; I was distracted by trying to fetch you some sustenance."

Marion sighed before pushing herself up from her stool. "Very well. I shall go to her."

Marion walked slowly down the halls, making her way towards the conservatory. Her heart was still heavy, and restricting her pace, but a faint curiosity stirred within her at a new subject for her art. She had grown tired of the dark abstractions that clouded her mind.

The glass-domed structure was a haven of warmth and light, teeming with life amidst the promise of summer that was upon them. As she stepped inside, the humid air, heavy with the scent of exotic blooms, enveloped her. She breathed deeply, wondering how long it really had been since she had stopped and smelled the roses.

She looked around, expecting to see Verity. Yet, there was no sign of her. She only saw Anselm, standing by a towering orchid with his back to her.

Anselm.

Marion's breath hitched. Her instinct was to turn and flee, to retreat to the safety of her studio, or better yet Scotland. She took a step back and reached for the glass door.

At that moment, the door swung shut behind her. The distinct click of a lock echoed through the glasshouse. Marion whirled around, her eyes wide with alarm. Through the glass, she saw Verity and Emmanuel, standing side by side, their faces grimly determined, and arms crossed.

"Oh, Verity! Emmanuel! What in God's bloody name is the meanin' of this?" Marion demanded. She rushed to the door and rattled the handle. "Unlock this door! Immediately!"

Verity merely shook her head. "Not until you two speak."

"Indeed," Emmanuel added. "Consider it... an intervention. For the good of all concerned. We cannot watch you suffer anymore."

"Ye cannae do this!" Marion retorted, pounding on the glass. "This is outrageous! Unlock this door!"

Verity and Emmanuel only exchanged a look, then turned and walked away. Marion watched them until their figures disappeared.

Trapped.

"They will not unlock it, Marion," Anselm said as he strode to her. He narrowed the distance quickly with his impossibly long strides. "Not until we resolve this."

"There is nothin' to resolve," she said. "I ken where ye stand."

"And... this was my idea," he said as he placed his hands in his pockets.

Marion spun away from the door to face him then. Her sapphire eyes blazed with a fresh wave of fury.

"Yer idea? Of course, it was yer idea! More control, Anselm! More manipulation! Ye cannae stand it when things are not precisely as ye order them, can ye? You cannae stand the thought of someone, anyone, havin' their own will, their own feelings, and their own pain that ye cannae neatly categorize and dismiss with a swipe of yer hand!"

She took a step closer. The heat of her anger strengthened her resolve.

"Ye are a cold, unfeelin' tyrant, Anselm! Ye push everyone away, then wonder why ye are all alone behind yer walls! Ye are so terrified of losin' control that you destroy everythin' good that comes into yer life! Do ye nae ken ye deserve happiness just as much as the next man?"

She paced the aisles of plants.

- "Ye speak of duty, of convenience, but what of the life we almost built? What of the joy we found in each other's arms? Was that all a lie?" Her voice began to trail off as hot tears prickled at the corners of her eyes.
- "Was I merely a pawn in yer scheme to 'protect' Verity? To protect yer precious name and the shite proprieties of the *ton*?" Tears streamed down her face now, blistering and angry.
- "Ye held me in the park, Anselm! Ye were terrified that somethin' could have happened to me! And' then ye came to me, and' ye broke me heart with yer cruel words... dismissin' everythin' we had become as a 'mistake'! How dare ye! How dare ye!"

She looked at Anselm then, who stood motionless.



He let her vent, absorbing every furious word and tear. He deserved all that and more. He did not interrupt, defend, or flinch.

Finally, when she had said her piece, when her voice cracked and her anger was spent, he felt her aching sorrow. She sagged, her shoulders slumping, and her gaze fell to the tiled floor beneath them. She placed a hand on a nearby counter. The only sounds were her ragged breathing and the gentle drip of water from the conservatory's humid glass panes.

Anselm took a slow step forward. Then another. He closed the distance between them, until he stood directly before her. He reached out, his hands gently cupping her perfect face. He tilted her delicate chin up until her tear-filled eyes met his.

"Marion," he began, his voice husky. "You are right. Every word from your lips rings true. I am a fool. A blind, stubborn, and cowardly fool."

He paused and used his thumbs to gently stroke her cheeks.

"I am so profoundly sorry. More sorry I think than I have been in my entire life, which is saying quite a bit. I am sorry for every cruel word and every moment of pain I have inflicted upon you... for pushing you away. For believing that control was the only way a man like me could survive."

He took a deep, shuddering breath.

"My entire life, control has meant survival. It meant keeping my family from ruin, protecting Verity from scandal, from the consequences of my father's illness. I believed if I did not maintain absolute control, everything around me would crumble. That I would lose everything, just as I lost my mother."

His gaze searched hers, pleading for silent understanding. She nodded for him to continue.

"But I was wrong. Terribly, tragically wrong. Since you came into this house, Marion, since you became my wife, I have never

been this... happy. The word is hard for me to say, but I will work on it. I have never, and I mean never, been this content. You have brought laughter into these halls and light into my life. You have made this house feel like a home again, something I never thought I'd have back after my mother's death. She...she would adore you," he said as his voice cracked.

"You are not a convenience, Marion. You are not a duty. You are everything."

His hands tightened on her face.

"I hurt you. I know I did. And I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you, if you will allow me. Please, Marion. Stay."

He swallowed hard, before placing his hands on her shoulders and looking into her deep blue eyes.

"I love you, Marion. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. And the thought of losing you... truly losing you... is a terror I cannot fathom. I never wish to be away from you again, from this moment forward."

Chapter Forty-One

to the

arion let silent tears fall, not from sorrow, but from the overwhelming flood of relief and hope that flooded her insides..

He saw it. He truly saw her, and himself.

"Ye... ye hurt me so deeply, Anselm," she whispered. "I thought... I thought I had lost everythin'. Me home, me friend, the man I... I had come to love."

Her gaze met his, unwavering and strong as a mare galloping through an open field.

"All I ever hoped for was to live a happy life, a life of me own, where I could make me own decisions. Where me choices were me own."

She took a shaky breath.

- "If ye want me to stay, Anselm, truly stay... ye must never take away me choices ever again. Ye cannae try to control me, or the course of me life."
- "I vow it, Marion," he said as he dropped down to one knee in front of her. "On my honor and my name. Never again. Your choices are your own. Always. I only hope that I can witness them."
- Marion searched his gaze and saw sincerity in his emerald eyes. A faint, hopeful smile touched her lips.
- "And Verity," she added, her voice softer. "Ye must do the same for your sister. Allow her the freedom to live her life, to pursue her passions, without unneeded interference. She needs yer trust, Anselm, not yer control. To yer credit, ye did raise her. Ye should be confident in yer work."
- He nodded immediately, without hesitation, before rising to his feet.
- "I promise that, too, Marion. I have seen the error of my ways. With both of you. I will strive to be a brother who supports, not dictates. A husband who trusts, not controls."
- He reached out. His thumb gently wiped a tear from her cheek, before pressing it to his full lips.
- Marion leaned into his chest. Her heart swelled with a love that felt stronger, more resilient, for having weathered the storm.
- "I love ye too, Anselm," she breathed. The words were a soft caress against his lips as she stood on her tip toes to kiss him.

He groaned as he pressed his lips deep into her mouth, kissing her ardently. It was as good as a handshake, a kiss that sealed their vows and a promise of a future built on understanding, trust, and a love acknowledged. The world outside the conservatory faded away. Only they existed.

Suddenly, the distinct sound of the lock clicking open echoed through the conservatory as they broke apart, startled. They turned to the entrance to see Emmanuel standing in the doorway. He held a triumphant, if slightly sheepish, grin on his face. Verity stood beside him with her cheeks flushed and her smile wide.

"Well, well," Emmanuel drawled as he began to clap slowly. "It seems our little intervention was rather successful, would not you agree, Verity? Though I daresay, the air in here is quite... hot. Thick almost? One could cut it with a knife."

He winked at Verity, who hit him lightly on the arm with a soft thwack.

"Emmanuel! You are insufferable! Come along, we ought to leave them to it," Verity said as she looked to Marion. "Marion, my dear. I am so glad. Truly."

She offered a small, apologetic smile, which Marion returned with a small wink.

"We only wanted to check on you both. We were... concerned and..."

"Tis' quite all right, Verity. Thank ye.... both of ye," she said as she turned to Emmanuel. "Perhaps, Emmanuel, ye and I might take tea in the garden? The air is rather... I mean, less thick out there. Shall we?"

Marion glanced up at Anselm with a silent question in her eyes. He met her gaze and a slow, tender smile spread across his face before he gave a subtle, affirming nod.

Emmanuel blinked, momentarily confused by the sudden invitation, then his eyes widened in understanding.

"Ah! An excellent suggestion, Your Grace! A most excellent suggestion indeed!" He offered her his arm with his customary flourish. "Lead the way, then. I believe the rose bushes are quite in need of some stimulating conversation. Would you believe I was speaking with some lord whatshisname the other day, and he said if you talk to the plants they actually grow faster."

"I actually have heard that," Marion said as she took his arm.

There was a lightness in her step she hadn't felt in days. As they walked towards the conservatory doors, leaving Anselm and Verity alone, she glanced back.

Anselm was watching her with a profound love and relief etched on his face.

The walls are down. Finally.

Chapter Forty-Two



o," Verity began, her voice stiller than before. "You truly mean what you said to Marion? About... about the control? About me being able to lead my own life?"

