



A Night of Passion with the Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "I shall be your husband in name but I will never claim you."

Vowing to be the end of his family line, Duke Edward never shares his bed with the same woman twice. So when an alluring vixen asks him for a night of passion he has no reason to refuse her...

After her failed engagement, Arabella is done with the marriage mart. Until she's caught almost kissing the worst rake of the ton. And now she has no choice but to be his bride.

Their marriage starts with a promise: live separately after six months. Only, parting with her husband seems impossible when he finally gives her what she craves most. A taste of his lips and a night in his bed.

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ChapterOne

“Tell me, Ara, surely one gentleman here has caught your eye?” Leonardo Burk asked his sister, a twinge of annoyance lacing his words.

This question pulled Arabella Burk out of her spiraling thoughts and back to the present moment. She understood why Leonardo may have been a bit annoyed with her. After all, this mansion party was grander than any he had thrown yet.

“It’s been nearly six months, Ara. As the Earl of Thorne, it is my duty to find you a suitable husband. However, as your older brother, I want you to be happy. Can you not at least try to find a silver lining here? These parties have been for you, you know,” he pointed out to her, trying to keep his tone polite.

In her head, Ara wanted to throw something—perhaps a plate, and perhaps on top of Leo’s head.

“I have tried, Leo, I really have. I do not expect you to understand what a broken heart can do to one’s spirit, as you have clearly never experienced it, but it is not easy to just move on,” she said, plucking a small truffle cake off the refreshments table and setting it on a plate.

“You are right. I have not experienced it. I cannot imagine what it is like, but I had hoped that maybe you may be ready to move on, since it has been some time. Perhaps there is someone who could... make you feel the way you did with the Duke of Green,” he said.

“Leo, I have told you this already. I am afraid no one ever will.” She sighed, her head hurting from the boisterous crowd of people filling the family’s banquet hall, all chattering amongst themselves. She did not let it show, though, as that could be seen as indifference to those watching. “Who knows if the next gentleman who woos me will betray me again.”

To be frank, she was rather excited about the house party that evening. She had intended to use it as a distraction of sorts. For so long did she see his face haunting her thoughts and even her dreams.

In a cruel twist of fate, she had actually begun feeling better that morning. She had felt like a weight of unprecedented proportions had been lifted off her chest. They say that time heals all wounds, and perhaps that was true for her. She had thought that maybe today was the day she began moving on and could finally start living her own life. Only this time she wanted to live it her way.

The world around her looked down on spinsters, women who never married and were responsible for their own well-being. But Arabella envied those women. They lived a life that was entirely their own, no man dictating how they should live nor how many children they should bear. To her, that thought had begun to feel welcome and even desirable. She knew that she shouldn’t think that way, as it was not the way a proper lady should think, but one can’t always help the way they feel.

“Leo, did you actually look at who was on the guest list when you invited everybody?” she asked, looking around and noticing all of the clearly middle-aged men on the prowl for a young wife.

“Age is but a number Ara,” Leo responded, taking a small bite of his pastry. He, too, looked a little displeased with the turnout. “Mother and Father were about fifteen years apart, and they were madly in love with each other.”

“Mother and Father were one in a million. I doubt a second-generation love match is attainable,” she said, not realizing how whiny she had begun to sound.

Leonardo set down his plate of small hors d’oeuvres and got into his all too familiar big-brother-is-about-to-lecture-you stance, his brow furrowed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Arabella Burk, you are almost twenty-and-three, and you are yet to be wedded. You are beginning to sound like our younger sister when you go against everything I have tried to build for our family. I don’t even want to imagine how difficult this will be with Madeline. God have mercy on my soul,” he chastised, sighing and picking up his plate again. “I know these last few months have been difficult for you, and I want more than anything for you to marry for love, but sometimes that isn’t in the cards for everybody. It is time you grow up. Perhaps I should find you a worthy suitor.”

While his words may have rung true, they still stung. Ara was once in love with the idea of love, but now those feelings had changed. She knew there were tangible things that come with love and marriage, and those were things that she would like to experience someday, but she didn’t necessarily feel the need to fall in love again. Not if it was going to hurt her the way it did a few months ago.

“Look, our older sister is almost here with her husband. Maybe you two could talk about things?” Leo suggested, not really knowing how women dealt with such emotions. “Because you know, they did not marry out of love, but they became best friends and fell in love regardless. Maybe you could learn a thing or two from her.”

Inwardly, Ara rolled her eyes, but on the outside, she smiled and told him, “Perhaps you are right, Brother.”

It wasn’t too long until Sarah and Richard, the Duchess and Duke of Ridlington, arrived. Luckily, it was before Leonardo could lecture her further. Their beautiful

older sister was adorned in a baby blue ruffled dress that expertly defined the shape of her torso without being too immodest. The blue complemented her pale skin and light brown hair, as well as made her dark brown eyes pop.

Her husband, Richard, was a handsome man with dirty blonde hair and grass-green eyes, though he was not necessarily Arabella's cup of tea. She found herself drawn to men who sported dark hair and eyes, though she wouldn't let her preferences known.

Richard was dressed in matching colors to Sarah's dress, tailored to accentuate his broad shoulders and his bulky stature. She had talked to him a few times since he and her sister had wedded, and from those short conversations, she had found it incredible that he and her sister had ever bonded over anything.

"Ara, you look absolutely ravishing in that dress!" Sarah exclaimed once she saw Arabella and Leonardo. "Yellow is your color for sure, Sister."

Arabella opened her arms and embraced her. She missed her dearly since she got married, and nights like these were always treats.

"Thank you, Sarah, though I don't think yellow looks as good on me as blue does on you," she said, taking in the sight of her sister in her dress a lot more now that she was right in front of her. Blue really was a great color on her.

Sarah turned to Leonardo and asked, "Would it be all right if I stole our sister for a few minutes? I desperately want to catch up with her. It's been too long."

Leonardo pulled a handkerchief out of his front pocket and dabbed his forehead. Clearly, the stress of the evening was taking its toll on him, and Arabella feared she may have been partially responsible for that.

"That is all right. But please do not steal her for the entire night, as she and I have

things to discuss,” he said, gently tucking the handkerchief back into his pocket. He gave Arabella a knowing look, and she nodded, receiving the message.

Leonardo then seemed to remember that he had also not seen their older sister for the first time in a while, as his expression softened. He walked over, took Sarah’s hand in his own, and pressed a small kiss to it. “It is great to see you, Sarah. I hope my parties will be just as memorable as Father’s.”

“I’m sure they will, Brother. This one looks extravagant,” Sarah assured him with a small but genuine smile.

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“Please do keep an eye on her,” Leonardo told her. “Your Grace, would you mind coming after me?”

Richard nodded.

“Ara, Let’s go outside and enjoy the fresh air. I have a feeling you might need some,” Sarah suggested, all but whispering that last part to her.

The two ladies made their way through the crowd of excited partygoers and dancing couples, periodically turning a few lonely men’s heads.

They reached the back double-glass doors that led to the outside garden and pushed them open, the crisp air raising the hairs on their arms. As much as Arabella enjoyed a good party or ball, she was never a fan of how stuffy and overwhelming they could be.

Sarah pulled her along the garden hedges that they used to play in as children, and Arabella remembered when they would often play hide and seek in this garden. The memory of those precious moments brought a small smile to her lips as well as a somber reminder that those days were long gone.

“So, is Leo trying to marry you off tonight?” Sarah asked her bluntly, taking her a little bit by surprise.

“You could not tell from the way he dressed me?” Arabella snorted. “I keep trying to tell him that it will not work, but he is dead set on sending me off regardless. He is so insufferable sometimes.”

“Please do not think our brother wants to send you off. If anything, this is probably more stressful to him than it is to you,” Sarah told her, sitting down on a bench in the middle of a large flowerbed. “Are you still so against the idea of marriage?”

“It is no longer appealing to me. It lost its luster,” Arabella confessed, hanging her head. Her cheeks reddened, and they felt warm. She wasn’t one to profess her feelings like that.

Sarah took a moment, possibly contemplating her words, and with sweetness lacing her voice, she said, “I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but your duty as a woman comes before your heart.”

A bitter laugh erupted from Arabella’s chest, but she quickly covered her mouth with her hands to stifle the inappropriate bluster. She took Sarah’s gloved hand in hers and responded, “Sister, I do not wish to wed. At least not now. I know I am becoming almost too old, but there is still so much in life that I have yet to understand. How do you do it, Sarah?”

“How do I do what?” Sarah asked.

Arabella didn’t know how to broach this subject. How would she ask her sister that she lived every day possibly not living her own truth? How would she ask her if she was tired of being whittled down to the prize of a man? How would she ask her to move on from the one person that she thought she might have spent the rest of her life with? How was she supposed to overcome that kind of rejection in a timely manner?

Instead, she asked her, “Excuse my impertinence, Sister. But... do you love His Grace?”

Sarah looked taken aback by that question, but she quickly regained her composure and gave a soft smile. Arabella had always been a little blunt.

“I do. He is like my best friend in many ways, but it took us time and dedication to reach that point.”

Sarah took her sister’s silence as an invitation to continue. “Ara, what exactly happened between you and the Duke of Green?”

It seemed the fresh air did not do much in the long run to help Arabella, because she felt her heart beginning to thrum in her chest at the mention of him.

“People don’t often talk of mental scars, but they do exist,” she started, her shaky voice betraying the hurt she was desperately trying to hide. “I spent months moving on and trying to handle the bloody embarrassment it caused our family. I was not enough for him, it seemed. A few days before we were to announce our courtship to the ton, he told me he would be pursuing another. I was... upset, to say the least. He was not fond of my response, and to be honest, Sister, I was rather rude to him. I said some choice words—quietly, of course. I do not believe anyone heard me, but I made sure he knew how much he had hurt me. He made me feel so precious to him, only for him to tell me that I was merely an option he chose not to go with.”

Silence fell between the pair. Arabella was on the verge of tears, thinking about that day, but she had always been good at hiding the welling dam behind her eyes.

Sarah tucked a loose strand of hair behind Arabella’s ear. “I am so sorry, Ara. You are such a wonderful and beautiful woman, and he was a fool to let you go. I, too, have had my run-in with heartbreak.”

“You have? How come I never heard of it?” Arabella questioned, turning towards her on the bench.

Sarah laughed fondly and explained, “When I was twenty years old, Father introduced me to the son of a nobleman related to the Duke of Green, funnily enough.

While we never got engaged, I fell head over heels for him—or at least I thought I did. Our courtship did not last long, as he found his interest lay in another. There was nothing I could do about it, as his decision was final.”

“How did you move on?” Arabella asked, astounded that anyone could turn her sister down.

“I reminded myself that he is not the only man out there. I kept my head held high and kept my dignity intact, as I knew I would have others I needed to impress. I will be honest with you. While I do not necessarily agree with it deep in my heart, I know that is my job as a woman.”

“But...” Arabella paused, not knowing how to continue with what she had planned on saying.

Her sister had always put up with the wild stories and statements she would tell when they were children and even encouraged her creativity a little bit. But she understood now that she was a grown woman and that she must act like one, even if being a woman meant she must sacrifice what makes her uniquely her.

“What is it, Ara?” Sarah asked, her hand resting on her sister’s shoulder. “You know you can talk to me.”

Arabella sucked in a deep breath and said, “I do not wish to marry. I am afraid that it may happen again, but I do wish to experience the tangible pleasures that come with marriage, even if I’m unsure of what that exactly entails. But I just don’t know if I could love another the way I loved him. As a child, I was infatuated with the idea of a happily ever after. Now I’m afraid all I want is the tangible benefits. Is that wrong of me?”

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Her sister looked her in the eye, her dark brown and all-knowing eyes full of womanly wisdom speaking what couldn't be said. They softened a little, and she said, "While our society may find that statement quite troublesome, I understand what you are saying, and I do not think it is wrong. But... unfortunately, I do not represent society, and I do not speak for everyone in the ton. I think you are in quite a precarious situation, Sister."

"How so?"

"You mustn't tell Leo that I told you this," Sarah said, glancing around for any eavesdroppers. She furrowed her brow and grimaced, clearly not proud of the gossip she was about to divulge. "The family's finances have been struggling. My marriage to Richard helped a good bit, but it wasn't enough. I believe Leo does want the best for you, but he also must think of the family and the estate. If you could marry someone of great wealth or of noble lineage, we may be able to pull ourselves out of the hole that Father's financial irresponsibility caused."

Needless to say, Arabella was shocked by this turn of events. Leonardo had never talked to her about finances or how any of the estate running worked, so it naturally never crossed her mind that they might be struggling.

"I did not know this," she breathed. "But I wish I did because maybe I would have gone easier on him."

The corners of Sarah's lips quirked up, and she let out a near-boisterous laugh like Arabella had a few minutes earlier. "You do not have to go easy on him, Ara. He may be in a tight spot, but he is still your brother. You would probably startle him if you

started treating him differently.”

Arabella giggled but then turned serious again. “You may be right about that. Still, I would rather be a spinster than marry one of the older gentlemen in there.”

“I believe you may have to give up on that dream. But I will say, Leo is a little too hopeful if he thinks that you would ever agree to marry someone older than our father.”

“You got that right.”

“You know,” Sarah chirped after a brief moment of silence. “Even though you may not immediately fall in love with whoever you end up marrying, you could end up like Richard and me. We were not in love when we first got engaged, but over time we got to know each other. We learned and grew and became better people. I can only pray that the same happens for you.”

“Thank you, Sister,” Arabella said, genuinely meaning it. “There is something I am curious about, though.”

Sarah smiled knowingly. “You’re curious about those tangible pleasures?”

“How did you know?” Arabella asked, always in awe of her sister’s intuition.

“I, too, was curious before Richard and I wedded,” Sarah explained. “I don’t want to tell you everything, as there are some things you will have to figure out on your own, but I will tell you the basics.”

Arabella turned in her seat to look directly at her sister, arguably the most interested she had ever been.

“Have you ever looked into the eyes of a man and felt intense desire before?”

Ara nodded.

“Well, there are things that happen between a man and woman that amplify that intense feeling. You get to feel it in your entire body. I will not elaborate, as that would be too inappropriate of me, but when the time comes, your body will definitely tell your head what to do.”

The answer was short enough to leave Arabella even more curious. “Is the fierce feeling you talked about a pleasant one?”

To her surprise, Sarah’s cheeks flushed uncontrollably. “Quite.”

Arabella wondered at her sister’s reaction. Yes, she loved the relationship her sister and brother-in-law had, but a cage was still a cage—good or bad. She could never see marriage as anything other than a cage that some enjoyed.

“Is it possible that one can feel such things outside of marriage?” she asked.

Sarah stared at her with such a scandalized look.

“I mean... is it only married people who feel these intense feelings?”

“Oh my,” Sarah breathed, red in the face. “Well, yes, there are people who felt such feelings outside marriage, but after such nights of passion, they are left with more regrets than bliss.”