Anselm sighed then ran a hand through his hair. He walked to a bench and sat down.

"Every word, Verity. I was a fool. A blind, stubborn fool. Thank you for trying to explain that to me," he said as he looked up at her. "And I owe you an apology as well. For years, I have... I have treated you as if you were still a child. As if you were incapable of navigating the world without my constant guidance, my protection."

"You did. And it was bloody infuriating," she said as she sat down beside him. "But I always knew it came from a place of love, buried deep in the catacombs of your soul."

Anselm nodded, his gaze distant and haunted as he placed his hands on his thighs.

"I was just a boy, Verity. But I had to become a man. I had to become the Duke. And I believed the only way to keep us safe, to keep you safe and to raise you well, was to control everything. To never show weakness. To never allow myself to feel... anything that could be taken from me again."

He took a deep breath. The words tumbled out forming a confession that was years in the making.

- "The truth about Mother's death... it is not as I told you originally. There is more to our family, and this sordid tale."
- "What do you mean, brother?"
- "Father suffered from a most tragic illness; they call it a wasting of the mind. At first, he forgot small things, the name of some lord for instance. But as it got worse, and he suffered an unexpected cold, a physician confirmed our worst fears. I began running the duchy quietly, keeping father removed and carefully planning his events."
- "When Mother...well, one day Father was especially cross. Not actually with her, but a product of the wasting of his mind. She sought to calm him and while his mind was weak, he was still impossibly strong. He accidentally caused her injury and took her life.
- "I promised myself that I would shelter our family from the weight of what Father had done, so profoundly unknowingly. When he finally passed, I told myself that the secrets would die with him... yet here we are. The ways I survived became the song of my soul. I do not... I do not know how to live a life without control. But I am willing to learn."
- "Anselm... why did you carry all of this on your own? All these years?" Her voice was thick with sorrow. "I understand when

I was a child, but I could have helped you now! Do you not realize how much I love you?"

He looked at her through weary eyes.

"It was my duty, Verity. Do you not see it now? My duty as the Duke. My duty as your brother. My damn duty to shield you from the ugliness of this world, our family, and the bloody truth."

Verity shook her head as tears welled in her eyes. She reached out, closing the small space between them as she took his hand.

"No, Anselm. That is not duty. That is a burden you should never have carried alone. We are family. And family... we must stick together, no matter what. Through the good, the bad, and the downright terrible. We share the burdens. We share the joys. We share the *truth*."

Anselm squeezed her hand.

"You are right. You are entirely right. I have been a fool, and I promise you, Verity... I will never shut you out again. Never. We will face everything together. You are a tremendous young woman, and I cannot wait to see the wonders you will share with this world."

Verity's grip tightened.

"And I promise, Anselm, to be more open with you as well. To trust you with my fears, and my triumphs. Even my literary pursuits, much as they seem frivolous to you."

A small, watery smile touched her lips. Anselm chuckled, a genuine, warm sound that filled the space around them.

"Indeed. Though perhaps we can agree to keep the more scandalous passages to ourselves. There are some things as your brother that I just do not care to read."

Verity laughed as she fought to catch her breath. Anselm did not realize how much he had missed her laugh or enjoyed being the one to cause it.

"Agreed," she said.

"But I will say this," he added, his voice lower, more sincere. "You may not have intended it, but your words stirred something in me." He paused, as if weighing how much to reveal. "It was your story that reminded me... how easy it is to lose something precious through pride and stubbornness. It made me realize I still had a chance to repair what I'd nearly ruined with Marion."

Verity's eyes widened, her amusement giving way to quiet wonder.

"I never thought my ridiculous scribblings would inspire anyone. Least of all you," she said, her voice soft.

He gave her a small, wry smile. "Life is stranger than fiction, little sister."

Chapter Forty-Three

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arion felt an uncomfortable pang in her chest as Beth pulled the ribbons of her corset tighter in preparation for a most unwelcome dinner.

- "Just a little bit more here, Your Grace," Beth said. "You are indeed a vision; this shade of emerald is most beautiful on you."
- "Thank ye, Beth," Marion said as she slid her feet into her delicate, gold slippers. "Help me with the gold necklace, will ye?"
- "I have it right here, Your Grace! Splendid choice. If I may say, the way the teardrop falls into the curve of your bust... you are most lovely."
- "And that was all the confidence I needed to face me family," Marion said with a wink. "Let us make our way down then to welcome the lions."
- A week had passed and the Greystead townhouse was to play host to an uncomfortable gathering. Anselm had sent word to Lord and Lady Harlowe, looking suitably confused by the unexpected invitation, to sup with them. Their faces were puzzled as they entered the drawing room for aperitifs. They offered a small bow to the couple.
- Anselm stood by the fireplace with Marion at his side. Her posture was regal and composed. She was no longer the quiet, scared girl they could order about. She was a duchess.
- "Lord and Lady Harlowe," Anselm began. "Thank you for accepting our invitation."
- "Your Grace," Lord Harlowe replied with a tentative smile on his face. "A pleasure, as always. Though I confess, we are rather baffled by this sudden summons."
- He glanced at Marion and she noted a flicker of suspicion in his eyes as he raised a brow.
- "Marion, my dear, you are looking... well."
- "Indeed, Uncle," Marion replied. "Better than I have been in a very long time."
- Lady Harlowe, ever the picture of polite concern, stepped forward then with her hands clasped at her chest.
- "Oh, my dearest Marion. We have been so worried about you! After your... unfortunate incident with Lord Gilton reached our ears. Such a dreadful man! We are glad you are rid of him at last."

- Anselm raised a hand, cutting her off.
- "Enough, Lady Harlowe. We are not here for pleasantries, nor for feigned concern. We are here for the truth and nothing more."
- He held up a folded document.
- "My Bow Street Runner has been most thorough. He has uncovered a great many... unsavory dealings regarding Lord Gilton. Debts, frauds, and a rather damning confession."
- Lord Harlowe's expression stiffened as he made his way to the beverage cart and poured himself a glass of brandy.
- "A confession? What nonsense is this, Your Grace? Gilton is a scoundrel; we all know that now. But what has that to do with us?"
- "Everything," Anselm replied.
- He unfolded the document, revealing a signature at the bottom that was undoubtedly the Viscount's hand.
- "Lord Gilton has signed a full confession. A confession that implicates you both, Lord and Lady Harlowe, in his scheme to defraud my wife of her dowry, and to ensure her... permanent removal."
- The Harlowes went white as sheets. In fact, they became so limp if an errant wind had blown through the windows, they may have flitted away entirely.
- Lady Harlowe gasped as her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes darted nervously to her husband who merely faltered for a moment as he downed his glass of brandy.
- "This is a damn forgery!" Lord Harlowe roared. His face became purple with rage. "A fabrication! Gilton is a liar and a bloody desperate man! You cannot believe a word he says!"
- He turned his fury on Marion as he took a single step toward her, raising a finger to point at her face.
- "And you, you ungrateful wretch! After everything we did for you, providing for you! You are disobedient, a disgrace! You would believe the rambling of a criminal over us?"
- Marion stood her ground.
- "Me faither loved that land. He loved his title. He loved it with every breath in his body, the same blood that flows through me veins. He would weep to ken how ye poisoned it with yer greed. How ye conspired to ruin me, to send his only child to a madhouse. All of that, simply for a cut of money that was never even yers."
- Her voice trembled slightly as she thought of her parents, but her resolve was unwavering.
- "I am done with ye both. Done with yer lies and yer cruelty. Ye will never set foot in this house again. And ye will never again have any claim over me life, or me inheritance."
- Lady Harlowe, tears streaming down her face, stepped forward, and reached a trembling hand towards Marion.

"Marion, please! You do not understand! We were desperate! He... he threatened us! We had no choice! You must believe me!"

Marion merely looked at her, but she was devoid of pity. She took a deliberate step closer to Anselm and stood firmly at his side. She placed her hand delicately on his shoulder.

"You always have a choice, Aunt. Ye simply chose greed over family. And now, ye will have to live with the consequences of that choice."

Anselm placed a reassuring hand on the small of Marion's back. His fingers rubbed her in a soothing rhythm.

"You will leave now," he commanded. "And you will never attempt to contact the Duchess, or anyone in this household, again. If you do, I assure you, the consequences will be far more severe than a ruined reputation."

Lord Harlowe could only nod.

Chapter Forty-Four



nselm stepped forward then. He was not finished.

"Furthermore," Anselm announced, "I have purchased all of Strathcairn's estates. Every acre now belongs to me."

He allowed himself a brief, triumphant smile.

His gaze hardened and settled on Lord Harlowe with an intensity that promised pain.

"You two are to leave this country. Now. And let me be clear. You will never set foot in England or Scotland ever again. If you do," Anselm said as he took another deliberate step forward, his voice a menacing growl, "I will remove you myself. Forcefully."

"I do not care who you are, you cannot do this—" Lord Harlowe cried, as he finally found his voice, which was no more than a strangled shout of outrage.

Anselm silenced him with a single, scorching look. With another step, he closed the distance between them and bared his teeth.

Immediately, Lord Harlowe cowered.

"Very well, we will be gone at once. We will see to our affairs, and set sail for Portugal," Lord Harlowe said as he slunk back.

Mr. Lewis arrived then, as if on cue, with the meager luggage they had brought for an overnight stay to usher them out.

"We can find our own bloody way out," Lord Harlowe cried as he dragged Lady Harlowe out of the room.

They snatched their bags from Mr. Lewis and practically ran out of Greystead.



"Oh, thank heavens, we are alone now," Marion whispered as she kissed Anselm's cheek. "I cannae believe all ye have done for me. How did ye not tell me about the buying Strathcairn?"

"I wanted your aunt and uncle to hear it, for them to serve as witnesses. There is nothing I would not do for you, my beautiful lass."

"I like the way ye call me lass," she said she planted a small kiss on his lips then. "Aye, I think me faither would have been

most proud of ye for this... and happy to call ye his son-in-law."

"I cannot tell you how much that means to me, or how much it pains me that I will never be able to meet him or your mother. It is my hope... that perhaps I can meet them in a way through our future children. Maybe they will have the same love for Scotland and zest for life you have told me so much about."

"Oh, Anselm," Marion said. There were tears in her eyes as she looked down to the floor. "I do not deserve all this."

Anselm took her chin in his hand and pulled it up so he might kiss her softly.

- "You deserve the world, my tempest."
- "Oh, Anselm," Marion cooed again as she placed her head on his shoulder. She stood on her toes and kissed the lobe of his ear softly.
- "If you want it, I will conquer it for you."
- He took her chin again in his hand and brought her mouth to his. He kissed her softly at first. He let his lips explore hers, savoring each sensation as he breathed in her floral lavender scent, letting her wash over him like the sea. How he wished he could bathe in her.
- Before he realized what he was doing, his hands were roaming up and down her body. He traced the shape of her dress, finally settling on the top of the gown and her generous bosom that poked out of her corset.
- "You should know better than to put yourself on display like this," Anselm said as he kissed the crests of her breasts. "I cannot help myself. Do you want to feel how badly I need you? How much my body craves yours?"

He pulled away for a moment to watch her nod. He grabbed a delicate wrist and placed her hand on the crotch of his trousers.



- "Oh my, Anselm," Marion said as she stroked the length of him through his pants, feeling the hardness of his attraction. "Ye feel so good, darlin'."
- "I think we need to move this out of the drawing room," he moaned as he placed his hand over hers, allowing one more stroke of her hand before removing it. "Let us be quick about it. To our quarters."
- "Excuse me, Your Graces," Mr. Lewis announced as he entered the room. "Dinner is ready to be served in the main hall."
- "Ahem," Anselm said as he began to feign a cough and doubled over.
- "Are you quite all right, Your Grace?"
- "Ahh, erm... yes, we—I mean he, is fine, Mr. Lewis," Marion said as she covered Anselm with her body. "But I do think it best if ye could bring trays of tonight's meal to His Grace's quarters. And please let Lady Verity ken that we are...indisposed this evenin'."
- "Ah, yes," Mr. Lewis said, realization visible in his eyes as he looked between them. "Of course, and I will not rush in its

- delivery. I will have it brought up say, in the next hour?"
- "Ye had better make it two. I want to be sure His Grace has proper time to...rest," Marion said while suppressing a giggle.
- "Of course, Your Grace," he said before making a swift exit.
- "It took everythin' I had not to burst out laughin'," Marion said as she took Anselm's hands in hers. "Shall we make a run for it?"
- "Get over here, you saucy Scot," Anselm said as he tossed her over his shoulder effortlessly. Then he carried her out of the drawing room and up the stairs to his room.
- He threw Marion playfully onto the lush bed. It was freshly made with new bedding. Rich green fabric had embroidered flowers on it. She ran her cheek along the material, inhaling the subtle notes of him.
- "Well, as you can see... I am clearly still in wanting of you, my wife," Anselm said as he dropped the last of his undergarments.
- Marion sat up on the bed and propped herself up onto her elbows to look at him.
- Aye, this man is a SIGHT to behold. I still daenae understand how I can take all that...manliness.
- "I need you. Now."
- He walked over. He was deliberate and she was wanton. She needed him as badly as he did of her, if not more. The insides of her throbbed with a painful want, as if she would ache for all eternity if he did not put himself inside of her.
- "We must do something about these clothes," he said as he spun her onto her stomach.
- He began undoing the fastening of her corset with expert movements. His efforts were quick and efficient but not harsh or sharp. Once it was loosened, he pulled it off and spun her around to begin work on the rest of her garments. She was undressed in less than two minutes.
- "If ye decide ye no longer wish to be a duke, ye should consider work as a lady's maid," Marion joked as she rose to her knees. "I havenae seen such fast work before."
- "They lack the appropriate motivation," Anselm said as Marion watched his eyes rove over her curves.
- He pushed her down onto her back and began kissing her neck, before moving to work her full and aching breasts. Her nipples practically begged for his mouth and the nip of his teeth. He answered the call, working her breasts with his large hands, taking playful bites of her soft buds until she began to cry out his name.
- "Oh Anselm," she moaned and then she saw him sit up.
- Her breath came in ragged, shallow bursts as she drank him in—so hard, so ready for her, his body tight with restraint. Heat surged through her as she realized just how much power she held in this moment.
- Without thinking, she reached for him, wrapping her fingers around the thick length of him, feeling the heat and weight of him in

- her palm. He let out a sharp breath, his head falling back slightly.
- "I want to taste ye," she said softly, surprising even herself with the boldness of the words.
- His gaze snapped to hers, green eyes dark with something primal—but also with surprise and something dangerously close to reverence.
- "Are you certain?" he rasped, his voice rough and low, barely controlled.
- She gave a small, deliberate smile, her thumb gliding over the sensitive tip as he shuddered under her touch. "Aye. I want to."
- Whatever restraint he had left vanished in the flare of his gaze, but he didn't move—not this time. He let her take the lead.
- So, she guided him on the bed, letting him lie on his back as she slowly leaned forward, her lips brushing against him as she tasted him for the first time, savoring the salt and heat as she began to explore him with soft, tentative flicks of her tongue.
- He groaned, low and guttural, as she grew bolder, taking more of him into her mouth. She reveled in the way his body reacted —tense, trembling, his breath ragged as she continued.
- He didn't guide her. He didn't need to.
- She wanted this. Wanted to watch him unravel beneath her hands.
- "You are heaven, my tempest," he said as he hissed through clenched teeth. "But I will not let myself find release in your mouth, at least not tonight."
- He slowly slid back down her body before putting his hands on her full hips. He flipped her onto her stomach and took a hand to her sex. He began sliding his fingers up and down her slit, taking the wetness of her arousal and using it to massage the whole of her. He then settled on the soft bud that would send her over the edge..
- As he continued to massage her clit, he slowly brought his large cock toward her entrance from behind.
- "Such a good lass for me," he whispered in her ear as he drove himself inside of her, hard and strong.
- He began thrusting hard and needy, filling her entirely. He took his hand off her throbbing clit to place both of his hands on her hips. He used them as leverage to deepen his thrusts, occasionally pulling her roughly against his muscular thighs. She found herself being pulled deeper and deeper into the moment with every rhythmic slap of their skin.
- The room was hot. Impossibly hot. She felt as though she may explode and a part of her wanted to. She could die a happy woman. Just. Like. This.
- Just when she felt her body could not take anymore, his pace quickened again. Each thrust sent a new sensation through her body. She felt him there, but she felt him everywhere.
- "You. Are. Mine. You. Are. Mine. I. Will. Give. You. The. World," he said with each thrust, before he finally cried her name. "Marion."
- After finding release, he fell to his side next to her. His breath was heavy but even. He wiped his brow with the back of his

hand before looking at her, as she was still on all fours. He guided her slowly down and spooned her from behind on the bed.

"It is all right. You can relax now," he said as he kissed her shoulder from behind.

But the moment his lips touched her skin, her body burned to feel him again.

"Oh Anselm," she cried out, sticking her bottom as hard as she could into him. "Please, I need ye."

"Your wish is my command," he said as he thrust inside of her.

His pace was just as deliberate, yet slower this time. She could feel him going more slowly, allowing her to savor each sensation as she took the whole of him. They fit so well, like a lock and key. She felt as though this man was truly made for her. She had no doubt that their future would be passionate, full, and bright.

When they finally found release a second time, as well as the strength to rise from bed to don robes, Anselm rang for supper. Mr. Lewis sent a footman up, who politely left trays outside of the door.

They dined while sitting on the rich carpet in front of the fireplace, savoring stewed meats, mousseline potatoes, fresh vegetables, and a delicious pudding for dessert. They sipped on luxurious red wine, allowing the intoxication of the spirit, as well as their passion, to settle deep within them.

When they had finally found their full, he took her in his arms and strode over to a large chair in front of the windows. He held her in his lap, stroking her long, chocolate locks as they gazed out at the stars.

"When I was a lassie, I would look at the stars and pray that someone else was lookin' at them too," she said. "I dinnae realize how beautiful it would feel to have someone to share it with, like we are now."

"I know that I promised you the world, but if it is the cosmos you require, I can assure you that I am up for the challenge."

Epilogue

SIX MONTHS LATER



an you believe all these exquisite paintings?" Lady Featherstone remarked as she entered the room. "I had no idea Her Grace had such remarkable talent!"

"Oh, and this is but a taste of what my dear sister-in-law is capable of!" Verity gushed as Marion and Anselm joined her. "I am so glad that my brother put this event together to let the world see just how talented she is."

Nowadays, the townhouse felt like a true home once more. Laughter filled the halls, company clamored to spend time with the esteemed couple, and tonight was no exception.

The ballroom was filled with pleasant conversation and the gentle clinking of glasses as guests savored champagne and looked at the magnificent artwork adorning the room. Anselm had spared no expense, organizing a gathering with rich, decadent offerings to showcase Marion's paintings that would rival the Louvre.