“Why?” Arabella asked with a frown.

“Because, Arabella dear, one night of passion could get you with child or worse.”

Arabella tried to wonder what fate could be far worse than having an unplanned child.

“What could be worse than...” she trailed off, as one of the upstairs maids, Jasmine, had appeared.

“What is it, Jasmine?” Sarah asked, sharing a look with her.

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“His Lordship is looking for you, Your Grace, My Lady,” Jasmine announced.

“All right.” Sarah nodded. “Where is he?”

“He’s at the foot of the stairs with a guest,” Jasmine answered.

The warmth of the house pricked Arabella’s skin as they opened the doors to get back into the merriment. She felt so much better about her tribulations after talking with her sister. Maybe she could handle this.

“Which guest?” she asked.

“The worst rake in all of London,” Jasmine whispered in her ear.

Arabella’s eyes widened.

“I heard no maiden is safe around him. He?—”

“I think that’s enough from you, Jasmine,” Sarah interrupted. “I will not tolerate you slandering anyone under this roof.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Jasmine curtsied. “I’m sorry, Your Grace.”

That’s when Arabella’s whole world stopped for the briefest moment. Standing in front of her, about thirty meters away, was a very tall and handsome man with black hair and dark brooding eyes. His overcoat was an ash-gray color that made the subtle hints of blue in his eyes pop. His breeches and undershirt were a stark white—fit

loosely yet flattered his waist. His black leather Wellingtons reflected the candlelight around him.

The deep inhalation of warm air she had taken only a moment before was forced out of her lungs when she took in the sight of him.

Lord have mercy on my soul. He is a sight for sore eyes.

Who was that man, and why had she never seen him before? Surely someone who looked like him would have stuck in her mind, and she would have not forgotten a face like his. No way. She could tell she was not the only one who found this mysterious gentleman as alluring as she did. Looking around, there were women around her age and some even older casting glances at him every once in a while.

Sarah caught her staring, and she giggled, gently gripping her arm.

“Sister, who is the gentleman talking to Leonard?” Arabella asked, her eyes fixed on the stranger.

“I thought you might be fascinated by him. Ara, that is Edward Fitzroy, the Duke of Soulden.”

“Oh my,” Arabella breathed. “Why have I never seen him before?”

“Because you shouldn’t have,” Sarah answered firmly. “He’s the renowned rake Jasmine had been talking about, and as much as I don’t like to tell tales, you aren’t safe around him.”

“Why not?” Arabella asked with a laugh, even though her fascination made her want to know more about him. “It’s not like he could steal my virtue after just one conversation.”

Sarah shot her a warning look but said nothing.

If the Duke of Soulden was a renowned rake, then that meant he'd know how to pleasure a woman without needing to trap her in marriage.

Arabella smiled inwardly at how Providence worked. He'd given her the answer to her desires on a platter of gold.

I believe he may be the one I spend my night of passion with.

ChapterTwo

"Ah, welcome Your Grace. His Lordship has been looking forward to your arrival," the butler standing guard outside the estate cheerfully greeted as Edward approached, tipping his hat and head to him.

"Well, I am flattered to make his acquaintance," Edward responded, nodding to the man's bow. "I do believe I have only met him once."

The butler allowed him to enter, and Edward was greeted by a beautiful display all around him. The robust banquet hall was decorated in the Season's best. Silver balls stuck into the leaves of large evergreen wreaths lined the tops of the walls, with thick garlands branching them all together. Intertwined into the garlands were specks of silver and gold, adding a whimsical glimmer to the hall.

Edward could barely enjoy the sight, before Lord Kilroy, a face all too familiar, approached him, three of his daughters trailing behind. He inwardly groaned at the upcoming conversation.

"Good evening, Your Grace. I hope this evening is treating you well," Lord Kilroy said, his wide smile making his eyes crinkle. He gave a slight bow, and his daughters

curtseyed.

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It was until you came to me.

“It is, thank you, Lord Kilroy,” Edward replied, returning the gesture and bowing. “Do you know where I might find the host of tonight’s event, by chance?”

“I wanted to introduce you to my daughters,” Lord Kilroy began, seemingly ignoring Edward’s attempt at walking away. “Emily is eighteen and shares your love for the outdoors, and Rita is twenty and is the perfect hostess.”

Edward raised an eyebrow at the man’s boldness. Other members of the ton who’d tried to proposition him had used indirect advances which he’d simply been able to escape by playing the ignorance card.

“That is lovely to hear, but alas I’m not looking for a wife.” He smiled politely, even though he was feeling anything but polite.

He tried to move, but the man interrupted him with a hand on his arm.

“Oh,” Lord Kilroy said. “But to the best of my knowledge, you’re unmarried. Unless... you already have a fiancée.”

Edward raised an eyebrow at him, folding his arms.

“Perhaps you have no interest in considering the available maidens because you’ve finally decided to tie the knot with your lovely ward after all these years,” Lord Kilroy went on. “I mean... it’s no news we’ve had our suspicions about your relationship with the girl, considering she stays under your roof and?—”

Edward grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt, not caring if there were eyes on them. It was by far the smallest thing he could do to silence him, even though he'd have much preferred using his fists.

"I say this once to you, but I hope you'll be wise enough to pass my message across to your friends." He glared. "If I hear one more word of slander against my ward or my relationship with her, you will know just how powerful my duchy is."

With that, he dropped his hold on the man and went to get himself a drink. By a stroke of pure luck, Edward's gaze landed on Leonardo Burk, the Earl of Thorne, tonight's host.

He navigated the crowd of people, periodically giving his greetings to the men and ladies he passed who had yet to step on his toes. Even though he hated Society's proceedings, he wasn't a complete harridan.

He noticed a few beautiful ladies he wouldn't have minded getting acquainted with and a few he'd had dallied with. Suddenly, the party wasn't a complete flop.

He tried to keep those thoughts at bay, as he knew some were innocent maidens who would enjoy his attentions for the brief moment it lasted but would sooner try to trap him in marriage once the truth of their indiscretion came to light.

He knew that no matter what, he'd never allow himself to be trapped in marriage, and then the poor lady would have a tainted reputation for the rest of her life, and he didn't want to live with that

Edward would be labeled as selfish by some of those he knew, but he had enough compassion to not purposely ruin a lady's life because of carnal desires.

Still, the thought was not an unwelcome one.

Lord Thorne spotted him and smiled at him. “Your Grace! It is wonderful to see you,” he exclaimed, reaching out a hand to shake Edward’s.

“It is great to see you too, Lord Thorne. I give you my sincerest condolences and apologize that I could not make it to the funeral of your father,” Edward said, wanting to keep the conversation pleasant so that he possibly could weasel his way out of staying longer than necessary.

“Oh, nonsense, I know the journey here is rather tiresome, so I do appreciate you attending tonight’s festivities,” Lord Thorne assured him, patting their clasped hands before letting go.

“Well, I figured I should answer one of your invitations.” Edward laughed. “It felt it rather rude to not attend one of your impressive parties at least once.”

Lord Thorne laughed as well and beckoned someone over that Edward could not see.

Oh dear, I hope he is not trying to introduce me to any debutantes.

“I cannot remember if you have met my sisters or not,” Lord Thorne continued. “Do not worry, one of them is married and the other one seems to have no interest in tonight’s options.”

In other words, he was not trying to sell his sisters to him.

Edward couldn’t help but smile a little bit at the joke and appreciated the Earl’s understanding.

A woman who looked no older than twenty-and-five made her way over to them with who Edward assumed to be her husband.

The woman was quite beautiful. If she was not already married, he would have asked if he could sign her dance card and enjoy one dance with her. She had light brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a skin so pale and perfect that she could have been a porcelain doll. Not to mention that the light blue ruffled dress she wore complemented her features subtly.

“Your Grace, allow me to introduce my sister Sarah Harris, the Duchess of Ridlington, and her husband Richard Harris, the Duke of Ridlington,” Lord Thorne announced.

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“It is a pleasure to meet you both,” Edward said, reaching for Sarah’s extended gloved hand and placing a gentle kiss on the back of it.

“The pleasure is all ours, Duke,” the Duke of Ridlington said, bowing his head slightly.

Edward returned the gesture.

“Sarah, where is our dear sister?” Lord Thorne asked, almost sounding displeased.

“No need to worry, Brother, she is in the powder room, freshening up,” the Duchess said with a glimmer in her eyes. “Oh, look, there she is now.”

Edward and Lord Thorne turned around to look in the direction that Sarah was pointing in.

Perhaps coming there sincerely was a mistake. When Edward laid eyes on their sister, it took everything in him to control the raging flow of sinful desire poisoning his brain. The woman, who looked to be a few years younger than her sister, was easily the most divine creature at this party.

She wore a yellow, babydoll-styled dress (which was a rather uncommon color to see at such parties) that left much to the imagination, although Edward could tell she was a bit more curvaceous than other young women her age. Her dark brown hair was curled in tight ringlets that hung just above her collarbone, and her skin resembled that of her sister’s, though it was slightly more tanned. Perhaps she enjoyed the outdoors.

As she made her way to the group, her eyes never left Edward's. He attempted to read her, but her bright blue eyes made it hard for him to come to any conclusions. She seemed almost playful with him in the way her eyes roamed over his body, and it did nothing to quell the burning heat in the pit of his stomach.

"Your Grace, this is my younger sister, Lady Arabella," Lord Thorne said. "Arabella, this is the Duke of S?—"

"Soulden, I've heard," Arabella interrupted with a small smile. She bobbed a deep curtsy for Edward and bowed her head.

Lord Thorne sighed. "I apologize for my sister's impertinence, Your Grace. She did not learn that from me."

Edward let out an amused chuckle and reached for Arabella's hand. "I find humor is a good quality in a lady."

He made eye contact with Arabella as he pressed a tender, lingering kiss to her gloved hand, shocking her somewhat, as a gesture this tender was usually kept between engaged couples.

Arabella's cheeks turned rosy-red, and it was not from the rouge she had clearly just put on.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she murmured, bowing her head again.

Edward was confused by the mix of emotions flooding his system. The primal, animalistic part of him wanted to take her to his bed and ravish her in ways she had probably never experienced before. But the proper side of him wanted the chance to get to know her. He didn't often feel this way with most women he interacted with, but something about the look in Arabella's eyes told him that she is worth getting to

know, even if it was only for tonight.

He noticed the dance card tied to her wrist by a pale, yellow ribbon. He pointed at it and said, “I sure hope that your card is not full yet.”

Arabella gave a near-mischievous grin and opened her card for him to see. “If you would like, you could be my first dance for the evening, Your Grace.”

“I would be honored, My Lady.”

Chapter Three

“Tell me, Lady Arabella, do you usually turn so many heads at these gatherings?” the Duke asked, turning to face her once they were on the dance floor.

Arabella could barely suppress her jitters, as she had never danced with a man who had gained her attention much like this duke did.

She tried to keep her hands from shaking in his, but her eyes could not stop admiring how his long, elegant fingers held her gloved ones. Her mouth went dry when she noticed one of the tendons in his fingers flex.

As they spun on the dance floor, more heads turned to look at them, and whispers arose around them. Arabella wondered about their continued attention but said nothing.

Her cheeks reddened when she remembered he’d asked her a question, and she smiled.

“Your Grace, surely you are not insinuating that I am the one drawing the attention? From what I remember, you don’t often come to events such as this.”

She wanted to clap a hand over her mouth at how plainly she'd spoken.

The Duke raised an eyebrow but laughed humorously. "While you may be right about that last part, I do not think I am the one attracting all of the attention from the gentlemen here tonight," he answered with a small yet playful grin.

Arabella's heart skipped a beat. His smile was so attractive, his teeth shining white, and his lips full and teasing. She wondered briefly if they'd be as soft as hers. She noticed a light dusting of hair on his upper lip and tried to imagine him with a mustache.

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Looking at him was most intoxicating—the more she looked, the more she was lost.

She heard him laugh and realized he'd been talking to her but she'd been too distracted again.

“Pardon me, Your Grace.” She flushed. “I usually pay more attention.”

He smiled slowly.

“It is all right.” He nodded. “I’ve been told I’m very distracting company.”

She quirked an eyebrow at his arrogance. “Far from it,” she teased. “Who is to say I don’t have a lover on my mind?”

“You do not look the type to entertain lovers.”

She tried for a flirtatious grin, wanting to hide how her cheeks reddened at that last word. “Do not underestimate me, Your Grace,” she warned playfully. “There are a lot of things you do not know about me.”

He laughed loud and long, drawing the attention of the people around them. When he calmed, he spun her in a move that made her dizzy as the musicians played a lively tune.

“To be rather honest, Your Grace, I am somewhat relieved that you asked me to dance,” Arabella admitted, looking over his shoulder at the older gentlemen looking longingly at her.

“Why is that?” the Duke asked, his eyes on her.

“While I love my brother, I find tonight’s turnout a little grim,” she said, glancing around, looking anywhere except at him.

He let out a hearty chuckle again. “I am amazed by your ability to make me laugh, My Lady. I find that I have had little reason to before tonight.” He smiled. “Indeed, Lord Thorne had mentioned that you were not fond of tonight’s—oh, what did he call it? Right.Options.”

“I fear he may be correct.”

Talking to the Duke was a lot easier for Arabella than she had imagined it would be. She had imagined that he would be stiff, much like a lot of the other men of the ton. But she had never been happier to be proven wrong.

“Tell me, does that still ring true now?” he asked, twirling her around once. “Do you still find all of your options grim?”

“I guess that will depend on how I feel by the end of tonight,” she replied, not quite sure where her sudden bout of courage came from.

The two danced in companionable silence for the next half minute or so, simply enjoying each other’s company. Edward was the first to speak up.

“To be rather honest with you, I was not looking forward to attending tonight’s party,” he admitted. “But as it is, I find I’m sufficiently entertained.”

Arabella looked up at him quizzically, not wondering why he hadn’t wanted to attend, but rather why he came. Her family’s standing in Society was way beneath his, so he wasn’t obligated to attend the party. Unless...

Arabella remembered the rumors surrounding him and the warning her sister and the maid had given her.

She didn't dare repeat the rumor to his face, but her expression said it all.

"Enlighten me, Your Grace," she demanded despite herself.

"Your company has proven most enjoyable." He nodded. "I'd like to ask for a continual dalliance between us."

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. Was he asking for...?

"I apologize if I have misspoken," he added. "I only wish to have the pleasure of your company if I have to attend any more torrid affairs."

"Are you calling our ball a torrid affair?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "You're absolutely incorrigible."

"You wouldn't be here if I wasn't."

"I truly wouldn't." He laughed.

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They shared a small laugh and went to refresh themselves with some punch, finishing their drinks in time for the next dance.

She knew it wasn't proper to dance so many dances with him when he wasn't courting her, but she didn't care much. This was the most fun she'd had in a while, and she didn't know how long it would last.

"I'm still curious as to why you attended though, Your Grace," she teased. "Surely it was not to come and ask me to dance."