The saucier pieces Marion was most fond of, of course, remained tucked away in her studio. Her private commissions were reserved for her husband's eyes alone.

Anselm moved through the throng with his arm possessively draped around Marion's waist. His chest swelled with pride. He looked up at the landscapes of Strathcairn and the remarkable still life paintings. He appreciated the more abstract pieces as well, which he knew helped her move past more tumultuous times in their relationship.

"My wife, the artist," he declared as he ushered her through the room, to anyone who paused to admire a canvas.

He would hold her out with one arm to twirl her around. His gaze was warm and adoring as it settled on Marion's beautiful curves.

Tonight, she was wearing his favorite emerald gown, and she was resplendent in the light of the chandeliers above. He watched how she glowed under his attention. There was a certain way her cheeks flushed with pleasure and her eyes shimmered brightly. She held a newfound confidence that suited her exquisitely.

He could not stop smiling, so much that his cheeks hurt.

Across the room, Anselm and Marion spotted a knot of ladies they had not greeted. They nodded in silent agreement and sought them out. They watched from a careful distance as they fanned themselves, their voices animated as they sipped champagne.

"Have you read it? Miss Eliza Jane Bennett's new book! It is simply scandalous, yet utterly captivating!" One woman said to the group.

- "Oh, indeed," another chimed in. "I devoured it in a single night like a rich dessert. The wit, the intrigue, oh and the gothic elements in this one. I must say, she has truly outdone herself with this latest novel."
- Emmanuel, ever the charming rogue, joined their circle as Marion and Anselm looked on.
- "Ah, *The Highland Haunting*," he mused and there was a twinkle in his eye that was not just from the champagne. "I particularly enjoyed the scene where the heroine disguises herself as a stable boy to spy on the villain before throwing a dead mouse onto him from a nearby stall."
- Verity, who had just approached, nearly choked on her champagne. Her eyes, wide with surprise, met Emmanuel's. A blush crept up her neck, and a smile played on her lips.
- "You... you read that part?" she stammered. "If you read that...than that means..."
- "I read the whole thing, cover to cover."
- "I am impressed," Verity said with a mocking bow as they excused themselves from the group and walked toward the bar.
- Anselm, witnessing the exchange, stiffened. He felt a familiar protectiveness rising within him, one he tried his best to keep at bay despite his natural inclinations.
- Just as he went to open his mouth, Marion gently pressed her fingers against his arm.
- "Leave yer sister be, me love," she whispered as she looked up at him. "She is a grown woman, which ye ken."
- Anselm grumbled as he relented and a soft sigh escaped him.
- "Ye would do well to remember yer promise to me," she said with a teasing tsk tsk in her tone.
- "Very well," he said as he began to usher them away to another group.
- A moment later, a joyous cry erupted from Verity from across the room.
- "Oh, Elspeth!" Verity cried as she ran towards one of her dearest friends.
- Elspeth, Lady Inverhall, had made the journey from Scotland. Her face was illuminated by the warmth of the room's soft light. She embraced Verity fiercely, then turned to Marion as she approached.
- "Marion, me dear! Yer paintin's are magnificent!" Elspeth cried. "I cannae believe we are reunited and ye have His Grace to thank. I was most happy to receive his letter and make the arrangements to journey here. I barely made it in time, so ye will have to excuse my appearance."
- "Oh nonsense," Verity cried. "You are a vision; you should let Marion paint you!"
- The three women fell into an easy conversation. Their laughter mingled with the hum of the party as Anselm approached with three champagne flutes. They smiled at him as they took glasses from the esteemed Duke and clinked them together as they looked at him.

- "You must stay longer than a week, Elspeth," Verity pleaded as she looked up at the late hour and clutched her friend's hand. "There is so much to catch up on and surely Anselm and Marion will not mind if you do."
- "Oh, we would be most delighted to have ye stay on as a guest as long as ye would like!" Marion said as she hugged them tighter.
- "Perhaps." Elspeth smiled at her friends. "Perhaps I just might."
- Later that night, when the last guest had finally departed and the echoes of the party faded into the quiet elegance of the townhouse, Anselm and Marion stood on the balcony overlooking the gardens from his quarters.
- The cool autumn night air was a welcome balm after the warmth of the crowded rooms. The city lights twinkled below and created a distant, glittering tapestry on the dulling green of the lawn.
- Anselm wrapped his arms around Marion from behind. He pulled her close and rested his chin on her shoulder.
- "Tired, my love?" he murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple. "You must be exhausted. I dare say you spoke to each guest that came, and you will undoubtedly be the talk of the *ton* for weeks to come."
- She leaned back into his embrace and allowed contented sigh to escape her. "Content is a better way to put it. It was a wonderful evening, one of the best. Everyone liked your wife's work," she teased as she tilted her head back to look up at him.
- "My wife's work is exceptional," he corrected, his voice husky. "My wife is exceptional."
- His hands slid from her waist. They traced the curve of her full hips as he pulled her even tighter against him. His lips found the sensitive skin beneath her ear, sending shivers down her spine.
- "And you, my love, are the greatest work of art."
- Her breath hitched as his fingers deftly unfastened the buttons of her gown. The emerald silk slid to the floor in a soft whisper. He turned her in his arms, and she saw that his green eyes were dark with desire as he devoured her with his gaze. She craved the way he looked at her.
- She stood in front of him, her corset accentuating each curve of her body. He turned her around again and unfastened it with expert fingers.
- "Each time I think ye cannae get any faster, ye somehow shave off more time."
- "Is that a challenge?" he asked playfully as their bodies met creating a perfect fit.
- He picked her up and pulled her naked body tight against his chest, the world beyond the balcony fading, leaving only the two of them. He carried her to his bed and laid her down with deliberate care, as though she were something precious, fragile, his eyes never leaving her.
- He shed his clothes swiftly, without finesse—casting aside the ornate pieces of his suit in a way that would no doubt horrify his valet come morning—but he didn't seem to care.
- His gaze swept over her, dark and burning, full of heat and something almost reverent.

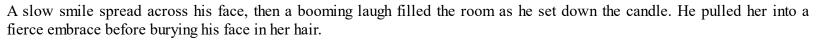
- "Turn for me, love," he said, his voice low, rough, but no less gentle for it. "Let me see you."

 She hesitated, breath catching. "But daenae ye want me to—"

 "I want everything," he murmured, his tone sending a shiver through her. "But right now, I want you like this."

 He moved to her, hands firm but not unkind as he drew her to the edge of the bed, guiding her where he wanted her—but with a lingering touch that worshipped even as it possessed.

 "Oh my," she gasped as he slid into her from behind, her body arching at the sudden, exquisite fullness.
- "Oh, Anselm," she cried, breathless.
- His reply was a low, ragged groan as he began to move, each deep thrust both deliberate and consuming—as though this wasn't just about lust, but about *claiming* what had always been his.
- "Oh...oh Anselm," she cried as she grabbed a pillow to place under her stomach, giving her a better tilt to receive him.
- He pushed hard but slow at first, building up pace as if they were a fine piece of music. As they reached the crescendo, he brought a hand down to her needy clit and massaged so he might bring her over the edge with him.
- "Oh, Anselm," she cried as he thrust his hot release deep inside of her. .
- I feel so complete, she thought as she listened to his ragged breathing, all from his response to her.
- Afterward, as they lay tangled in the silken sheets, the city lights still twinkling outside at a distance, Marion stirred. She traced the hard line of Anselm's bearded jaw, and a soft smile graced her lips.
- "Anselm?" she whispered, her voice a little shaky.
- "Hmm?" he murmured, already half-asleep, his arm a heavy, comforting weight across her.
- "I have somethin' I need to tell ye," she started.
- "Can it wait until morning? I am so tired from—"
- "I am with child."
- His eyes snapped open like a shot in the dark as he propped himself up on an elbow. He fetched a candle from the bedside table. His gaze searched hers in the dim light.
- "Truly? Are you sure?"
- She nodded As tears of joy welled in her eyes.
- "Truly."



- "A baby," he whispered. "Our baby. You are so remarkable. I will forever be in awe of you, my love."
- "I think ye had somethin' to do with it too," Marion said with a soft giggle.
- "Well, I hope I see him in my dreams tonight," Anselm said as he closed his eyes once more.
- "How are ye so sure it will be a lad? It could very well be a lass ye ken."
- "I would be just as happy with a girl," he said as he planted a kiss on her cheek. "But something tells me this is a boy. I can feel it."

They held each other close. The promise of a future filled with laughter, love, and the pitter-patter of tiny feet, unfolded before them.

The End?

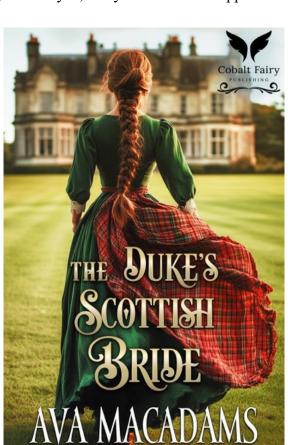
Extended Epilogue

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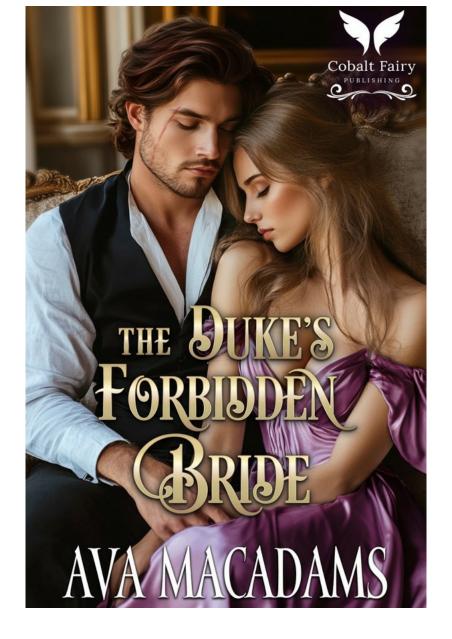


PREVIEW: THE DUKE'S FORBIDDEN BRIDE



"Tease me more, Duchess, and you will find that my tongue can be more wicked than my fingers."