The Duke allowed a small smile to grace his lips. "I felt it rude to not attend. I am not one for parties, but I do enjoy an occasional night out. I figured tonight might be a good night to do such."

"Do you regret attending?" she asked, subtly trying to gauge how he felt about dancing with her.

"I do not think I do now," he said, his dark eyes boring into hers.

He has to be one of the most elegant men I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

"I think I, too, am enjoying it a lot more now," she relented, trying her absolute best to attempt any semblance of flirting.

As Arabella looked into his eyes, she felt his hand slowly trail down her arm and gently wrap around her waist, pulling her ever so closer to him. She could barely contain the heat emanating from her cheeks due to her racing heart.

What was this man doing to her? If only Sarah could read her thoughts, she would laugh at the irony of the night's events.

"I do not think I have had the pleasure of ever dancing with a woman as captivating as you," he suddenly said, taking her by complete surprise. "You're not only beautiful, but you have a sharp wit and charm that keeps me engaged."

I wonder if he desires the same as me.

"Oh, Your Grace, surely a rake like you says that to every lady he meets." She suddenly realized what she had said and who she had said it to. Her smile dropped, and she froze. "Your Grace, I apologize. I did not mean for that to come out the way it did."

The Duke had cocked an eyebrow, the same mischievous glint in his eyes. "Like I told your brother earlier, Lady Arabella, I do enjoy a lady with a good sense of humor."

The Duke of Soulden sure was a gentleman who knew his way with words. The way he could speak a simple sentence and somehow make Arabella lose her breath for a second was a feat no man could ever achieve.

"I am glad you find my company enjoyable," she said, stepping back and curtsying as the song ended.

That's when the Duke said something that took her a moment to process. "Perhaps you may find it even more enjoyable if we were to continue our conversation in private."

"In private?" Arabella asked, breathless.

What exactly was he asking her?

“Do not take me seriously, Lady Arabella.” He laughed. “I was merely jesting. That was an improper joke. I would not dare to jeopardize the reputation of a woman of your standing with such words.”

But Arabella didn’t care. She wanted to know what he meant by that. Where would she follow him?

“It seems tonight’s party may be coming to an end soon. It was lovely talking and dancing with you, Lady Arabella. I must go find Lord Thorne and thank him for his hospitality,” he added, bowing his head again and bringing her gloved hand up to his mouth to press another tender kiss to it.

He left her with a longing look that she interpreted as an invitation.

He’d said he was jesting, but his eyes had said otherwise.

“Ara,” she heard Sarah call from a few feet beside her.

Arabella hadn’t noticed her sister’s presence, as she had been watching the Duke walk away from her, her eyes focused on how his broad shoulders flexed beneath his jacket and how he towered over most of the guests and how his hands... oh, how his hands held her.

“How was your dance, Sister?” Sarah asked with a knowing smirk.

“It was absolutely divine.” Arabella sighed whimsically, her gaze focused on his back.

Sarah laughed at her sister’s obvious infatuation. “Richard and I are going to retire

for the night. Will you accompany us on the walk to our rooms?"

"Sure," Arabella said, finally averting her gaze from the Duke of Soulden.

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The three of them walked over to Leonardo and bid him a good night. Sarah asked where their rooms would be.

“Arabella can take you. I’ll send her handmaid after her to escort her back,” he replied, craning his neck to try and find one of the family’s longest-serving servants. “Ara, you remember their room in the eastern hall. That reminds me. The Duke of Soulden had asked me earlier where his room would be. I do hope he found it easily.”

Arabella’s ears perked up at the mention of the Duke. She tried to hide her excitement at the thought that she might bump into him near his rooms and led her sister and brother-in-law to their room in a nearly dazed state.

Her head was still spinning from his smooth words and dashing, good looks. It was almost as if the universe had witnessed her dilemma and decided to tease her.

When they entered the wing that Sarah and Richard would be staying in, Arabella decided to put the thought out of her mind. She noticed several meters ahead a familiar figure being escorted by a footman. Of course, it was the Duke.

Knowing where his room was excited and scared her in equal measure as her plan was starting to take shape in her mind.

“Thank you for showing me where I’ll be staying, Robert, but I fear I may have left my handkerchief somewhere in the parlor. I think I will go back and retrieve it,” she overheard the Duke tell the footman.

“Of course, Your Grace. I will escort you back,” Robert offered, moving out of the

way.

“No need, my good man. I have an exquisite memory, and I should be able to find my way back,” the Duke assured him.

It was at this point that he noticed Arabella standing a mere fifteen feet away from him. His smoldering eyes roamed over her body, making her flush.

Seriously, what was this man doing to her?

“If you insist, Your Grace. I will be at your disposal during your stay,” Robert answered, before bowing and swiftly leaving to head back to the parlor.

“Thank you,” the Duke called after him.

As he passed her, Arabella found herself facing a small dilemma. Would she seem desperate if she followed him back?

“Sister, this is your room,” she announced as she stepped in front of their door, unlocking it.

“All right.” Sarah yawned. “Have a good night.”

“Good night, Sister.”

As she turned to head back, Arabella wondered if she should go to the parlor or her room, but as she turned down the hall, she spotted the Duke walking at a leisurely pace. She wondered after a long moment if he’d been waiting for her.

She entered the parlor not long after him. Arabella watched him make his way to the hors d’oeuvres table. Rather than look for his missing handkerchief, she noticed that

he turned around and faced the dancing crowd, his eyes searching.

Is he looking for me?

When his eyes landed on her, he froze and so did she. He had been looking for her, waiting for her to follow him. So, she indulged.

She made her way over to him, determination being the factor that held her back from greeting the ladies and gentlemen she passed. She noticed the cocky grin tugging at his lips.

What was she doing? This was no way a lady and a man should have mingled.

“Are you following me, Lady Arabella?” he asked as she approached, her heart already racing a mile a minute.

She really liked how her name sounded on his lips. She wondered if he would say it again. She would’ve liked that.

“Would you be afraid if I was?” she asked, her voice sounding small. But her words had the desired effect.

She looked into his eyes and noticed his pupils dilate slightly at her jest. Arabella couldn’t lie, she enjoyed bantering back and forth with the Duke.

“I can return to the watchful eyes of my brother if you’d like,” she teased, looking around and wondering where Leo had gone.

“I believe that would be the last thing I want,” the Duke said, his voice hoarse. With what, she could not tell.

Arabella took a cautious step towards him, her arms daintily folded behind her back and her cheeks red. “Whatdoyou want?”

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The Duke sucked his bottom lip between his teeth. Something about the action drew her attention to his mouth. It was... nice. He had plump, red lips that made goosebumps spread across her arms when she thought about them for too long. She wanted to touch them, to put her lips on his. Would that do anything?

“I am afraid what I want would destroy any sense of innocence you have, My fair Lady,” he warned, licking his bottom lip.

Something told Arabella that what he had just said was laced with a burning... want. She didn't even know what that want entailed, but she wanted to wrap herself in it.

“So, you are afraid,” she said, her voice a lot lower than she had ever heard it before.

She hadn't noticed until now, but she was only a couple of inches away from the Duke, his tall frame towering over her. His dark eyes were hooded, and his breathing was ragged.

“I think I should retire for the evening. Will you follow me to my chamber, then?” he asked teasingly. He was breathing harshly through his nose.

“What is in your chamber, Your Grace?” She giggled at the idea, wondering what could possibly be there. “Shall I call for my brother to chaperone me?”

“No,” he said suddenly, startling her slightly. “No, you must follow me alone.”

He was being serious.

This excited Arabella. She enjoyed breaking the rules here and there, and it had been a while since she had dipped her toe into the rebellious pool.

She looked him in his eye and nodded with a sheepish smile.

“Wait a minute after I leave before coming to me,” he instructed, his stature a lot broader.

Had he squared his shoulders? Now that she looked at him, he seemed more domineering than before.

And it excited her for some reason.

“All right,” she murmured, not watching as he walked right past her and presumably back to his room.

The minute of waiting went by agonizingly slow. She counted down the seconds and tried to appear as if she was eyeing the sweets that remained on the table. When she reached number fifty, she decided enough time had passed. She was too eager to wait any longer.

She made sure she was careful and as inconspicuous as possible, not wanting to draw attention to her second departure for the evening. Counting her blessings, she thanked God that she had not run into Leo. How would she have explained this?

When she entered the guest hall, she saw the Duke of Soulden leaning against his guest chamber door. Something about the way he stood there, almost looking like he did not care about how he looked to others, made a familiar spark light up in Arabella’s heart. He must have been a fan of subtle rebellion as well.

His eyes lit up when he watched her make her way over to him as gracefully as she

could.

“You actually followed,” he said in awe.

“I saw it as a challenge.” She shrugged. “And you must know, Your Grace, I am never one to back down from a challenge.”

For the first time, his cheeks flushed. They stayed red as his eyes roamed over her face. She wondered what she looked like to him. Was she beautiful? He was making her feel so.

“I do not think I’ve ever met someone quite like you, Lady Arabella. You intrigue me,” he admitted, his hand tentatively opening the door to his chambers.

Suddenly, Arabella felt a tad overwhelmed and nervous. Being alone with the Duke could potentially have dire consequences if they were caught. But her curiosity was too strong. She wanted to experience a night of passion she had only heard whispers of. She wanted to ask him about one.

“Your Grace,” she piped up.

“Yes, My Lady?” he questioned, his fingers pausing on the doorknob.

Ara looked around, ensuring no one was standing nearby.

“This may seem rather sudden and... rather inappropriate, but please do not think poorly of me,” she stammered out.

The Duke simply smiled at her stuttering, seemingly endeared by it. “What is it?” he asked.

“Will you...” She let out a slow breath. “Will you allow me a single night of passion?”

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The tense and shocked expression on his face elicited a soft giggle from her lips, but she swiftly sobered up and stilled.

Oh God, what had she just asked of this gentleman she had only just met? She had always dreamed of being brave enough to challenge a social norm like this one, but she had never imagined the aftermath. Here it was.

“Oh, my dear God, I am so sorry to—” Arabella began, panic overtaking her quicker than she could comprehend.

But she was interrupted by the Duke quickly pulling her away from his door and down the back half of the guest hall. The part of the hall that was unoccupied. The part that was unlit and devoid of servants, as there was no one to tend to.

“Where are you going?” she asked, wondering what he was planning to do.

The Duke jiggled a doorknob of one of the unoccupied rooms and found it unlocked. He pushed the door open and gently ushered her inside.

“What on earth are you doing?” Arabella asked, throwing etiquette out the door. Then she added, “Your Grace.”

The Duke walked up to her and stared down at her with a heat she had never seen before. He lifted his right hand and ran a tender fingertip down her arm, making goosebumps spread all over her body, so much so that it became uncomfortable yet intoxicating.

“Do you even know what you just asked of me?” he asked, growling almost, his voice deeper and huskier.

“Well, I?—”

“I don’t think you do,” he continued, the hand on her arm now resting firmly on her hip.

I don’t think I do.

The Duke’s left hand reached up and tilted her chin so she was looking him in the eye. He was impossibly close. So close that Arabella could feel his breath tickle her lips.

He’s so tall and... intense.

“Because if you did, you would not have asked so innocently,” he growled this time.

Both his grip on her hip and chin became firmer, her body more in his command. Arabella’s heart was beating so hard and loud that she wondered if he could hear it.

“You’re breathing so fast,” he murmured, his eyes darting down to her heaving chest. “Are you nervous?”

“What do I have to be nervous about, Your Grace?” she asked, her doe eyes searching for an answer in his.

When his lips hovered a hairsbreadth from hers, her brain began to fizzle in and out. What was this feeling? She felt a weird mix of anxiety and burning desire coursing through her, making her knees wobble.

“If I had it my way, you wouldn’t be nervous. You’d be excited,” he answered, cocking an eyebrow as his gaze traveled back up to her eyes.

Arabella took a deep breath as quietly as she could and said, “I do not recall saying I was nervous, Your Grace.”

“Are you excited, then?” he purred.

He was standing so close to her that his words sent vibrations through her chest.

He leaned closer, and she forgot to breathe. She closed her eyes and tried to remember how to breathe.

She felt his breath near her mouth and knew that it was only a very small distance that separated them. If she leaned forward, she’d be tasting his lips.

Her heart was pounding loudly now, and the only thing her mind registered was the heat coming off him in waves.

Before either one of them could move further, the small, squeaky voice of the estate’s biggest gossip piped up, “My Lady?”

ChapterFour

Oh no.

Arabella was out of his arms in a split second.

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“Jasmine,” she stammered, straightening her dress where his fingers wrinkled it. “What are you doing in this part of the hall?”

“I’m sorry, My Lady,” the maid said frantically, her eyes darting rapidly between them. “Lord Thorne requested I change His Grace’s sheets.”

Arabella took another deep breath and put on a fake smile. “Well, thank you, Jasmine. I was just showing His Grace around. Would you like me to help gather the sheets?”

Why would she help the help? No one would believe that she was showing me around. She does not have a chaperone.

“Oh, My Lady, that is very kind of you, but I thought you would rather rejoin the festivities,” Jasmine said, keeping her head lowered.

“Jasmine, what?—”

“I must strip his bed first, My Lady!” Jasmine blurted out, clearly distressed at witnessing something no one should have seen.

The maid walked away before Arabella could say another word to her. She turned to look at Edward, her eyes wild and her breathing heavy again.

“Oh God!” she exclaimed, chewing on the inside of her cheek. “What do we do?”

Edward wasn’t quite sure what to do, as he had surprisingly never found himself in a

situation like this. He knew that this could have been bad if it were someone of higher standing who walked in on them, but it was just a housemaid.

He sat on the bed, leaning back to watch her pace the room, anxiety coming off her in waves. She walked in a smart pace, unlike the sedate pace she used in the ball which accentuated the curves of her legs. She really cut a lovely figure in her dress, and he'd been so close to ripping it off her had that cursed maid not found them.

He understood her fear, but he thought it needless and told her as much.

"Breathe, My Lady. She is but a maid," he tried to soothe her.

"Yes, she is, but she is also a renowned gossip in the estate, Your Grace," Arabella retorted, her voice jaded and shaky. "Word will get around."

"Lady Arabella, surely no one of the ton would take the word of a housemaid that seriously," Edward reassured, trying to get her to relax.

It wasn't working. She was still pacing frantically.

"Please stop pacing and come sit."

A near-hysterical laugh escaped her lips. "You do not understand, Your Grace. Jasmine has a strong reputation among the staff and our family. She has been able to prove that some of her gossip is true. Her word is regarded as reliable."

She continued pacing, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, not knowing what to do with her hands.

"Your Grace, my family is holding on to their reputation by a mere thread. And I was the cause of it. Will I be the cause of their ruin? If I'm the reason no one in the ton

takes us seriously, what will become of us?" she spat. "What if we're forced to get married?"