When Lady Eleanor risks everything for his family, Duke Spencer must act. Marriage is the only solution... But one kiss shatters all sense of convenience—now he must make her completely his...



Chapter One



ell, well, well." Boots clicked against the stone floor, and suddenly Eleanor Barnes's cramped room—her *cell*, for that was truly all it was—seemed even smaller as William Coleman, Lord Belgrave, crossed the threshold. "Three years and you have not changed, Lady Eleanor. Well, I try to greet you as the lady your birthright says, but you hardly look worthy of any title."

- The door had creaked open, the sound echoing off the low stone ceiling of her room in St. Euphemia's House of Mercy.
- A shudder went down her spine, a pit yawning open in her stomach, as it always did.
- However, this time, Eleanor did not look up into the cruel, flat eyes of Sister Martha, with her sneer and pious words, or even Sister Susan, with her righteous hand raised before her lips ever opened.
- No, she looked up at the last man she had thought she would ever see again.
- Before Eleanor could break her stony silence, Sister Susan finally showed her weathered, wrinkled face.
- "Lord Belgrave, whatever you may require after your visit is at your disposal. We will be more than happy to provide you with anything you need. Of course, you are always welcome to dine with Mother Caroline as well."
- "Thank you, Sister," Lord Belgrave said, but his eyes remained on Eleanor.
- She wished they would not. She wished *she* could look away, but she couldn't.
- "You may leave us now."
- "Of course, Lord Belgrave."
- Do not, Eleanor wanted to beg, forcing the weight of fear from her tongue, from her eyes, so he did not see or hear it.
- Please do not leave me alone with him.
- But of course, they would—they were perhaps crueler than him. They would not think twice about what kind of man she was left with.
- Her heart beat a nervous staccato in her chest, pounding in a way that made her feel ill.
- The heavy, wooden door slammed shut.
- "Eleanor Barnes," Lord Belgrave drawled, laughing lowly at her. "My, how you have fallen. How small you look, kneeling there beside the bed. Were you indulging in your prayers? Did you turn to God, after all, thinking he would save you after your... ruination?" He crouched, tilting his head at her. "Did you pray that I would forget you, Eleanor?"
- He was taunting her, and she refused to give in, to be affected. She lifted her chin. The convent and its host of nuns who wielded their religion cruelly had broken her spirit long ago, but she could not let Lord Belgrave see that.
- His cold blue eyes caught the meager light of her candle. They were nothing but icy chips. How had she ever thought he was charming and handsome?
- He extended his hand, uncurling his fingers. "Here, let me help you up. Do they ask you to kneel like this for visitors? Perhaps you did not know I was coming. Did they tell you? They knew about my arrival. I sent word this morning."

- Eleanor's stomach dropped. She should not have felt the betrayal clumping through her guts, sifting through the heavy contents of her breakfast she was already fighting to keep down.
- Lord Belgrave's eyes trailed over her, making her feel exposed.
- "Silent," he mused. "You never were before. Do you have nothing to say to me? I will admit, I expected anger from you. Three years is a long time to think."
- "I have done enough thinking," Eleanor finally answered, her voice a rasp. She only used it to pray long enough to avoid the nuns' wrath. "I do not need to think more."
- "You did enough thinking, and not smartly so, when you snuck into my study at our engagement ball." His voice was hard even as he smirked at her.
- His life had not been affected by that terrible night. That night that had ruined everything. That night, Eleanor had *lost* everything.
- His eyes bored into hers, and she forced herself not to look away.
- "Well, as you said, three years is a long time. That ball was very long ago."
- "And yet, by the look of you, it's not long enough. I still see you fighting yourself. Has it finally exhausted you, Eleanor? You made yourself the perfect lady, and now look where it has gotten you—in a convent, playing the pious, little acolyte."
- More mockery, for he knew she would not do such a thing.
- Eleanor only kept staring back at him, the man who had ruined her life. She had been ruined, but not in the ways he had declared to the *ton*. She recalled that day as clearly as if it had happened only the day before.
- "How defiant you remain." He laughed, looming over her. "Stand up, Eleanor."
- So used to following orders, she did.
- Lord Belgrave looked smug at her obedience, but she kept her head high. She may have done his bidding, but she was not broken—he would not break her. This place could—had—but not Lord Belgrave, even if he was the very reason she was there.
- "I want you on your feet for this news, my darling," he told her, his voice so sickly charming. It was the same voice he had once used with her parents when he had asked to court her, to propose to her.
- His fingers reached out to grasp her chin, but she jerked her head away, her jaw tight.
- "I do hope three years has not taken away your memory of your dear friend, Lady Charlotte Vanserton."
- The name immediately dredged up memories. Her friend, three years younger than her, had not long debuted before Eleanor was sent away.
- She nodded silently.
- "Her suitor has announced his plans to propose to her," Lord Belgrave continued. "She is to marry the Earl of Follet. She will become his Countess, and she will remain none the wiser of mine and her husband's little business venture. And you, Eleanor, the only one who tried to take that business from us... oh, you will rot here. You will die in this dank, dark cell, and even if you find mercy within these halls and break free, nobody will believe you. Nobody believed you then, and nobody will believe you now. Not ever. I would extend an invitation to you for the wedding, but..."
- He pointedly looked around her cell.
- "I do not believe God forgives whores," he sneered, and then he was gone, the door clicking shut in a way that left her shaking.
- His booted steps grew fainter and fainter, and she collapsed, heaving for breath when she could no longer hear them.

Charlotte.

No—no, she could not marry Lord Follet. Not Lord Belgrave's associate, whom Eleanor had tried to scream about—whose true nature she had tried to uncover.

And Charlotte... Would she remain safe even if she were oblivious? Would she also find out what her fiancé was truly like?

Would she end up right where Eleanor was, broken and desolate? So far from her former self that she did not even recognize her reflection in the copper goblets she cleaned for Mother Caroline?

A pained, scared noise tore from Eleanor's throat as she tried to get her breathing under control, lest she be discovered by one of the sisters.

Charlotte had to be fine.

She has to. She has—

Eleanor squeezed her eyes shut as she gripped her threadbare bedsheets. Charlotte could not be subjected to the same fate.

"I do not believe God forgives whores."

By the time she finally composed herself, fury had overtaken her panic, pushing her to sit on the lumpy mattress just as more footsteps approached her door.

She recognized this set of footsteps.

Sister Susan.

The door slammed open, and she had to quash the fear rising inside her.

"Girl," Sister Susan sneered, extending her clawed hand in a silent threat. "Sister Martha has summoned you to the prayer hall. Go. Immediately."

Eleanor jumped to her feet, hurrying as fast as she could without running, leaving Sister Susan far behind. But she only traded one cruel sister for another as she entered the lofty, cold prayer hall, where Sister Martha stood at the center of the aisle.

For a place that was supposedly blessed by God, it was the coldest place Eleanor had ever known. There was no warmth, no blessings to be found.

"Eleanor Barnes."

Her name rang out through the hall, and she kept her head down.

"Sister Martha," she greeted. "You have summoned—"

"Do not speak, girl. Not without permission."

Eleanor clamped her mouth shut. She stared down at her thin slippers and the black dress she was forced to wear in the convent, neither of which did anything to ward off the night's chill.

Sister Martha laughed at her, a subdued huff of a sound. "Look at you. How far you have fallen, daughter of the *ton*. Nobody would look at you and suspect you are an earl's daughter. Not with your looks, your words, or your manners. And certainly not with the way you tempted our visitor. Your dress is skewed. Should we check your sheets, Eleanor? Your bed? Did you tempt him with your body and commit more sin? Was your first ruination not enough?"

"I am *not* ruined," Eleanor snapped, her temper breaking through her fear. "Lord Belgrave came without invitation. I-I did not know he would arrive. His presence was a surprise to me."

"Did your body flush with heat upon seeing your former fiancé? Did you miss the marital bed you were promised and never got to see? The convent sees all, Eleanor. If you lay with him, if you used your body—"

"I did not!" Eleanor shouted, and then cringed when Sister Martha surged forward, snagging her hair and yanking her head back.

"You should calm yourself, Eleanor Barnes," Sister Martha snarled, her accent curling around the name as if it were dirty. "God will hear your prayers for forgiveness. Kneel."

"No," Eleanor whimpered, her shoulders sagging, but she was thrown to the floor, her knees breaking her fall in a way that sent a wave of nausea through her.