The end of her rambling made Edward tense up. Marriage? That was the last thing he wanted. He had just met Arabella, and he did not want to hurt her in any way, but marriage was a step too far.

"Lady Arabella, I do not believe that anyone could force me into anything," he stated before she could spiral further. "Plus, I have no intentions of getting married."

She paused and cast her gaze downwards, staring at the floor beneath her feet.

"I do not either," she mumbled, taking him by surprise.

"You do not wish to wed?" he asked, his tone betraying his surprise.

"Yes," Arabella said, looking up and staring him straight in the eye. "Believe it or not, that is not every woman's dream."

Edward stared at her as if she'd grown another head. What woman did not wish to wed?

"It is an odd thing that you do not want to wed," he commented. "May I ask why?"

"I would rather not be trapped in a golden cage for the rest of my life," she answered plainly.

He nodded.

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“You believe that reason is sufficient?” she asked in surprise.

“I do believe that, believe it or not,” he answered lightly.

“Then please understand that that may be the future we both have to contend with,” she said, her voice cracking. She was upset—her eyes were filling with tears.

That reminder was enough to dampen Edward’s arousal, and he promptly decided he needed to get her away from him, so he could think.

“I should go to bed, Lady Arabella. I need to think on this,” he murmured after a brief moment of silence.

“I will try to get this resolved. Marriage shall be our last option,” she said, before she turned quickly and briskly walked out of the room.

When she stepped out of the chamber, Edward couldn’t stop laughing a little bit at the situation. He was not a cynical man by nature, but he had a knack for finding humor in difficult situations. Though he should not have been laughing this time.

Arabella’s words had been all too true, and as much as her words scared him, he decided he’d face their fate when he was better rested.

I need to rest.

He struggled to fall asleep at first, frustrated by the predicament he found himself in.

But soon he fell asleep, angry with himself. For claiming Arabella's body for even a night made him forget every shred of propriety.

* * *

The next morning, glances and whispers from the staff caused a lump to form in his throat, almost choking him. It appeared Arabella had been correct.

He had found the maid, Jasmine, who had caught them in a compromising position, speaking in a low whisper with an older gentleman.

When they saw him, the maid's face turned red, and she bobbed a quick curtsy, before scurrying out of the room.

"Good morning, Your Grace," the butler said, bowing his head. "Allow me to show you to the drawing room."

"Thank you..." Edward paused.

As the two made their way into the dining room, Edward nodded in greeting at Arabella's family.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Lord Thorne greeted, rising from his seat. "I am glad you joined us this morning. I had the cook make her cakes extra sweet this morning."

Edward offered him a polite and appreciative smile, then took a seat at the place Lord Thorne indicated. Herbert pulled out the chair, and Edward gingerly sat down.

When he looked around the room, he noticed Arabella was two seats away from him.

"Your Grace, thank you for joining us," she said to him. She looked like she hadn't

slept the previous night, but her tone was pleasant and calm. “We hope you found your chambers comfortable?”

“They were, thank you, Lady Arabella,” Edward answered, giving her a short look.

The Duke of Ridlington and his wife entered the room, and with that breakfast commenced with a small discussion about their plans for the day.

“Brother,” Arabella spoke, surprising him. He wondered what she had in mind and why she was so bold as to seek him out so purposefully. “Do you think I could show His Grace the hedge garden? When we talked, I remember him saying that it reminds him of his childhood.”

She is witty. I never told her that. I didn’t even have a hedge garden.

“That would be lovely, Ara. I believe I will join you as well. The weather is quite beautiful for a walk,” Lord Thorne commented.

To anyone not paying attention, they would have missed it, but Edward swore he saw Lord Thorne shoot his sister a questioning look.

“I would enjoy that, Lady Arabella,” Edward answered, grateful for the chance to talk with her alone.

When breakfast ended, the kitchen maids came up and cleared away the plates. Edward heard Arabella whisper to one maid.

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“Nancy, are you feeling better this morning?”

“Yes, My Lady,” the maid answered. “The babe is still.”

“All right. Please feel free to rest for a while. You worked so hard this morning.”

Hearing that sparked admiration in his heart. He did not often see his peers asking after their servants.

“If you insist, My Lady,” the maid replied, a happy smile showing her teeth. She looked around fourteen.

Edward, Arabella, and the Earl left the room shortly after and set off for their promenade around the garden.

When they neared the entrance, they spotted Jasmine wiping some furniture.

“Lady Arabella, how did you sleep last night?” Edward asked loudly, catching the maid’s attention.

Arabella shot him a look, but seeing the quick look he gave Jasmine, she understood.

“I slept really well,” she answered with a smile. “It is good I retired to my chamber early. That way, I can finally beat my brother at a game of chess later.

Their party laughed and set off towards the gardens.

Luckily, the other members of their party were not standing too close.

“I do not know if you have noticed, but I do believe word has gotten around,” Arabella whispered, her arms folded tensely behind her back.

The two walked past the centerpiece at the front of the hedge garden—a limestone statue of a man who Arabella said was her late grandfather, Malcolm Burk.

Edward wasn’t paying attention to her words, as she sounded distracted while speaking. She was wearing a beautiful light pink morning dress that complemented her slightly tanned skin. He tried not to lower his gaze but could not help it. His eyes flicked to her folded hands.

“I believe I saw it with my own eyes,” he finally said, shifting his gaze back to her face.

“We need to face the possibility that word will spread beyond the estate.”

It was Edward’s turn to sigh. He didn’t want to finally admit it, but now he was forced to.

“You are right. I remember you saying that you were going to find a way to fix this. I cannot think of one that may benefit us both.”

“Me neither, but I am still thinking. Have you given it some thought?” she asked. Edward noted she didn’t address him by his title.

“I must admit I have been stumped. I realized too late that this may cause a problem,” he begrudgingly confessed. “Perhaps we should take this walk to come up with a plan?”

“I did tell you last night, Your Grace,” Arabella said, huffing at the end. “But no matter, you now know.”

They had made their way through most of the garden when she suddenly piped up, “What if we?—”

She could not even finish her statement before Herbert hurried over to them. He was slightly wheezing by the time he reached them.

“Herbert, are you all right?” Arabella asked, putting her hand on his thick bicep.

“I apologize for interrupting your promenade, Your Grace, My Lady,” Herbert started. “Lord Thorne has requested to speak to you.”

Arabella let out a small, annoyed huff through her nose. “I am sorry, Your Grace. Perhaps Herbert can finish the tour with you.”

“Apologies, My Lady,” Herbert cut in. “I was referring to the both of you.”

Edward’s heart stopped for a moment. Lord Thorne was out there with them when they began their walk. He also knew that Herbert spoke with Jasmine this morning—presumably about what she had walked in on.

Did Herbert tell him?

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Arabella shot Edward a worried glance. “He was just out here. Is he feeling all right?”

Herbert nodded. “He is all right, My Lady. He... he had to go back, as he forgot a prior commitment. He requires your presence for a brief moment.”

“We will join him then,” Arabella said.

Edward could hear the nervousness in her voice.

The three of them walked back to the estate in utter silence, Herbert staying several feet behind them. They made their way up the stairs.

“What was your plan, Lady Arabella?” Edward asked quietly.

“It was desperate, Your Grace.”

“Tell me,” he urged, his hand coming up to lightly grip her elbow.

This surprised both of them. They had not touched since the previous night, and doing so was not appropriate.

She glanced around, her expression shifting. Though she looked worried, she also came off as sweet. Her small nose reddened. Edward noticed this a few times when she had appeared worried before.

“I had hoped we could just pretend to court,” she whispered.

“Pretend?” Edward echoed.

“I thought that if the ton were to find out, then it might have worked, but...” she trailed off.

“Lady Arabella, this could end in marriage if we’re not careful,” Edward warned, his crushing anxiety making his voice shaky.

“That’s why I said it was rather desperate. If it comes down to marriage, perhaps we would just enjoy the freedoms that come with it. We don’t need to act in love.”

“Lady Arabella, surely you do not think I was jesting when I said I didn’t want to marry.”

“I did not think you were jesting. I just?—”

“Then please do not put those cards on the table.”

“I’m only saying so because I’m trying to help you adjust to the fact that it is a possibility.” She glared at him.

He looked at her thoughtfully, wondering how many times she had never been taken seriously.

They were standing before the door to Lord Thorne’s study now, both of them itching to walk away and pretend they never got the message to see him. Arabella was the first to act. She rapped at the heavy wooden door so softly that Edward barely heard it.

“Come in,” the Earl’s stern voice called out from behind the door.

They both pushed open the door, only to be greeted by a clearly agitated Lord Thorne.

“Please make yourselves comfortable. Both of you.” He pointed to two chairs in from of his grand red mahogany desk.

“Brother—”

“Ara, please keep quiet and let me speak,” Lord Thorne ordered through heavy, harsh breaths.

Arabella immediately closed her mouth.

Lord Thorne slowly rounded his desk and stopped before them, leaning against the edge of the desk.

“I have heard a rather unsettling rumor this morning,” he began slowly, shooting Edward a rather cold glare.

It was Edward’s mistake anyway, so he had accepted he’d get the brunt of the Earl’s ire.

“Brother, please?—”

“Arabella Burk, I have already told you to please be quiet. Unfortunately, this is a matter between men,” Lord Thorne interjected, causing his sister to tense up.

Her fists clenched into a ball.

“Oh, yes, because I am too stupid to understand what has happened. Brother, please continue so I can learn the secret intelligence only men possess.”

Both Edward and Lord Thorne were taken aback by her brash words. She only looked back at her brother with a cocked eyebrow and a scowl on her face.

Lord Thorne just sighed and hung his head. “Since you have already determined what I was going to say, I supposed these rumors may be true. A housemaid walked in on you two in a less-than-flattering position.”

Neither Edward nor Arabella said anything. Edward’s palms were clammy, and he flexed his fingers—a nervous habit of his. He looked between the Earl and his sister.

“Would either one of you care to explain why?” Lord Thorne asked, pinching the bridge of his nose.

In a sheer attempt to save face and alleviate some of the burden from Arabella, Edward made a very quick, not well-thought-out decision.

“Lord Thorne, we were caught in that position because, quite frankly, it is very hard

for both of us to keep our hands off each other.”

Arabella looked at him with confusion. “Your Grace?”

“When Lady Arabella and I met last night, I knew it was love at first sight. No matter how cliché that may sound... it is the truth.”

Arabella looked at him with wide eyes, stunned into silence. Even Edward was surprised he actually went ahead and said that.

“That is why I have decided that I want to marry her.”

ChapterFive

Arabella was distraught.

She had not expected to be forced into marriage today. The Duke had never agreed to their plan, so she had thought he would not go along with it. He seemed like the type of man who did not enjoy being told what to do, and Arabella could relate, though he was more welcome to not listen.

“You want to marry me?” she asked, trying to sound not so shocked at the idea.

She looked back over at him, but he was glaring at her brother.

She took a deep breath.

“Ara, do you love the Duke of Soulden?” Leonardo asked, his expression hesitant.

“I...” She paused, desperate for more time to think. She had none. “I do.”

Leo walked back around his desk and sat down in the tall chair their father used to fall asleep in after working long into the night. How she wished she could talk to him about this.

Leo cleared his throat and said with hesitation, “Then you two have my blessing.”

Arabella felt a weird sense of relief as well as unnerving nausea. She was thankful that Edward went along with it for the sake of it, but she knew that he did not wish to marry, much like her. She glanced over at him and attempted to give him an appreciative smile, but he did not look at her. He was staring right at Leo.

“I am grateful for your blessing,” he said in a gruff voice.

Something about the way he said it made her insides twist with unease. There was no way he would have agreed to the marriage under normal circumstances. Neither would she, and she felt sick to her stomach.

“If you two will excuse me, I need to make preparations,” Edward added, standing up. “I would like the wedding to take place as soon as possible, so I can return to my estate.”

“O-of course,” Leonard agreed. “I will inform the family of the good news as soon as possible. But I need to speak with my sister if you please.”

Edward nodded, leaving the siblings alone in the study without so much as a glance at Arabella. She felt a mix of confusion and guilt. Why had he not even looked at her? Was he that mad at her or the situation?

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She glanced up at her brother, his brooding eyes softening considerably once the Duke left the room.

“Ara, is what you said true? Are you actually in love with the Duke?” Leonard asked, sitting down and folding his arms on the desk.

Arabella felt her face flush as she lied. “Yes. I was not expecting to be swept off my feet that quickly.”

Leonard took a moment, studying her face. “I thought you said you could not fall in love again, and now you have fallen this hard this fast. I have to think something is not adding up here.”

Arabella furrowed her brow in frustration. Why couldn’t he just believe her? Men were used to women falling in love immediately, so why was it so hard for him to believe this?

“Well, I guess that’s manly wisdom you think you have over me,” she snarled, immediately regretting speaking to him like that. “I’m sorry, Leo. There has been a lot going on this last day. My emotions are a bit frazzled.”

“I understand, Sister. I am happy for you, though. I had always hoped you would find a love match,” Leonard said, his voice soft, but his gaze still a little wary.

Arabella felt like she could cry. Once, she too would have preferred a love match if she were to have it her way. But she would not.

“Me too,” she mumbled.

* * *

The wedding preparations swiftly began. Edward had gone to the local church, which was located not too far from the Thorne estate to obtain a special license, since they wanted to marry so soon.

The family had questioned Arabella on the lack of the Duke’s excitement, but she’d played it off as him being busy with other things. She could understand, but she had begun to see the brighter side of this predicament. Once they were married, they would be expected to spend the first several months together, as was customary. After that, she figured they could live separately.

After all, marriage was only a contract.

She had also begun thinking of how her family’s financial troubles may be alleviated greatly. She remembered that Sarah had told her that their family’s finances had been struggling since their father was alive, but now that she was getting married to one of the wealthiest dukes in Britain and would be joining his family, they could be saved from ruin.

“Ara, I cannot believe you are to wed the Duke,” her younger sister, Madeline, said to her the following afternoon as they sat in the drawing room.

“I, too, am surprised that I am to be married,” Arabella replied, a small smile tugging at her lips.

She hated that she was enjoying the preparations and the thought of her family’s safety, as she knew the Duke did not have anything to gain from the marriage. Just the loss of his freedom.

“You surprised us all,” Sarah chimed in from the sofa. She was crocheting something Arabella couldn’t quite make out.

“Do you truly love him, Sister?” Madeline asked with equal amounts of innocent wonder and slight disgust.

Arabella swallowed hard. “I do.”

“I hope I find a love match one day, though the idea of marriage also makes me quite ill,” Madeline cooed, her eyes glimmering.

“Madeline, that is quite enough,” Sarah chided, although she was struggling to hold in a giggle. “Why don’t you go ahead and take the dogs out? I need to speak to our sister in private.”

“Ugh,” Madeline huffed. “Fine. But I want to know the details later.”

She pointed at her eyes and then at Arabella, then waltzed out the drawing room door.

Arabella gave Sarah a what is going on? look.