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat, looking up at Sister Martha. The woman's lined face had haunted her nightmares

- since her first night at the convent all those years ago.
- Perhaps they had broken her that first night.
- Perhaps it had been an accumulation of every long, hot day and every freezing night.
- Or perhaps it was the punishments, the denigration and humiliation. The daughter of the Earl of Quinley, forced to go down on her knees, reciting prayers that nobody heard anyway.
- The stone bit into Eleanor's knees, a punishment she had known often enough but never grown used to. She parted her lips, and prayers to a god she was not sure she believed in anymore came forth.
- At her first stutter, Sister Martha brought her cane down across Eleanor's shoulders. Eleanor had long learned to keep her cries of pain behind her clenched teeth, but today, a choked, pained groan escaped her, and she swayed from the strike.
- Another landed on the back of her thighs, and she forced her spine to remain rigid, to stay upright, to continue.
- Bury the pain and the protests.
- "Begin again," Sister Martha instructed. "The Lord will receive nothing but perfect worship."
- "Yes, Sister Martha," Eleanor whispered.
- She remained kneeling on the stone floor, new bruises forming over the old ones, and recited and recited until her voice was hoarse.

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- Tears had long dried on Eleanor's cheeks by the time she hobbled back to her room, bruised, with welts from the strikes opening on her shoulders and thighs.
- Her dress stuck to her—whether it was the blood or sweat, she didn't know. She didn't care. That protective numbness she always let in had blanketed the pain and fury, leaving her empty.
- While it protected her, it was exactly what the sisters wanted: she could not be angry, could not bite back if she was exhausted and empty.
- And it was for that reason that Eleanor didn't let herself collapse onto the bed as she ached to.
- She dragged her weary body to the corner of her room, choosing to tuck herself away, even if the hard floor hurt more. This was her defiance, even if nobody but herself saw.
- Stuffed in a pile of old bricks was ointment she had received from another girl like herself around two years ago.
- "For your swollen knees," the girl had whispered.
- She'd had haunted eyes, and Eleanor had asked for her name.
- It doesn't matter. That name and girl are gone. Soon, you will be, too.
- Eleanor had seen the girl once after that and then never again. But the girl had hobbled around with her own swollen knees before disappearing for good. Eleanor would never forget her or the only kindness extended to her in years.
- Now, she rubbed the ointment on her knees, biting back moans of pain.
- Another girl drifted through her thoughts—Charlotte Vanserton. Through the murkiness of her time at the convent, Eleanor closed her eyes and gave herself to the memories she only indulged in during her darkest moments.
- A girl who held the banister as she descended into a ballroom that glittered in the chandelier lights. Skirts that shimmered and reflected an array of spring colors, and music that coaxed her to dance for as long as her parents allowed, passed from gentleman to gentleman. Men who smiled at her like she mattered, as though she had not been one lady in a sea of many for them to choose from.
- Now, she smiled through the pain of those memories.

For in the ballroom was a girl with hair the color of sunlight who had walked as though she was not aware of how beautiful she was. A girl who carried herself without vanity or pride. A girl who carried pain behind kind blue eyes but never spoke of it.

Charlotte Vanserton.

Eleanor had called her a friend, for she had lacked them, and Charlotte had been lovely and gentle. She and Eleanor had come together to face those ballrooms that were more of a beautiful game of chess than anything. That was what they had once laughed over, at least.

Now, Charlotte faced her own checkmate, as Eleanor may have once done had she not been foolish enough to try and uncover the dangerous things she had learned about Lord Belgrave.

She could not let Charlotte fall into the same trap. Follet and Belgrave were evil. Her breath hitched as she recalled the papers she had found in Belgrave's drawers the night of her engagement party. And for the first time in months—in *years*, even—a well of rebellion surged through her.

She was Lady Eleanor Barnes, and she was not as helpless as the sisters made her feel.

She might be broken, but she could move. She could gather those broken pieces and flee.

Eleanor had long since stopped fighting for herself, but for Charlotte?

For Charlotte, she had to do something.

Evening fell, casting darkness over the countryside beyond St. Euphemia's. Eleanor requested bandages for her knees, claiming she would not be able to pray perfectly the following day if she did not treat them properly.

As soon as Sister Theresa left her room to fetch the bandages, Eleanor moved as fast she could, catching her cell door before it closed. She waited for a precious few seconds before she slipped out and ran-shuffled in the opposite direction to where Sister Theresa would have had to go for the supplies.

Three years of cleaning and tending to the old, crumbling Jacobean manor had allowed Eleanor to memorize the way to the stables. The sisters maintained them for themselves and any visitors, as well as transporting women like Eleanor to other establishments across the country.

She wasted no more time ducking into the shadows of the stables, immediately finding a pile of cloaks kept aside for the harsh nights of travel—which were kept secret for the right amount.

She had kept provisions in her room and transferred them from her skirt pockets into a saddle bag. She swung herself up on a horse, biting back cries of pain as her body protested.

"Hey!"

The call came from deep within the stables. A young boy's eyes widened as they landed on her, his hand outstretched. But he did not move to stop her, did not shout.

"Please," she whispered. "Please..."

But she was not sure if her pleas were heard. She did not have time to wait and see whether he would call for backup or ring the bell to alert the convent of a deserter.

So she took off on her horse and disappeared into the dark countryside.

As she rode away, she let herself break down one last time, and then, with each thud of the horse's hooves, she gathered what remained of her strength for her friend.

For one woman, she could not fail.

ou, there."

She whirled, stumbling on her weak legs, finding herself at the scrutiny of a stable hand.

- Through the darkness of the countryside, Eleanor had found her way to Everdawn Hall.
- When she'd arrived at the stables and hopped off her horse, her eyes had to adjust to the lights that illuminated the grand estate. It looked as though it emerged from the redwood trees that surrounded it.
- Sprawling and turreted in places, Everdawn looked exactly as Charlotte had always described it.
- Except Eleanor had not anticipated how *busy* it was. Carriages lined up around the estate, and the stables were overrun with workers rushing around to brush down horses and tend to them ahead of departure.
- And now, she had to face a stable hand.
- She recoiled from him, from the uniform that brought awful memories of her engagement ball and the week after it, the accusations and—
- "Yes," she managed to say.
- "Why are you loitering there? Go! You can't dawdle on a night like this, whether you lost your assigned group or not. Hurry to the servants' entrance with the others. We shall not have His Grace look down upon us."
- Eleanor nodded, stumbling out of the stables, confused and dazed. Quickly, she found her way to the indicated servants' entrance, immediately sneaking in with a group of them, keeping her head down.
- She received a few odd looks, but she noticed that some servants wore different uniforms.
- Extra help.
- Perhaps she would not stand out.
- "Everdawn has not seen such an event in a long time," one servant whispered quietly. "His Grace must be ever so proud of Lady Charlotte."
- "That is if he emerges. He has yet to show his face in the ballroom."
- Hearing her friend's name made Eleanor straighten and strain her ears. If the Duke hadn't shown his face yet, that meant no announcement had been made.
- Why would Charlotte's father not show his face at her party?
- Eleanor kept her head down and walked on until she could sneak past the servants and break away undetected.
- Hurrying to the first door she found, she shut herself inside and pressed her forehead to the smooth wood, trying to catch her breath.
- I have escaped the convent.

- The realization hit her hard enough to make her move. If she stopped too long, she would lose her nerve. She needed to find Charlotte, to properly figure out a plan.
- As she turned to face the room, she was met with the sight of tall bookshelves.
- She gravitated toward the nearest shelf. It had been so long since she had read a non-religious text.
- She reached out her hand to a book when a harsh voice rang out, making her freeze. "Who are you?"
- Eleanor jerked her head around to see a man rising from an armchair.
- "What are you doing in here?"
- "I—" Her throat went dry as she took in his tall frame, his hair catching the low light of the candles scattered around the library.
- She swallowed, her eyes running over his autumnal, russet brown strands. As if, like the estate, he had come from the maple trees. His handsome face caught her off guard, and she fought to find her voice.
- She lifted her chin, remembering exactly who she was. The convent had broken her, but they had not *stolen* her.
- "I am a guest of Lady Charlotte's," she declared haughtily, eyeing the man who had clearly snuck out of the party. Her heart pounded in her chest as she silently prayed he would buy it. "I am th-the Countess of-of Maplewood."
- She chided herself inwardly for stammering.
- "The Countess of Maplewood?" the man echoed.
- Eleanor had always prided herself on being an honest woman. Lying had never been her strongest suit, but now she had to lie as though her life depended on it.
- Perhaps it did.
- She had never trusted men very much, and she did not trust this handsome stranger with eyes the color of coffee speckled with honey.
- "Yes," she lied.
- All she could think about was how awful she must have looked—unkempt and disheveled. Thank Heavens her knees were covered.
- "And how dare you question me, when I am a guest! What are *you* doing here? Are you hiding away? Perhaps I should ask *you* who you are and what you are doing here."
- "By all means," the stranger drawled, arching an eyebrow.
- She had the sense she was being toyed with, but perhaps she could use him to learn Charlotte's whereabouts. That was the important part.
- Even if... even if this man was beautiful to look at and she had a hard time tearing her eyes away from him.
- "Who are you?" she pressed, lifting her chin, looking down her nose at him even though she was much smaller than him.
- "I am from Oakwood," he began, his eyes dancing with mirth as he gazed at her. "It is next door to Maplewood. Surely you have heard of it."
- "Of course I have," she sniffed. "After all, I am the Countess."
- "Indeed. And is Maplewood nearby?"
- "Yes."
- "How far away?"
- "A day's ride."
- "Heavens, you must really be an honored guest, then, to travel so far. You cannot be expected to leave right after the party."