“I have to ask after our conversation last night, is there something else going on with this wedding?” Sarah asked, setting her crocheting down. “I would love to fully believe that you have found a love match. But I know that you were firm in your stance.”

Arabella laughed nervously but struggled to get any words out again. She wanted to tell her sister everything. She knew she could trust her because she never went to Leonard or anybody else after their talk in the hedge garden.

“I know that this is the right decision for me.” She smiled, masking her nerves as best

as she could. “It’s more than a love match, Sister.”

It’s everything but.

“But you only met yesterday,” Sarah pointed out.

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“But it feels like I’ve known him for a lifetime,” Arabella answered honestly.

“That is very romantic.”

Arabella blushed at the fact that she meant those words. “He made me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

“If that is what you believe, then I am beyond happy for you,” Sarah gushed, her face flushing. “Being in love can be an incredible thing.”

“I know,” Ara replied softly.

I would love to experience that someday.

She sighed. Even though she’d claimed she never wanted to marry, deep down she’d hoped for a romance that rocked her and swept her off her feet.

It saddened her greatly that she was still going to be trapped in the golden cage she’d feared all her life. She could only hope for the best, since the Duke was of the same mind.

* * *

The following day, the Duke was invited to join the family for dinner that evening. Arabella was nervous, as she had not seen Edward since the previous morning.

Would he still avoid her? Was he upset?

A few hours before their dinner, she was promenading in the hedge garden, with Herbert chaperoning her. She made her way to the statue of her grandfather and smiled. She had heard great things about him, though she never got to meet him in person.

He was her mother's father and died when her mother was only seventeen. Her mother used to tell stories of how he would go out to sea for months and come back with wild stories. He was the captain of the British Navy and was required to be at sea for half of the year.

Her mother had always said that her parents were a true love match and that she hoped she would find one too.

Arabella laughed when she thought about how she would end up finding one. She had always gone to talk with the statue whenever she had problems.

"I wish I could talk to you or Mother," she said to the statue, the cold stone shining in the sunlight. "You both would have known how to help me."

She sat down on the bench on the side of the statue. A cool gust of wind blew her hair back, and she smiled. Closing her eyes, she decided to talk to her grandfather, even though he wasn't there.

"Two nights ago, I made the mistake of thinking with my heart. Mother had always told me to think with my brain, as women are known not to do so. Anyway, I was... alone with the Duke of Soulden, and we were close. It was closer than I had ever been with anyone other than Mother and Father.

"I do not really know what was going to happen, but I know that it felt right. I am not in love with him, but maybe I could be? I don't know, I just wish you were here." She stood up, feeling antsy. "But maybe this is a journey only I can embark on."

She left the statue and continued her promenade in the garden. Then she went back to the house to get ready for tonight's dinner.

She decided on a deep green dress that fit her comfortably but hugged her chest slightly tighter than the rest of her body. The neckline dipped slightly, showing a bit of cleavage, and it was lined with lace the same shade of green as the rest of the dress. The skirt was lined with the same lace.

A woman was better prepared to face a battle in a good dress.

When the housemaid opened the dining room door, Arabella immediately felt upset.

He wasn't there yet.

Counting her loss and attempting not to look disappointed, she took a seat across from Leonard. She wasn't hungry much; her nerves had eaten away the hunger. The smell of the roasted lamb wafting from the kitchen made her stomach growl, however. Oh, and the potatoes smelled divine.

Maybe she was hungry.

"My Lord," Jasmine called from the doorway, "His Grace, the Duke of Soulden, has arrived."

Arabella's head nearly whipped around to watch the Duke saunter in. He wore a light tan overcoat with matching breeches, a black undershirt, and the Wellingtons he wore at the party.

"Good evening, Your Grace," Leonard greeted, rising from his seat and bowing slightly.

Arabella rose from her seat but curtsied. When she looked up, she saw that the Duke's eyes were fixed on her with the same burning passion from a few nights ago.

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“Good evening, Your Grace,” she echoed, before sitting down and keeping her eyes on him.

“Good evening, Lord Thorne, Lady Arabella,” the Duke returned as Jasmine pulled out the chair at the foot of the table for him. It was the seat to Arabella’s right.

Not too long after the Duke, Sarah and Richard strolled into the dining room. Sarah’s cheeks looked rosy, and even Richard seemed a bit flustered. Arabella smiled at her sister’s happiness and wondered if she and Richard had a good conversation.

“Good evening, Sister, Brother, Duke,” Sarah said, sitting in the chair that was pulled out for her.

Richard said his pleasantries, and they all waited another few minutes for Madeline. Just like always, she was the last to arrive for dinner. Arabella couldn’t help but laugh when her younger sister eventually strolled in, in her morning dress.

Leonard groaned. “Welcome, Sister. We were wondering if you would be joining us,” he said, agitated.

“I apologize, I was very engrossed in my book.” Madeline giggled at his annoyance. “You know, Brother, you are allowed to eat without me while in the comfort of your own house.”

“I was just trying to be polite,” Leo said, trying to sound somewhat playful, as he knew his sister meant no harm. She had always loved picking on him.

“Thank you, Brother,” she quipped.

The first course was served. A light, spring salad with light balsamic dressing served in a large ramekin was placed in front of everyone.

“Duke,” Sarah piped up, “Arabella has been talking my ear off about you and the wedding. Tell me, are you excited for the reception?”

Arabella wanted to stomp on her foot. She knew what Sarah was doing. She was gauging if the Duke was as in love as she supposedly was. Of course, he wasn't. Neither of them were.

Plus, she never talked about him like that.

He offered a soft smile and said, “I am very excited about the wedding. I have not felt anything this passionately in a very long time.”

His words hit Arabella hard. He spoke with fire. With passion. He sounded sincere. It made Arabella want to curl up in a ball and apologize. She knew that he was lying through his teeth.

Sarah beamed, showing her teeth. “That is really great to hear. I have always hoped she would find someone who is as fiercely in love with her as she is with him. I don't know if she told you, but our parents were a true love match.”

“I did not tell him that,” Arabella said with a laugh, trying to slyly let her sister know that she did not appreciate her butting in.

“She did not, but I am glad your parents provided a loving household,” the Duke replied with an almost convincing, genuine smile.

Sarah must have heard the compliment, but Arabella heard the jealousy in his words. They did grow up in a loving house, but something about what he said made her think he did not. She could not imagine a childhood without her parents' undying love for each other.

She paced herself as best as she could, but her anxiety about the dinner eased and her hunger replaced it.

"So, Your Grace, when your family arrives for the wedding, do you know how many rooms they will require? I am not a fan of procrastination and would like to start the preparations," Leonard asked after his first bite of ice.

The Duke took a moment to answer, his brow furrowed in thought. "I am not sure yet. A lot of my family has either passed away or are deep in the political trenches." He laughed uncomfortably. "So, I do not want to tell you a number that may not be correct."

ChapterSix

Edward was severely unhappy, though he made sure not to show it. Over the last few days, his anger at the situation had increased so much that he almost felt numb. He was never one to talk about his feelings, nor did he think that it was anybody's business, but he had always wished that there was an easier way to deal with the overwhelming emotions.

He wished he could bring himself to ease Arabella's worries, but he had yet to ease his frustration and decided he'd rather avoid her than pour it out on her, when she was in no way to be blamed.

He knew that Arabella seemed interested in a night of passion with him. She even asked for one herself. But he knew that she had no idea what she was getting herself

into by asking that. He should have known better, considering he was the one with more experience.

Lord Thorne interrupted his train of thought when he asked, “Would anyone else care for a second serving? Creamed ice has always been a weakness of mine.”

That is the last thing I want right now. I feel like I could be sick.

Lord Thorne seemed to be the only one who was hungry enough for extras, so he had a servant bring him more.

It was impossible for Edward to take his eyes off Arabella during dinner. He desperately wanted to leave. He needed space from the family that he was about to become a part of.

Nonetheless, his eyes wandered.

She wore a beautiful dress that complemented her every feature without coming off as immodest. He had grown to appreciate that about her over the last couple of days. She was so naturally beautiful that it barely took anything to capture his attention.

Her skin glowed underneath the golden glow of the candles, and he still felt the heady rush of desire when he looked at her. His hands itched to free her breasts, which strained against the bodice of her dress, and fondle them till she came apart in his arms.

Feeling his breeches tighten, he decided to think about her other qualities

She was a funny and caring and compassionate woman. She had the wit of one of his best mates growing up and the heart to care for those who may only be a speck in the wind to others.

What is this woman doing to me? I have never felt this way about another.

“Sarah and I have picked out the floral arrangements,” Arabella piped up after some time.

“Do tell, Sister!” Madeline clapped her hands together excitedly.

Arabella’s nose twitched adorably. “I am a fan of surprises, so I think I will not say anything, so it may remain one.”

“Does His Grace know?” Madeline asked, turning her head to face the flustered Duke. She then haphazardly added, “Oh my goodness, am I going have to call you Your Grace, Sister?”

Arabella did her best to stifle her laugh. “No, Madeline, you will not have to do that. I will not object if you decide to be polite to me and address me by my new title, but I do not expect it. And no, he does not know what I have chosen.”

There was an uneasy feeling in the air after Arabella said this. It was not that Edward did not want to help with the preparations, it was more so the fact that he couldn’t bring himself to.

“While I do not know the colors, I am excited to see what you ladies decided on,” he said with such grace.

When he was a boy, he used to be prone to hyperventilating when he became too stressed. Obviously, this was unbecoming for a young gentleman in high society, so his caretakers and father made sure to instill in him that he was to keep those feelings hidden inside.

Those feelings had transformed from helplessness to anger that burned hotly when sufficiently stoked.

“I cannot wait for you to see them,” Arabella said, her hands resting on her lap, her head lowered.

Edward knew that she thought he was not being serious, but he was being honest. He was curious to know what colors popped out to her.

I wonder what her favorite flower is.

When dinner finally ended, Edward was more than ready to retire to his chambers. But before he could head back upstairs, he heard Arabella call to him.

“Your Grace, can I ask you a question about the preparations?”

Edward inwardly groaned at the request but figured he owed her some of his time.

“Yes, My Lady,” he replied, walking to where she stood in the corner of the dining room.

He felt his skin tingle as he approached her. She looked even more ravishing up close. The hems of her dress were sewn in with matching green lace. The thought of her in lace sent a wave of desire through him.

When they made sure no one was around to overhear their conversation, Arabella whispered, “May I ask why you seem unwilling to invite your family? Are they really in the political trenches?”

Edward froze for a few seconds before he masked his discomfort with a faux smile. “They indeed are. I fear they would not be able to arrive on time.”

How could he even begin to explain why he did not want to invite his family to her without coming off as dismissive? He would gladly invite his younger siblings, Beatrice and Noah, as he had always had a relationship with them, but he couldn’t even hold conversations with his younger brother, Charles.

Even though Charles was only two years younger than Edward, he acted like his father sometimes. He was crass, harsh, and had high expectations for everyone in the family. Edward sometimes wished Charles inherited the duchy, as he seemed more capable than Edward at times.

Alas, Edward had a strained relationship with a lot of his family. His mother would nag him to bring home a wife. Perhaps this would make her happy and hop off his back for once.

“That is rather unfortunate. I was hoping to meet your parents,” Arabella admitted, her cheeks and neck flushing.

Edward momentarily held his breath when she mentioned his father. “My father passed away several years ago, actually, but I can take you to his grave if you like?”

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Arabella covered her mouth to hide her amusement, but a small giggle managed to escape. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Do not worry, I am not,” he said before he could stop himself. He coughed to get rid of the nervous tickle in his throat and said, “If you will excuse me, My Lady, I am feeling rather tired. I wish to return to my chambers.”

“Arabella,” she blurted out.

“That is your name, no?”

She snorted. “Yes, but I think it’s only appropriate for you to refer to me as such, no? Now that we’re to be wed.”

“Arabella...” Edward tested how her name sounded on his tongue and found that he liked it. “Please call me Edward. Ed if you are feeling adventurous.”

The smile she bore made him reciprocate.

Maybe things will be easy with her.

“Goodnight, Edward,” she sheepishly murmured, before curtsying and leaving the dining room.

“Goodnight, Arabella.”

When Edward got back to his chambers, he shut the door behind him and let out a

long shaky breath. He allowed himself to decompress, which was something he only did in private.

He poured himself a glass of Scotch from the collection he'd been provided with and took a large sip, staring into the fire. He'd made his bed the moment he'd given in to temptation, and now he'd lie in it.

ChapterSeven

It was the day before the wedding, and Arabella was starting to get beyond annoyed. All morning, she and Sarah ran several errands around the estate, trying to get everything in order for the wedding tomorrow. At some point, Madeline had asked, "Why are you in a rush, Sister? Surely you would want more time to plan out every small detail?"

Arabella had a hard time wondering how to tell her sister that that wasn't possible, so instead, she answered, "We are just so in love and cannot wait."

Madeline had always been perceptive. Ever since she was a little girl, she had been able to notice things that others would not. Arabella usually admired that about her younger sister, but right now she just found it annoying. She needed every one in her life to believe this lie.

"How come he is not putting the slightest effort into the wedding preparations?" she had asked.

"Madeline, you are meddling in something that is not your business. When it's your turn to get married, you will understand that a woman's taste is what makes weddings so memorable," Sarah had cut in.

"Oh Lord, do not remind me of that," Madeline huffed, never one for looking forward

to matrimony.

By noon, Arabella had started to get really annoyed. She understood that Edward may have been hesitant about preparing for a wedding that he did not want to partake in, but she felt the same. She was annoyed that all of this responsibility was thrust on her and her sister and that he wasn't helping in the slightest.

He is not making this easy for me.

She decided that after luncheon, she would talk to him about this. When lunch came and went, she was annoyed to find that Edward did not join them. She was to be wedded to him in less than twenty-four hours, and she had not seen him since last night, when they had that lovely conversation.

"Why are you ignoring me?" she mumbled to herself when she was taking her daily promenade in the hedge garden.

She appreciated Herbert at times like this because he kept his distance, but he was there to make sure she did not do anything rash. Not that she was one to do anything rash on a regular occurrence, but she never knew if today might be that day.

After her promenade, she felt somewhat better, but the looming stress of being tied to someone who did not love her and she did not love back for the rest of her life was impossible to let go.

When dinner time came, all of the wedding preparations had been hastily wrapped up. Not everything would be perfect, but it would be good enough.

The family was excited and talking about their expectations for the ceremony.

"Madeline," Leonard chastised, "you know very well it is not proper to speak with

your mouth full.”

Madeline just rolled her eyes and nudged her brother with her elbow.

Leonard sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Please do not behave like this tomorrow,” he said. “Speaking of tomorrow, Your Grace. Have any of your family members responded to our invitation? Do you know if we will need to prepare additional rooms?”

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Edward hung his head slightly. “Unfortunately, I do not believe any of them will be able to make it.”