- "I-I am staying overnight," she fibbed, trying to keep up with his questions.
- "Oh, undoubtedly." He nodded firmly, clasping his hands behind his back as he stepped closer to her. "In the autumnal wing, I assume? Lady Charlotte must have mentioned that is where you will be staying if you are *her* guest."
- "Yes," Eleanor said. It made sense, given the scenery, if the wings were themed after the seasons. "The... the autumnal wing."
- "Your bags must already be in there, yes?"
- "Of course. I arrived a while ago."
- "And yet you are not dressed for the party," the stranger noted, his gaze assessing every inch of her.
- Eleanor's face flushed a warm red, and she averted her gaze.
- "Perhaps you will be wearing red."
- "Red?"
- "To honor your homestead."
- "Oh!" She let out a nervous laugh. "Of course."
- "Remind me. Where is Lord Maplewood?"
- "Widowed," she said quickly. "I-I am a widow, I mean."
- "Recently? Given the color of your dress."
- "Six months ago," she answered, and then cursed herself inwardly.
- Even if she was a countess, she would not have returned to Society so soon. Heavens, what had that lonely, isolated life in the convent done to her mind?
- "Six months ago," he mused, and she had the sense that he did not believe a word she said. "You are very brave, then, to face Society so soon. Lady Charlotte must be very accommodating and thoughtful to invite you to her party so soon after your bereavement."
- "Indeed. She is very considerate."
- "How long are you staying?"
- "Three days," she uttered.
- "Heavens." He whistled, looking impressed. "It seems you are outstaying your host."
- As he spoke, a knock sounded at the door.
- Eleanor flinched on instinct.
- The man took another step toward her, his face still twisted in amusement as he reached around her. "Excuse me for a moment."
- He pulled open the door, giving her no chance to move out of the way.
- A maid stood in the hallway, looking at him.
- "Yes?" he prompted.
- Peculiar.
- Why would a maid look for him in here?
- "Your Grace, I have more gifts for Lady Charlotte, but she has requested to not be disturbed until the announcement," the maid relayed.
- Eleanor's eyes widened, her blood running cold.
- Your Grace.

- She thought back to the servants in the hallway.
- "He has yet to show his face in the ballroom..." they had said.
- Because he had been hiding out in the library.
- Slowly, the man before her—no, not just a man, but the Duke of Everdawn himself, a man she had lied to so blatantly, Charlotte's brother—dragged his gaze back to her.
- A hint of a smile played on his lips. "Have the gifts sent to the autumnal wing."
- "The autumnal wing, Your Grace?"
- "Lady Maplewood here should know where it is. After all, she is already settled in her rooms for three days." He spoke as if it was an inside joke. As if he was teasing her.
- Eleanor blushed hotly, hearing only mockery.
- The Duke of Everdawn sighed, finally turning back to the maid. "Leave the gifts in my study. I shall give them to my sister later."
- Eleanor wondered what exactly had happened in the last three years. Had she missed the death of Charlotte's father?
- The maid was dismissed, the door to the library closed, and the Duke fixed his eyes on her.
- "You may drop your act now, whoever you are," he commanded.
- "Whoever I am?" Eleanor's voice rose. The last three years had rid her of her rigid politeness, even if fear reminded her to speak properly. "You are the Duke of Everdawn! Why didn't you tell me?"
- "For a liar, you certainly feel quite entitled to the truth." He raised a brown eyebrow at her.
- She was aware of just how little power she had. She had escaped from the convent, snuck into a party she had not been invited to and lied to the host.
- "You knew I was lying."
- He nodded once. "I know every town, village, and city from the South to the North of England. I would have heard if a Lord Maplewood died and left behind a widow. Especially if they were my neighbors."
- The casual authority he spoke with made her feel something she had not felt in years—perhaps not ever, for no man had sparked such excitement within her. Such *fear*.
- This was not the fear Lord Belgrave had evoked within her in that chamber hours ago. Nor was it the fear that had seized her heart when Sister Martha raised that evil cane to strike her.
- No, this was the fear of...
- No. This was different. This was the dizzying, gut-pulling fear of being seen by a man. Desired, perhaps. And wanting him back.
- She hated it. And yet she could not stop staring at his mouth.
- "You are rather bold for a trespasser," he murmured, taking a step forward.
- Eleanor stiffened.
- "Is this where you tell me more lies?" he asked, his voice a little lower, the space between them crackling.
- "I'm not here to harm anyone."
- "Mm. No," he said softly, eyes sweeping down her face. "That's not what I asked. I can think of far more enjoyable ways to make you surrender the truth. Or more."
- Her heart slammed once, hard. She felt it all through her body—his words, his nearness, the weight of his gaze.
- She couldn't remember the last time someone looked at her like that. Like he saw through her... and wanted her anyway.

- But she couldn't afford this. Not now.
- "I need to speak with Charlotte," she said, trying to make her voice steady, trying not to notice how close he'd drawn. "It is a matter of great importance."
- He smiled faintly, almost predatorily. "More important than telling me who's roaming around my house in disguise?"
- Eleanor narrowed her eyes. "Your sister is in danger."
- That did it. His smile dropped. A glint of steel entered his gaze.
- "And what danger would that be?" he asked quietly.
- "I won't say more unless I speak with her directly," Eleanor said. "But I swear on my life, I am not your enemy."
- He stared at her for a long moment, the heat between them flickering into something sharper.
- "Well," he said, at last. "You're an intruder in my house. You've lied, and you're hiding something. Shall I drag you back into the ballroom and ask the guests if they know who you are? See who steps forward? Or, perhaps, who begins to panic?"
- *Heavens...* what if her parents were present?
- "No," she whispered. "I just need to speak with Charlotte. *Please*. I do not have time to waste."
- "You will make the time to answer me."
- Eleanor's heart pounded in her chest, sweat trickling down her back and making her wounds sting.
- But she also felt something else: a *thrill*. A thrill at him being so close. A thrill when his eyes dropped to her mouth and his head inched closer.
- "Perhaps there is something in the anonymity," he murmured. "Perhaps that is why I did not tell you who I was. And why I did not catch you out of your story."
- He leaned in closer, and she met his honey-brown eyes, her breath catching. A strange disappointment pooled in her stomach as he paused an inch away from her lips.
- "Tell me who you are," he said, a subtle command in his tone.
- My time is up.
- She could only hope that giving her name would spark some sort of recognition. That Charlotte had mentioned their friendship. That revealing her identity would have her thrown before Charlotte for confirmation.
- So she steeled herself, and in a tight voice, she spoke, "I am Lady Eleanor Barnes. My parents are the Earl and Countess of Quinley."
- The Duke immediately stepped back, blinking a few times as if deep in thought. When her name finally registered, his eyes widened.
- "I know of you," he muttered.
- Eleanor had long since learned how to detect an accusation. How voices turned sharp with judgment. How eyes narrowed in disgust.
- "I will not let your reputation ruin hers. You will have no association with her." The Duke paused, his hands settling on his hips. "If you are indeed Lady Eleanor, then—"
- Her heart lurched when he suddenly lunged toward her.
- Instinct overtook her. She flinched, her arms flying up to shield her face, breath catching in her throat.
- But instead of pain, a firm hand caught her by the elbow—steady, but not cruel.
- She winced anyway, her body bracing for something that didn't come.
- The duke stilled. "What the—" He looked down at her, brows furrowed, his grip loosening instantly. "You thought I meant to

strike you?"

Eleanor didn't answer. She couldn't. Shame burned her throat.

A beat of silence stretched between them. Then, quietly, he said, "I don't raise my hands to women."

His voice had lost some of its edge. Still stern, still sharp, but something flickered beneath it—confusion, maybe even regret.

"I am not going to harm you, Lady Eleanor," he said as he led her from the library.

His grip on her elbow was firm, but not rough.

And the flicker of emotion in his eyes from earlier still lingered in Eleanor's mind.

Chapter Three



ou have to believe me," Eleanor tried yet again for the umpteenth time in the last hour of riding. Her breath burned in her throat. "I was not honest at first, but I am Lady Eleanor, and anything you have been told about me is not true! Please, I must see Charlotte. We are friends. She needs to hear what I have to say."

The Duke's arms were clamped around her, and for most of that dark, cold ride, it was all she could think about.

Powerful thighs bracketed her backside, but she could hardly think about the press of his body against hers, not when anger held him so rigidly at her back, pressing her close to the horse's neck. He urged his horse to ride faster, as if he could not get her away from Everdawn Hall quickly enough.

- She tried to move to the side as much as she could, but he yanked her back to him with a low, warning snarl.
- "Neither my sister nor I need anything from a woman who breaks into estates," he told her, his breath barely labored from riding.
- "She does!" Eleanor shouted, not hysterical but panicked. "Her life is in danger. Your Grace, you must believe me."
- "I find it hard to believe any word coming out of your mouth, My Lady," he snapped.
- Eleanor could not stop trying. She couldn't give up. Not when she had already failed too many women. Charlotte would not join that endless list of names she had once caught a glimpse of in Belgrave's study.
- "Please," she begged. "I-I have to speak to her."
- "You have nothing to say to her for now, Lady Eleanor. You can send her a letter of congratulations after her wedding," the Duke said, flicking the reins.
- "You are willing to risk your sister's safety?" Eleanor hissed.
- But the Duke was unruffled.
- She could try again.
- She could escape again.
- She would never stop trying—not for Charlotte, not for the women she had failed, not for her own freedom.



- By the time the Duke slowed his horse down as the Jacobean manor came into view, Eleanor thought she might be sick—both from her stinging wounds and the fear coiling in her empty stomach.
- Terror made her shake. If the Duke felt it, he did not care.
- He pulled the horse to a stop before the entrance. Eleanor was lifted off the horse before she could even resist, fear rendering her limp.
- The door was already opening, revealing the shadowed face of one of the younger acolytes.