The air, again, was riddled with unease. Arabella had the sneaking suspicion that the invitations were never sent out. That would be something that she would ask him about the next time they were alone.

“That is a shame. No matter, I’m sure Arabella would love to introduce you to our family,” Leonard said, with a soft smile directed at his sister.

“Everyone except Marley,” Madeline piped up with a false sneer.

At the mention of Marley, Arabella and the rest of her siblings groaned.

Edward let out one of the most boisterous laughs she had ever heard from him and asked, “Who is this Marley, and what is wrong with them?”

“She is our dearest cousin. But like Madeline, she has a knack for getting into trouble,” Arabella explained.

“Yes, but unlike me, she’s not the best at getting away with it.” Madeline giggled, before lifting another spoonful of pea soup to her mouth.

The air felt a lot lighter now, and when dinner was finally over, everybody felt satiated and ready for bed. The house servants cleaned the dinner table, and Leonard, Sarah, and Richard excused themselves to retire to their chambers for the evening.

“Your Grace, would you mind promenading with me in the hedge garden? I have some things I would like to discuss with you,” Arabella asked.

Edward nodded. He wiped his mouth with his napkin one last time before throwing the cloth on his dirty plate.

The two walked in relative silence on the way out and at the entrance of the garden. Herbert was in his usual spot, about ten meters away from the two, and stayed quiet.

When they were partially hidden by one of the hedges, Edward turned to her.

“What did you want to discuss?” he asked, his gaze soft and his words even softer. It made what Arabella was about to confront him with even harder to be mad at.

“Why have you not helped with any of the wedding preparation?” she asked, averting her gaze. Her voice was even, but she could feel the unwavering anger quickly threatening to take over.

“Oh,” he grumbled, his hand reaching up and scratching at the back of his neck. “Yes, about that?—”

“Because I understand that this is not a predicament either one of us wanted to be in, but I don’t think I should be the one to oversee all of the preparations,” she interrupted, her anger starting to fizzle out. “Because if this is a sneak peek into what our married life will be like, I think I would rather risk the ton’s judgment than go through with this.”

She looked up at him when she said that and was met with his hardened gaze and brooding stature. His eyebrows knitted in what looked like anger, and his lips were pressed into a fine line.

He licked his lips. "I did not expect you to be the only one who oversaw the preparations."

"Well, you may not have expected it, but that is what happened," she said, standing her ground. "Just because you say that does not erase the fact that that is how it played out."

"I figured my efforts would be best put into how our home and our estate would be ran once we are married, but I am sorry I did not help pick out which desserts would be served at our wedding breakfast," he snarled.

Ara felt her cheeks burning up at this point. She was livid. They weren't even married yet, and they were already having their first fight.

"If that is what you reduce my input to, then do not ever ask for my help," she replied through gritted teeth.

"That is not what I was saying, Ara." He sighed, putting his hand on his hip.

"That is what it sounded like," she huffed, not even noticing that he used her nickname. "Can I ask, though. Are you mad at me?"

This question seemed to surprise Edward. He gave her an incredulous look and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Why do you think I'm mad at you?"

"Well, it is partially because you did not help with the preparations," she started, squinting up at him. "But it is also because you have appeared to have been ignoring me these last couple of days. I can understand why you may be upset, but I would have loved more than just a fleeting conversation with you."

Edward bit his bottom lip fiercely and nearly belted out, “I am not mad at you, Arabella.”

“Then why have you been ignoring me?”

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“Because I am trapping you in something you will never be able to leave. You will never fall in love with me, and you will never have the love marriage you deserve.”

“Who said I could never fall in love with you?!” she fired back, her voice rising nearly an entire octave.

She was stepping closer to him with every question she asked, and now she was only a few inches away, staring up into his dark eyes.

“Because I am unlovable, Ara,” he croaked, his eyes flicking to the ground. “I always have been. I cut myself off. I do not allow myself to develop feelings for anybody, and in return I hope that they do not either.”

“Is that why you’re mad at me? Because I’m trapping you in the same thing?” she asked, her eyes glossy.

Little do you know I cannot stop thinking about you!

“I am not mad at you!”

“And you are not unlovable!”

Their faces were now dangerously close. Arabella could feel every quick breath he took and the heat emanating from his strong body. She almost could not stand being this close to him and not being able to do anything with her raging emotions.

She wanted to put her hands on him—not in a violent way, but in a way that showed

him the fire he had stoked inside her. She just didn't know how to even go about showing him, or if it was proper for the woman to make the first move.

"You make me feel the most annoying emotions that it drives me insane whenever I see you," he admitted.

"How do I make you feel, Edward?"

He looked her in the eye, his pupils dilated. "Like I am on fire. Overwhelming in the best way possible."

Even in the darkness, she knew that he could see her pinkening face. She felt the courage to stand on her tiptoes.

"Show me," she whispered.

Arabella could hear her heart pounding in her ears. This was it. She was about to kiss the man that she would lie with for the rest of her life. She had no idea what to do, but at the same time she did. When Edward's hands gently cupped her face and tilted her chin up, she wrapped her fingers around the crooks of his elbows.

His breath was hot on her face, and she was sure that her breath was just as warm on his face. The seconds before they touched felt like hours, and when their lips finally met, it took everything in her not to freak out.

Kissing was a new sensation for her because she had never felt lips on her own before. His lips felt warm and soft. And they moved against her own at an agonizingly slow pace. She did not quite know what to do with her lips, so she let him lead.

He managed to part her lips a bit wider, and when his tongue met hers, she felt a

fierce shiver run up her spine.

She let all her inhibitions go when he started kissing her harder. She felt a near uncomfortable ball of warmth sizzle in the pit of her stomach. Was this what Sarah had referred to?

The burning sensation traveled lower and surprised Arabella when she could feel it deep within her core.

This feels beyond incredible.

When they finally broke the kiss, they stared at each other while Edward rubbed small circles with his thumb right under her eye.

“Now you know.”

When Arabella returned to her chambers that night, her mind could not stop replaying their kiss. It was almost impossible for her to fall asleep.

I cannot wait to do that again.

ChapterEight

“Sit still, Maddie,” Sarah chided, placing another pin into her sister’s hair.

“I would if you stop pricking me with all these pins,” Madeline complained. “Ow!”

Arabella laughed at the familiar scene. “Oh, Maddie, you’re such a harridan!”

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Madeline stuck out her tongue, earning herself a flick on the forehead.

Arabella shook her head and lounged back in the bath that had been drawn for her. She'd had always thought that if she ever got married, her wedding morning would start off magical, with fresh morning light streaming through her windows and birds singing harmoniously in the background, but her reality was a far cry from what she was currently experiencing.

First, her sisters had woken her early before the sun began to peek through the clouds to soak in a hot bath with rosemary, lavender and rose petals sprinkled in while they bickered about Madeline's hair.

"I really don't see why you woke me up at an ungodly hour just to soak in a bath," she groaned. "You could have given me an extra hour of sleep."

"Nonsense," Sarah had rebutted. "You want to look your best, and you definitely want to smell your best on your wedding day. You only get married once, you know."

Her tone left no room for argument, so Arabella sat back and let herself be pampered. Her hair had been washed and oiled with fragrantly spiced oils, then brushed and arranged in an elaborate style that had her giggling.

By the time her hair was done, the sun was peeking through the clouds, the bright light telling her that even if it wasn't exactly the wedding every girl dreamed of, it was still a beautiful day.

"'Tis a beautiful day," Hannah, her handmaid, commented as if hearing her thoughts.

“Indeed,” Arabella affirmed, smiling brightly.

She was dressed in her mother’s wedding dress, which had been altered to fit her with accents of pearls and crystals sewn over the bodice and in floral patterns around the flowing skirt to give it a more modern feel.

“The Duke won’t be able to keep his eyes off you in this dress,” Sarah gushed as her sister was laced into her wedding dress.

“Or his hands,” Madeline whispered.

“Maddie!” Arabella and Sarah gasped simultaneously at her crude words.

“Whereever did you learn to speak so crudely?” Sarah scolded, swatting her youngest sister’s bum with the hairbrush.

“Ow!” Madeline complained. “It’s not like there’ll be anything wrong with that, seeing that they’ll be married.”

“Maddie!” Sarah gasped again.

Arabella felt a hot blush creep up her neck and cheeks at the thought of her and Edward sharing a marriage bed.

Yes, she’d asked him to give her a night of passion, but now that it would be his right to take his pleasure from her, she couldn’t help but fear if he’d be satisfied with her, considering she didn’t know much about the marriage bed despite Sarah’s best attempts to educate her.

The lecture had been awkward and had changed the way she’d look at cucumbers forever.

“Are you ladies ready in there?” Leonard’s gruff voice came through the door.

The sisters rolled their eyes at his fatherly tone and opened the door.

If Arabella hadn’t been feeling guilty about lying to her family before now, his awestruck expression made her feel worse than she had in the last few days as they rushed the wedding preparations.

“You look... too beautiful for words, Sister.” He smiled at last. “The Duke is a lucky man.”

Arabella smiled through the tears pooling in her eyes and rushed into his arms. She really hoped she wouldn’t spend the entire day crying. That might do the opposite of convincing them that she was actually in love with her husband-to-be.

“I never believed this day would come so quickly. I—” Leonard broke off once she pulled away from him. “Are you sure this is what you want, Sister? You don’t have to go through with this.”

Love filled her as she looked at her brother’s concerned expression. Even though he feigned being tough and unfeeling, he’d always been the sweetest even when they were just children. It was he who’d taught her the names of flowers and birds. It was he who had calmed her when she fell and hurt her knees in the gardens. It was her big brother who had stayed up all night, raging on her behalf when she’d wept over the Duke of Green.

“I’ve never been more sure, Brother.” She smiled, squeezing his hand.

He nodded and took her hand in his. “Come, let’s go downstairs,” he said. “It isn’t proper to keep a duke waiting, especially on his wedding day.”

They slowly went down the steps of the childhood home she realized she was going to miss once she moved to the Soulden estate.

Most of her things had been packed and sent ahead to the Duke's castle. The rest would go with them as they rode to his home as man and wife.

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An uneasy feeling settled into her stomach as she wondered if she'd do well as the lady of her own home now. She hadn't forgotten the comment he'd made in anger about managing the affairs of his estate.

Would she be of any use to him besides warming his bed?

Even then, would he even come to her bed?

She bit her lip as she was helped into the waiting carriage to take her to the chapel where the wedding ceremony would be held.

Her breath hitched in her chest when she was helped out of the carriage. This was it. She was going to get married.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as her heart beat a frantic rhythm. Was this how all brides felt?

She wondered if it was because hers was a sham marriage that she had such jitters.

She spotted her husband-to-be's carriage down the line of parked vehicles, the noise of footmen unloading her trunks and loading them into his fading in the background.

God. Could she really go through with this?

"You ready?" Leonard's hand in hers drew her out of her nervous thoughts.

She nodded, swallowing her fear.

The wedding march sounded, and the oakwood double doors opened to let them in. Once again, she found herself short of breath as she spotted Edward standing at the altar, astonishingly handsome in a dark suit, with his dark hair slicked back with gel.

Heat flooded her as his hot gaze landed on her. She could feel it even through her veil. A hot blush crept up her cheeks.

When Leonard handed her over to him, even through the gloves she wore, the heat of his palm seeped into her fingers.

“We gather here today to...”

When the priest started the sermon, her heart started thudding heavily in her chest.

Her reasons for getting married were nothing like what the priest had mentioned. Even the thought of children chilled her to the bone.

Edward was a duke and was expected to have heirs to continue the line. Wouldn't he want to have children?

But children meant her not having freedom to live her life the way she'd always dreamed of.

She didn't mind the process of creating the children. If anything, she knew she'd find the process interesting. The tension that simmered in her skin every time Edward touched her let her know that it would be good with them. At least on his part. He was a famed rake, so he would surely know how to pleasure a woman. She would just have to learn his likes and dislikes in the six months they'd stay together.

“You may now kiss the bride.” The priest's words caused her to stiffen as Edward turned to face her.

She remembered the one kiss they'd shared and how her skin had been set aflame.

But the chaste kiss and the blank expression on his face killed that thought and left a sick feeling in her stomach, even after they were pronounced man and wife and hurried into their carriage.

"We have a long journey ahead of us, and if we're going to make it to Soulden by nightfall, we need to leave now," was the only explanation he'd given her when she'd asked why the rush.

She'd only had a few minutes to say goodbye to her family, holding back tears when her sisters started crying.

"I'll see you all at Christmas," she'd promised them, taking her husband's hand as he helped her into the carriage.

The tears fell as she heard Leonard extract a promise out of him to take care of her.

An uneasy silence fell over them as the carriage doors were closed and the carriage was prepped to take her to her new home.

The carriage suddenly lurched forward, throwing her at the man sitting across from her.

"Apologies," she muttered, righting herself in her seat.

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“It’s all right,” he answered gruffly, looking away from her.

She wondered then if this was to be her life for the next six months. Stilted replies and near-cold indifference. She thought they’d gone past this, but it appeared he still had some adjustments to make. Ones she didn’t intend to help him with.

She folded her arms over her chest, regretting she hadn’t brought anything to keep her busy, looking out the window at the sprawling countryside dotted with shrubs boasting wildflowers in an array of colors.

She smiled, excited that she was finally getting to explore England outside the home she’d been raised in, but she still missed the familiar woods surrounding her childhood home.

“We’re here.”

Edward’s voice startled her awake, and it took her a minute to realize that her head was on his shoulder.

How did that happen?

She wiped her face, hoping she hadn’t drooled on him, flushing at the thought that he’d seen her in a less-than-perfect state.

“Are you ready?” he asked again, his voice laced with concern.

In the dimness of the carriage, she couldn’t make out his expression.

Had she really slept that long?

Night had fallen around them all too quickly. She was rather grateful she had been asleep, or it would have made for a dreadfully boring trip with the uneasy silence that had hovered between them.

“I am,” she said when she realized he was still waiting for an answer.

She faintly saw him nod in the darkness, and then he opened the carriage door, stepping out to help her down.

Her eyes took in the castle that was to be her new home. Even shrouded in moonlight, she had to admit it was beautiful, with flower-lined stone paths leading up to large double doors.

It was almost intimidating to think she'd be the lady of all this soon and the responsibility of managing his household would be on her shoulders.

She bit her lip and looked away from the castle to her husband, who stood patiently beside her as she took in his home. His eyebrows were raised in question, as though he wanted to know if she was ready to go inside.

She nodded, before letting him lead her to the front doors.

The butler opened the door and immediately greeted Edward, not sparing her a glance.

“Your Grace, would you be wanting a hot bath?” he asked.

“No, but my wife would surely.” At the word wife, the butler's eyebrows rose, disappearing into his hairline. “Have one drawn for her in my chambers.”

Arabella blushed when she realized that taking a bath in front of her husband was something normal for married couples.

“Y-yes, Your Grace,” the butler stammered out, before scuttling off, no doubt to inform the rest of the staff.

She ignored his behavior and wondered then if her husband had even informed his family of his marriage.

“Edward—”

“Let’s go,” Edward interrupted, as if knowing what she intended to ask.

Arabella followed him inside, taking in the floral arrangements and fresh rushes lining the halls. Those were a woman’s touch. She wondered if perhaps his mother lived there and how she’d take the news that her son was now married.

Once they were safely behind her chamber doors, she turned to him.

“Why did your butler have no knowledge of my arrival, Edward?” she asked, trying to keep the accusation out of her voice. But upon seeing his guilty expression, she frowned. “You said your family would be too busy to attend the wedding. Did you even tell them you were getting married?”

When he hadn’t answered after a long minute, she shrank back, not knowing how to feel.

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Their marriage had been founded on lies that just kept piling up. Was this to be her future?

Not only would she have a loveless marriage but one based on lies and deception.

“Edward...”

She held her peace until the bath had been filled.

“That will be all,” he told the maids. “Thank you.”

Hot tears pricked her eyes.

“Why did you marry me?”

ChapterNine

“Why did you marry me?”

Her words hung in the air between them, bitter and thick with pain Edward knew she had every right to feel, especially after how he’d behaved the entire day.

How was he to confess that his silence had nothing to do with her?

“Arabella...”

“I won’t stand for any more lies between us, Edward,” she snapped. Her eyes were

wet with tears, and even he couldn't deny the sight discomfited him. He'd made her cry. "I would have been happier if you'd left me to deal with the repercussions of my foolishness that night rather than trapped me in this farce of a marriage. Am I that far beneath your station that it would have shamed you to inform your family? Is that it?"

"It has nothing to do with your station, Ara," he answered, looking away from her. "Believe me. You have nothing to worry about from my family. I assure you of that."

"I find that hard to believe, considering how everything you've told me up till now has been a lie." Her words stung with truth, but he'd be damned if he let her insult his honor. "Am I to believe this is how it will be between us, going forward?"

"I understand you are hurt, but I won't have you insult my honor." He glared at her. "I might have kept some truths from you, but I have never lied to you, and I don't intend to."

"But you were more than willing to lie to my family and, by extension, yours. That's a lot of lies, Your Grace."

"I told you to call me Edward," he reminded her. "We are married now. It wouldn't do to call me by my title."

She turned away from him, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"You're making me feel like I've forced my way into your carefully planned life and upset everything," she whispered, her voice so low that he wouldn't have heard it if he hadn't been admiring the way her wedding gown hugged her figure. "I feel I've pushed you into something you'd spend the rest of your life regretting."

He sighed, stepping close to her—so close that he could smell the lavender essence she'd no doubt bathed in. He didn't trust himself to touch her and stop. Not when his

lust had been burning inside him since the moment he'd seen her walk into the church. Especially not when her lush breasts had pressed against his arm while she'd slept in the carriage.

"It was I who called you to that chamber, Ara," he muttered, hoping his words did something to chase away the guilt she shouldered heavily. "I should never have put you in such a position in the first place."

It was he who was to blame for their predicament. He was a rake by all rights, but he should have known better than to dally with an innocent, especially not in her home, where she'd no doubt be under the watchful eyes of her family.

"Forgive me if I've made you feel I blame you for our predicament. As much as it might not seem so, I don't regret being married to you. I wouldn't want to be married to anyone else," he admitted. "I will inform my family come morning that you are my wife. I promise you that they will treat you with nothing but love and acceptance."

Arabella sighed as if she'd resigned herself to her fate rather than trust his words.

"You should bathe while the water's still warm," he told her, stepping out of the room to give her privacy. "I'll have them send up a plate to you."

"I'm not hungry."

"You must eat."

"I—"

"You've barely had anything to eat all day, so you will eat what they bring up, am I understood?"

“You do not?—”

“Am I understood, Arabella?”

“Perfectly,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Good.”

“Will you send up a lady’s maid too, or will you have me undress myself?”

“I will help you.”

Her eyes widened, and she let out a gasp. He, too, was surprised that he’d suggested such a thing, but he hid his emotions better. She turned around then, surprising him with her compliance.

When his hands touched her back, she shivered but then stilled.

His hands undid the strings holding her dress together, and for each string he loosened, his tongue got heavier in his mouth. When he was finally done, he moved to help her take off the dress, but she stilled him with her hands.

“I’ll finish up. Thank you.”

“Oh.” He swallowed. “Enjoy your bath.”

He wondered if she’d have minded him joining her in the bath as he neared his study.

The image of her naked and flushed in the hot bath sent a sharp jolt of lust through him that had him stumbling. Before the door closed behind him, he'd seen the outline of her curvaceous form through the thin fabric of the chemise she wore.

Her generous breasts and plump buttocks teased his eyes and tongue to run over them. He'd shut the door before she lifted the garment over her head. If he saw her naked now, there would be no way he would leave her again.

He swallowed past the thick lump that had formed in his throat as he righted himself. He needed a drink and fast, anything that would put his conflicting thoughts out of his mind.

Sure as hell, his butler had already made his rounds, lighting a fire in the ornate fireplace and placing a bottle of his favorite Scotch on his desk.

It was things like this that made him overlook the man's overbearing and downright snobby attitude.

Edward recalled how he'd ignored Arabella as if she were nothing more than a lady of the night he'd brought home. He could only hope she hadn't taken it personally. Why the man would think so still amazed him when he'd made sure to never bring his paramours to his family estate. Apart from the fact that they'd turn needy, he didn't want to disrespect his mother that way.

He'd been honest when he'd told Arabella that his family would love her, but not on all accounts. His mother, the Dowager Duchess of Soulden, would be ecstatic that he'd finally granted her one wish, albeit she'd be furious with him for not letting her be present at the ceremony or even in the wedding preparations.

For that, he was extremely grateful for the circumstances of his marriage, but even then Arabella had been unlike any other bride he'd known. She'd made her decisions

fairly quickly and hadn't been at all hysterical during the planning. He'd honestly been too impressed to give his input.

His brother, on the other hand... Edward shuddered to imagine how Charles, who'd professed at every turn the need to marry a woman of good social standing, would take the news of his surprise marriage. It would take a lot of convincing that Arabella wasn't with child to make him accept the marriage. He knew his brother meant well, but...

Edward remembered his conversation with the Earl of Thorne the day after he'd announced his desire to marry her.

"Arabella is young and trusting, and she falls in love easily." Leonard had warned him. "I don't want her to get hurt. I know she claims she loves you, but I see how much her light has dimmed. If you don't want to marry her, you can say so, and she'd survive it. But if you still choose to marry her, and if you hurt her..."

"I don't intend to," Edward had affirmed, not knowing why he hadn't just taken the out the Earl had thrown him to escape this well of despair he'd fallen in.

He'd decided to stay the course and had finally married her. She'd looked so beautiful in her dress that he'd almost forgotten that what they had wasn't real. If she were really his bride, he'd have been unable to stand still, waiting for her brother to walk her down the aisle.

The sermon had made him feel guilty, for he had put her through an ordeal he could have simply freed her from.

He let out a sigh and rubbed his temples. Why was doing the good thing so bloody difficult?

“Would you be in need of a hot bath too, Your Grace?” his butler asked.

It was only because he'd been used to the man's behavior that he hadn't jumped in surprise.

“No, Aldwin.” Edward waved him off, reading through the papers.

There were reports from the just finished barley and wheat harvest, complaints from farmers at the western edge of the property about the flooded lands, as the river had overflowed due to recent rains, and financial reports about some investments he'd made.

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He arranged them in order of priority and scanned them, but sensing an intense gaze on the side of his face, he looked up. His butler still stood there with a displeased look on his face.

“A penny for your thoughts, Aldwin.” Edward sighed, looking away from him, already suspecting what the man wanted to say. “And don’t bother beating about bush. I can hear you thinking.”

“You shouldn’t be here, Your Grace,” the butler stated, the words rushing out of him as if he’d been waiting so long to say them.

“Oh, and why, pray tell?” Edward asked, leaning back in his seat.

“’Tis your wedding night.”

“And?”

“You should be with your young bride.”

Edward raised an eyebrow at the man. One could almost say he was... concerned.

“Coming from you, who’d thought her a paramour?”

“You’d been gone more than a week with no word, Your Grace,” Aldwin explained, his cheeks flushing.

“Speak freely,” Edward ordered, wanting the conversation to be over and done with

quickly.

He didn't like how the suggestion was starting to appeal to him more than it had before.

"How was anyone to know you'd bring home a wife?"

"Tell me, Aldwin." He glared at his butler. "Do I make a habit of disappearing to dally with paramours?"

"Well, no, but?—"

"But nothing," he cut him off, not caring he was being rude to a man twice his age.

"You do not tell me when I should or shouldn't spend time with my wife. If I need help carrying out my marital duties, I'll let you know."

"I... I..."

"You're dismissed, Aldwin," he ordered, not looking at the man for fear of regretting how he'd spoken to him.

The door closed with a gentle slam, but he knew he had upset him.

"Fuck!" Edward groaned, rubbing a hand over his face.

The truth was, he had considered going to claim his husbandly right from his young wife, but he wondered how Arabella would respond, considering he hadn't spoken two words to her the whole week.

He wasn't a bastard who didn't know when he'd hurt a woman's feelings. She had been braver than him tonight—but then she'd always been brave.

Her words at the ball had haunted his sleeping and waking moments, and he was sorely tempted to give her the night of passion she'd asked for, but he held back.

The lust she ignited within him had made him lose control more than once, and until he built resistance to the charms she didn't know she possessed, he wanted to keep his hands off her tempting body even if it killed him.

Memories of their kiss haunted him now, and his pants tightened as the lust that had nearly driven him to lift her skirts and take her irrespective of how close her family was coiled in his belly.

He wondered whether she'd taste as sweet as the lavender essence she had bathed in, whether he'd be able to last when he sheathed himself in her silken heat.

"Fuck!" he groaned, rising from his seat to pace around the room and downing the rest of his drink.

He could imagine her cries of pleasure as he teased that bud of pleasure between her legs.

He groaned, palming himself as he became unbearably hard in his breeches, working himself to the thought of her coming undone around his fingers, his tongue, his cock.

"Fuck!" He came with a groan into his hands and instantly felt shame at his actions.

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He wiped his hands and downed another glass of Scotch. He looked down at himself, still hard as if he'd not just climaxed.

Go to her, it seemed to say.

"Hell no," he muttered to himself, hoping that hearing the words out loud would help to rid his mind of the foolhardy course it was about to take.

It would be oh so easy to go up the stairs and lose himself in her willing arms, but when the act was done?

Wouldn't she want what all women wanted? She'd claimed she didn't want to marry, but eventually, even she might want children, and that had never been in the cards for him.

Wouldn't she act like other women when desperate to get her way, throwing tantrums and attempting to manipulate him?

The darkness of his thoughts kept him in his seat, staring off into the fire. It would be a damned near painful decision to stay away from his alluring bride, but it was a sacrifice he was willing to make to ensure he had peace.

He took another sip of the dark amber liquid and let it roll around his tongue, savoring its flavors.

It was better this way.

He reclined on the sofa, deciding he'd make do rather than stir up rumors by asking the maids to prepare another chamber for him.

He didn't know when sleep took him, but when he opened his eyes, the sun had just started its ascent over the horizon.

His neck and body felt sore from maintaining the only position he could sleep in on the small sofa, considering how little sleep he'd had since his dreams had been haunted by visions of his wife's curvy frame.

"I hope you do not make a habit of sleeping in your study?" Charles, his brother, asked, looking pointedly at him.

Edward rolled his eyes and stretched, groaning at how his joints protested his choice of bed.

"Good morning to you too, Brother," he greeted once he felt his limbs loosen up. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I awoke to a most surprising piece of information, and I came to ascertain its credibility."

Edward stiffened but righted himself, busying his hands with arranging the papers on his desk. He'd wanted to wait until after breakfast to have this conversation and not a moment sooner.

Discussing this with Charles now would mean he'd have to have the unpleasant conversation twice.

"I know you know what I'm referring to, Edward," Charles accused, his voice strained. "Tell me it isn't true."

Edward sighed. “I can’t.”

“You got married.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Damn.” Charles shook his head, sliding into the seat his brother had just vacated.

“Who is she?”

“She’s the middle sister of the Earl of Thorne...”

“Ridlington’s in-law?”

“Yes.”

Charles frowned deeply, and it was all Edward needed to know that an onslaught of disapproving comments was coming his way.

“I know what you want to say, but don’t.” He held up a hand to ward him off. “She’s not pregnant, and she comes from a good family.”

“But—”

“We’ll discuss this after breakfast.”

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“Fine,” Charles relented. “But you know Mother will give you hell for this.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You have until after breakfast,” Charles warned. “Don’t think you can put off this conversation like everything else.”

Edward said nothing, but it wasn’t until after his brother had left that he realized his hands were clenched into tight fists.

Conversations with his brother had him feeling like Charles should have inherited the duchy. There was always something wrong with any decision he made in his brother’s eyes.

Edward shook off the unpleasant feeling and peered out the window of his study at the now bright morning outside. It was good weather for a ride, and he intended to enjoy his favorite morning activity.

His mind wandered back to his little wife, wondering if she’d be awake now.

What did she like to do in the mornings?

He dreaded facing her, especially after he hadn’t returned to their chamber last night. He hoped she hadn’t thought too much of his absence.

He stared over the lush green field stretching out before him and breathed in the crisp countryside air, his stallion beneath him. To think only a week prior he’d been in the

same spot, albeit freer and not at all worried about a wife.

He would never admit it out loud, but he feared greatly he'd somehow become the one thing he'd never wanted to become by trapping Arabella in something they were both wont to forget.

For now, she might harbor anger against him, but in a few months, she may learn to be indifferent towards him, no longer seeing the need to make things work between them.

He feared greatly he'd dampen the light he'd seen in her that first night. But worse of all, it was too late to make things right.

"We better head back home, Dash," he murmured, running a hand down the side of his stallion.

He returned just as the morning meal was about to be served and rushed his ablutions.

He didn't want Arabella to have to deal with his family on her own, but to his surprise, it seemed she too had a late start to the day. She was standing nervously at the door to the dining room, her hands clenched into fists.

He appreciated the elegant figure she cut in her simple yellow day dress. She was smart not to choose something ostentatious for the first meeting with his family, and once more he appreciated her maturity. She really made a perfect wife, but here she was, wasting it on him.

He shook the thought out of his head and moved to stand beside her, obviously startling her.

"Good morning, Duchess."

Chapter Ten

“Oh, sorry, Your Grace,” a young maid quipped, attempting to step out of the unfamiliar chambers.

Arabella sat up sharply, looking around and then remembering how she’d come to be in the large bed.

Her hands slid to the other side of the bed, and she frowned when she felt the cold sheets. She wondered where her husband had slept.

If he couldn’t bring himself to sleep beside her on their wedding night, how was his family going to accept that they were well and truly married?