- "I must see the head sister," the Duke barked. "Tell her that the Duke of Everdawn is here." His voice was so different from the man who had teased her in the library.
- How differently people spoke with her upon learning who she was.
- Eleanor's heart broke as the acolyte nodded. She stiffened in his arms, awaiting the arrival of Sister Martha, for Mother Caroline would not be roused over a runaway. Not until Eleanor was punished by the senior sisters first.
- Tremors of fear racked her entire body. She could swear she felt the Duke's gaze on her for a moment, but his features were still twisted in that angry detachment as he watched the doorway.
- Moments later, Sister Martha's pale and tired face appeared. As soon as she laid eyes on Eleanor, a warm smile that Eleanor had not seen since she had first been brought to the convent—a smile that had quickly morphed into a cruel, twisted sneer—spread across her face.
- "Oh!" she cried, pressing a hand to her bosom, making sure to clasp the cross she wore around her neck. "Heavens, Eleanor! We were so worried about you. I prayed for the Lord to guide you back to us. Merciful he is, he has brought you back!" Her eyes flicked to the Duke. "Your Grace, thank you for returning our wayward charge."
- Behind Sister Martha, Sister Susan, with a terrible gleam in her eyes, came forward with a younger nun, their fingers already reaching for Eleanor. They grabbed her arms, and she tried to buck them off.
- "N-No!" she screamed. "No! Your Grace, please! Please, you do not know what they—"
- Her shouts were cut off as she was forced past Sister Martha with quick, brutal efficiency, dashing any hope of salvation. She cried out once more, but a hand was clamped over her mouth.

- Spencer Vanserton, the Duke of Everdawn, hesitated as Lady Eleanor was taken away—no, *dragged* away.
- Something ignited the anger that had driven him out of his estate, away from his sister's engagement party.
- "Please, you do not know what they—"
- Her cries were cut off as she was forced through the dark entryway, and he caught sight of the sisters shoving her head down and pushing her forward. Something about the way they handled her had him on edge.
- This is none of my business. I needed to keep her away from Charlotte, and now I have.
- He forced himself to nod at the head sister and turn back to his horse. But then he paused and looked back at her.
- "What is it exactly that you will do to her?" he asked. "To Lady Eleanor?"
- The nun, who had kissed her cross upon Lady Eleanor's return, smiled at him.
- Spencer stiffened. He knew a placating, false smile when he saw one.
- "Nothing that I would wish to bother Your Grace with," the sister told him. "It is a mere lesson on penance and discipline. A ward does not leave the convent, and when she does, she must be purified once more. It is a simple procedure. And do not bother with titles here, Your Grace. She is hardly a lady, from what she has proven."
- Spencer frowned, his unease growing.
- A mere lesson on discipline.
- The phrase was familiar to him. Hard, cruel lessons labeled as discipline to be excused, to be explained away, to divert concern. He had watched too many people eat up those labels.
- Of course, discipline had to be taught, but he did not trust it. Not when his own lessons had been called that and he still bore reminders.
- Spencer opened his mouth to ask more, to have his worries appeased or confirmed, when a scream from inside split the night.
- He didn't waste a moment.

- "Your Grace, you must not—"
- He bolted past the head sister, ignoring her words, and slipped inside the convent, running down the stone hallway to where the screams continued.
- "No, please, I won't—"
- The cries had his heart pounding, his breathing quickening.
- How many times had he tried to stop those screams? How often had he heard similar screams in every nightmare—
- He skidded to a stop as he reached a cracked door. One of the nuns who had taken Lady Eleanor away had a cauldron filled with water and was shoving Eleanor into it.
- Spencer's eyes widened in horror. Her dress was torn, exposing bruises and welts, blood that had dried in long trails down her back, along with more scars.
- Lady Eleanor howled again and thrashed as the nun submerged her head into the deep cauldron.
- "Sins must be cleansed!" the nun proclaimed loudly. "You have committed too many to even name, Eleanor Barnes."
- This was not purification. It was torture.
- "Get away from her!" Spencer roared, rushing forward and pulling Lady Eleanor out of the hot water.
- She crumpled into his arms, violent coughs racking her frame.
- Spencer did not think; he took off his tailcoat and draped it over her shoulders as she shuddered violently.
- Heavens, she had tried to tell him.
- "You do not know what they—"
- After making sure she could hold herself up while she sat on the floor, he surged to his feet, looming over the young nun, who cowered back.
- "What the hell do you think you are doing to her?" he shouted.
- "Stand back, Your Grace." The loud order came from the door.
- "This is a House of God," the head sister told him. "Your authority is respected, but we do ask that you do not interfere with our charges."
- "The charge you are trying to drown?" he bellowed. "She does not deserve this."
- "Are you aware of what she has done? The defilement this girl carries is deserving of a far greater cleansing."
- There is worse than this.
- His spine stiffened, and a growl rumbled in his chest. Every muscle tensed, and he felt the urge to move, to fight, to *strike*, but he held himself in check.
- Another woman came up behind the head sister, bearing a heavier-looking cross, her face more lined. He had heard of the pious Mother Caroline, who ruled this place with an iron fist. He had respected such devotion, but not if it entailed *torture*.
- "Your Grace, there is no need to cause a scene," she said, her voice calm and composed. "The bell for the morning prayers will ring in a few hours. I will not have tired prayers for our Lord simply because—"
- "Because of torture," Spencer snarled, cutting her off. "Frankly, Sister, I do not care. I will wake up the whole convent myself if any one of you lays a hand on Lady Eleanor."
- Mother Caroline's eyes slid to Lady Eleanor. "Eleanor needs deep cleansing, Your Grace. Bathing her in holy water is necessary. Sometimes atonement requires a sliver of pain."
- "Not like this," Spencer choked out, undone by the sheer violence he had witnessed in the scars and wounds on Lady Eleanor's back. He stood over her protectively. "Is this how you treat every woman sent here?"

- "The women who come here, Your Grace..." Mother Caroline paused, looking down her nose at Lady Eleanor. "They cannot keep themselves *clean*. They have snuck out to sin."
- Spencer stepped closer to the trembling woman on the floor. He did not care what they accused her of, not even if he himself had thought the same. She did not deserve this treatment.
- "Eleanor is our responsibility," Mother Caroline told him firmly. "We do with her as the Lord sees fit."
- "As the Lord sees fit, or as you see fit?" Spencer snapped.
- At that, the other nuns shuddered, not knowing what to say.
- In the end, Mother Caroline extended a hand. "Return my charge to me, Your Grace. Leave here and ignore what you have seen. It is better for everybody this way."
- But all he could hear was Lady Eleanor.
- "Charlotte... Must help Charlotte..." she mumbled over and over.
- The desperation in her voice, the fact that she was only thinking of Charlotte right after nearly drowning at the nun's hands...
- This woman was honest.
- Another girl's screams echoed in his head.
- He flinched.
- I cannot fail another sister.
- "Lady Eleanor is coming with me," he declared, bending down and pulling his coat tighter around her shoulders. "Now, get out of my way."
- "You cannot," Mother Caroline said simply. "And should you try, be prepared to face the wrath of Lord Quinley. He will bring her back."
- "He will have to know she has left first," Spencer threatened.
- Mother Caroline held his gaze, and he glared at her for daring to challenge his authority. "Eleanor Barnes is not to leave this convent."
- "Lady Eleanor Barnes is no longer your ward to decide her fate," he hissed.
- "You have no right to take our ward, Your Grace. She is nothing to you."
- His mind raced. Yes, Lord Quinley would come after his daughter. He could even bring the constables to Spencer's house, claiming his daughter was abducted. The news would spread all over England: the Duke of Everdawn, a kidnapper.
- That would ruin Charlotte. And it would drag Lady Eleanor back to this forsaken place.
- Unless...
- There was a way. The *only* way.
- "I have every right. She is my bride," Spencer spoke, just as the idea came to him.
- He felt the silence descending on the room, the soft gasp behind him. He looked down at Lady Eleanor, extending his hand to her.
- "Come with me, Lady Eleanor. We have a wedding to plan," he told her, his voice firm, resolute.
- Her eyes flickered, blinking slowly, her lips parted in shock and confusion.
- Spencer kept his eyes on her, moving his head in the slightest of nods—a sign to show her that this was her only way out. And the only way to save Charlotte.
- She glanced down at his hand, then back at him, and took it gingerly.
- Spencer helped her to her feet, his eyes finding the nuns. "Tell Lord Quinley he can come and find me," he bit out, his chin

- lifted. "You will never, ever lay another finger on her."
- And then he wrapped his arm around Lady Eleanor's waist, supporting her as they walked out of the convent.
- None of the nuns attempted to stop him.
- And once Lady Eleanor was secure in the saddle, Spencer mounted his horse and they rode off into the night, back home.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

The Duke's Forbidden Bride

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About the Author

Born and raised in rural Louisiana, Ava's rebellious nature would always find her riding her horse through vast farmlands or lying under a tree, getting lost in one of her favorite historical romances. Always itching for adventure, she was only nineteen when she decided to embark on her biggest adventure and travel through Europe.

She studied art and theater in London, where she met several people that filled her with valuable experiences. Taking part in a writing competition upon her professor's encouragement, she realized that this was what she always wanted to do. Married to that same professor a few years later, she decided to return to her roots to settle down and write about her favorite era.

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