“It’s all right...”

“Matilda, Your Grace.”

“Matilda. Where’s His Grace?” Arabella asked, sliding out of bed.

“He’s gone out riding, Your Grace.”

At this hour?

“’Tis a habit,” the maid supplied as though hearing her thoughts.

“All right, thank you.”

Arabella did her morning ablutions and dressed with the help of the maid, who announced that she’d been assigned as her lady’s maid.

She was already late to breakfast, so she hadn’t wasted time deciding on a dress. She’d chosen a pale yellow day dress that she hoped wouldn’t be too loud for a first meeting with his family and had her hair styled in an elegant but simple chignon. A touch of rouge to her cheeks and a dash of perfume later, she was ready. She allowed herself to be led through ornately decorated corridors to the dining room.

Chatter floated through the closed double doors, making her pulse quicken so much that she nearly screamed when Edward suddenly appeared beside her.

“Good morning, Duchess,” he greeted, smiling down at her warmly.

She tried hard not to notice how handsome he looked when he was smiling. The little dimple she’d only noticed once before appeared again, making her heart flutter. She tried to stay angry at him for leaving her alone last night, but it was hard with him being so devastatingly handsome.

Even if her marriage was a sham, his beauty could almost make it worthwhile. He’d dressed this morning almost informally, with his dark hair still damp and curling slightly at his forehead, as if he’d rushed his morning ablutions.

His brow furrowed as a concerned look crossed his features, and she remembered then that she hadn’t greeted him back.

“Good morning, Your Grace.” She curtsied. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did. Thank you.” He nodded. “Did you?”

She wanted to ask him why he hadn’t returned to their chamber last night, but she didn’t think it’d be proper for her to bring up such matters.

Even if she’d been bold enough to ask for a night of passion at that ball, now they were married because of that foolish decision. She didn’t think he’d want anything to do with her, especially seeing that it was her being so improper that got them into this mess.

He’d told her not to blame herself, but it was hard not to do so when the truth was obvious.

“I did. Thank you.”

He nodded, keeping his hands behind his back.

The silence between them was pregnant with so many unspoken words, but how did one converse with their fake spouse?

“We should?—”

“Aren’t we?—”

They shared an awkward laugh, before he gestured for her to go first.

“Aren’t we going to go inside?” she asked softly, mindful of the footmen nearby.

Edward laughed uncomfortably, rubbing the back of his neck. “We are. I just...” he

trailed off. “Give me your arm.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked between them, before giving him her arm, trying hard not to flush at the contact.

He nodded to the footman who opened the doors to admit them.

All chatter stopped the moment they stepped in, three pairs of eyes flicking to them.

Arabella took in the people sitting at the table, and it was hard not to break into a cold sweat at the intense looks they shot her.

She figured it was because of the oddness of the Duke showing up late to breakfast with a strange woman on his arm. She flushed at how improper they must have looked.

“Edward?” An older woman who looked to be the most elegant middle-aged woman she’d ever seen asked. She had to be Edward’s mother. They shared the beautiful dark eyes and proud chin that added a regal air to them. “I didn’t know you’d returned from London.”

“I returned last night.”

“And you brought a friend,” she noted, sounding disgusted with the word.

“Actually—”

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“What is your name?” Harriet Fitzroy, the Dowager Duchess of Soulden, asked, her face expressionless.

One could make the mistake of thinking nothing was wrong, going by her expression, but the palpable tension in the room spoke volumes of her anger.

Of course, the Dowager Duchess thought Arabella was nothing more than a paramour. They’d had no prior knowledge of her. No proper Society lady would be found unannounced and unchaperoned in a man’s house.

“Lady Arabella Burk, sister to the Earl of Thorne.”

Eyebrows around the room shot up. Well, the man Arabella assumed to be Edward’s brother seemed unsurprised by her declaration. The other woman she suspected was his brother’s wife had raised her eyebrows—they nearly disappeared into her hairline. She was a pretty blonde whose cherubic features caused one to stare.

The Dowager Duchess had raised a single eyebrow, but the rest of her face was still blank.

“The Thorne seat,” she stated. “That is a beautiful property. I haven’t visited in years.”

Arabella shifted her weight from one foot to the other, waiting to be asked to sit.

“Mother—”

“Edward, I do not appreciate you bringing your... friends to our home. Your family seat.”

Arabella watched, impressed by the older woman’s ability to convey her displeasure through veiled words. This was a skill only noblewomen with the highest training in decorum could pull off.

“Mother, it’s not what you think,” Edward argued, sounding like he was holding back a laugh.

“Oh. So I am to assume she’s not your paramour?”

“She is not.” He placed a hand on the small of Arabella’s back, and it took everything in her not to shiver at the contact. “She is my wife. I present to you Arabella Fitzroy, the Duchess of Soulden.”

This time, his mother’s eyebrows rose to her hairline. “You got married?!”

“Yes.”

How he kept his tone even, Arabella didn’t know. She felt like a cow at an auction, with the way they were staring at her.

“Why?”

Arabella looked at her husband, wondering what explanation he’d give his family.

“Why not? You’ve wanted me to marry for the last few years.”

“Yes, and I expected that if you did, I’d at least be informed.”

“Is she expecting?” his sister-in-law asked.

At her question, his mother gasped.

“No,” Edward almost snapped.

His family let out a collective sigh of relief.

“Well then, what was the need for the rushed wedding?”

“I fell in love.”

This time, the eyebrows of all three occupants disappeared into their hairlines.

“Arabella stole my heart with her smile a few months ago, and I knew I couldn’t wait to make her my wife.”

“You courted her for months?”

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“No. I courted her for only a week, but I’ve been watching her from afar for months,” he lied.

“Well...”

“Mother, Arabella is not only beautiful, but she is compassionate, funny, smart, well-read and most importantly, she isn’t afraid to tell me exactly what she is thinking.”

Arabella reddened at that. One didn’t describe a proper, well-bred lady as one who spoke her mind.

“It was hard for me to wait and court her for months when my heart already knew she was the one for me.” He took her hand in his. “I love Arabella too much to be parted from her a minute longer.”

His family stared at him as if he were a strange creature they’d never seen before, but she couldn’t blame them. His words were so sweet that she could almost have believed them herself.

After a long minute, his mother smiled.

“I see she has you smitten.” She smiled at Arabella. “Come. Sit. I look forward to getting to know the woman who has stolen my son’s heart.”

Arabella curtsied and took a seat to the left of Edward’s sister-in-law while he took his place at the head of the table.

“I’m Harriet Fitzroy, Edward’s mother, and I welcome you to our home.”

“I thank you.”

“I’m Emily. His sister-in-law.” The angel to her right smiled. “I have to admit, Edward, you have a good taste.”

Arabella blushed deeply.

The footmen placed a plate of eggs, toast, butter, bacon and blueberry jam in front of her, and she was grateful for the heavy spread. She had barely eaten the previous day and was starting to feel light-headed.

Conversation flowed around the table as she ate, chiming in when questions were directed at her, but she was content just watching.

She noticed Edward speaking with his brother out of the corner of her eye, and she could tell he didn’t want to be there if his glower was anything to go by.

She wondered if she were the subject of their conversation. Her attention was drawn back to the Dowager Duchess and her sister-in-law when they rose from their seats.

“Come, Arabella.” Emily smiled. “You simply must meet the children.”

Children?

“I must warn you, they can be heathenish, but they’re the absolute sweetest,” Emily gushed. “I should know. I’m their mother.”

Arabella didn’t know she’d been holding her breath until Emily had said that. She didn’t want to think Edward had kept something as important as having children from

her.

Noise met them in the hallway before she even got to the room she assumed was the playroom.

The door opened, and she confirmed that it was exactly that. The nannies looked downright worse for wear, and it took everything in her not to laugh.

“Beatrice. Noah,” Emily called. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

The children rushed over to their mother, before hiding their faces in her skirts.

Emily giggled, hugging them to herself, sending a pang through Arabella.

Would she and Edward ever have children of their own?

She turned away from the sweet display to compose herself and turned back, trying to bury the thoughts. But it was hard with the two little ones trying to talk over themselves as they explained something to their mother.

“We will go to the gardens so that you’ll show me this bird, but before then I want you guys to meet someone.”

The children looked at Arabella then, matching curious expressions on their faces, and she couldn’t help but smile. They were absolutely adorable.

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The girl seemed to be older and was absolutely beautiful, having her mother's cherubic features. The boy had his father's dark coloring, although had his mother's eyes. He smiled, and a dimple popped into his cheek on one side. Arabella couldn't help but think of her own husband.

"Arabella, these are my children, Beatrice and Noah," Emily announced. "Beatrice is seven, and Noah is five..."

"Six in winter," Noah added.

"Yes. Six in winter." She laughed. "Bea, Noah, this is your aunt Arabella, Uncle Edward's Duchess."

"Good day." Arabella smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you two."

The two shared a look and then Beatrice launched herself at her. Arabella had barely been able to keep them from tumbling to the floor.

"Bea, be careful!" Emily scolded.

Beatrice didn't answer but started chattering excitedly.

"Do you like tea parties? I have so many pretty dresses! Can I brush your hair? I'm very good at styling hair. Will you come play with us in the garden?"

The questions flowed out of her incessantly—it was hard to keep up with them.

Arabella noticed then that Noah was still hiding in his mother's skirt, a hot blush on his cheeks.

"Don't be shy, Noah," Emily cooed. "Go greet your new aunt."

Arabella caught his eye, and he turned away again, blushing furiously.

"I can't," he cried.

"Why not?" Emily asked, giving Arabella a wink.

"She's so pretty."

Emily laughed, pushing him towards her. "That's exactly why you should talk to her."

Arabella crouched down, trying to meet the boy's eyes. "Good day, Noah." She smiled. "You think I'm pretty?"

He nodded shyly, digging his foot into the ground.

"I think you're pretty handsome too." She ruffled his hair. "Want to go play?"

"But I asked you to play first!" Beatrice cried.

"All of us can play together," Arabella assured them. "I have so many games to teach you. The first person that makes it the garden gets a secret prize."

The children dashed off excitedly.

It was only then that she stood up again, catching Emily's eyes.

“You’re a natural with them.” Emily smiled. “You’ll be a good mother.”

The sharp pang returned, but Arabella buried it.

“Come. We’d better head to the gardens quickly before they hurt themselves. And you can tell me all about how you and my brother-in-law met.”

Arabella’s eyes widened as she tried to think up a story that matched what Edward had said in the dining room.

They spotted the children already running their nannies ragged in the gardens and took a seat under the shade of an orange tree.

“How did you two meet?” Emily asked, smiling expectantly.

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“It was at a ball my brother threw in our home, and it had been love at first sight.” Arabella decided to be as true as possible. She already felt poorly because of the lies he’d told his family and, by extension, the lies she had told her own family. “He’d been so handsome and funny...”

“Edward? Funny?” Emily asked incredulously. “I’m sorry, but funny is not a word I’d use to describe my brother-in-law. He’s always so serious.”

Didn’t she know it? But Arabella would never say that.

“He was. It wasn’t a hard decision to marry him when he’d proposed.” She smiled.

“I’m very happy you’re his wife, Arabella,” Emily said all too seriously. “Be patient with him, all right?”

Arabella wondered then if the woman knew something but decided against asking. She nodded.

“Good.” Emily squeezed her hand. “Let’s put the nannies out of their misery and tackle my heathens.”

They shared a laugh and went to wrangle the children, who’d started a game of tag.

By the time lunch rolled around, Arabella was fatigued, and not long after, she felt exhausted and her feet were killing her. But the children were making plans to play more games.

Sometime after lunch, their mother had disappeared, so she'd had to handle them all alone, and now she craved alone time more than anything.

She pounced on the perfect opportunity as soon as she saw Edward.

"Let's play a new game," she whispered to the little ones. She pulled them to the other side of the tree and crouched down. "Let's try to scare Uncle Edward."

The two giggled, but she put her fingers to her lips.

She spotted Edward turning into the garden and gave the two her signal, sitting back to watch them work.

When they launched themselves at him, she laughed.

His eyes found hers while he had Noah in his arms, and she couldn't help how fast her heart beat in her chest.

His eyes were bright, and he had the biggest smile on his face. Bigger than she'd ever seen him wear.

He truly was unfairly handsome.

Seeing him with the children in his arms made the pang she'd felt earlier return, and now more than ever she wanted to be alone.

"Darling," she called to him, startling him.

"Ara mine," he answered when he caught himself.

"How—"

“How—”

They laughed again as they interrupted each other. He watched her once their laughter subsided, and she had to put a hand on her chest to calm her racing heart.

“Are you two about to kiss?” Beatrice asked suddenly.

The two of them started and turned to look at the two heathens, who were smiling brightly.

“No, little one. Although if your auntie does kiss me, I won’t mind.” Edward smiled, patting her head.

Arabella knew he was joking, but her silly heart somehow didn’t seem to and beat even faster.

“Uncle Eddie, will you come play with us?” Noah asked suddenly. “Auntie Ara wanted to teach us a new game.”

Arabella’s eyebrows rose in panick as her eyes met her husband’s.

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Help me, she mouthed.

Edward smiled, winking at her. “All right. I’ll play with you.”

Damn you!

She glared at him.

“But I heard Cook was baking cookies and...”

The children ran off before he finished, and he laughed.

Arabella let out a sigh of relief and looked at him then. “Thank you.”

“You lasted far longer than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

She blushed at the praise. “I barely did.” She laughed nervously. “I thought I was going to have to pretend to faint.”

“It was fortuitous I came around, then.”

“Indeed.”

He smiled.

They settled into a comfortable silence that she wasn’t in a hurry to fill.

“How did your day go?” he asked suddenly.

“Good, surprisingly,” she answered sincerely. “You were right about your family.”

“So, what did you like about my family?”

“Your mother is the absolute sweetest, and she has the best stories.”

“What stories did she tell you?”

Arabella smiled mischievously. “She told me about the time you went to swim in the fountain, naked, in the middle of a garden party she hosted.”

He groaned as she laughed.

“You must have been the most adorable five-year-old.”

“I was. I made a few ladies faint that day.”

They shared a laugh.

“I can imagine how proud you must have felt.”

“Oh, I was,” he answered proudly. “I stood with my legs apart on the fountain, proudly showing off the family jewels.”

“Oh God.”

“Have you taken a turn round the gardens?”

“Not yet.”

He held out his arm to her, which she took.

Edward was very knowledgeable of the flora and fauna in the garden and made the conversation light and fun. She was surprised by the charming side he'd shown her.

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“I guess I better escort you inside so you can dress for the evening meal.”

Had that much time passed? She hadn't even noticed.

“Are you sure you aren't trying to make sure I don't run away?” Arabella teased as they fell into step with each other.

If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

“Why would I need to, when you're in love with me?”

She laughed then, unable to make it as graceful as she could.

He smiled down at her, seemingly enjoying her amusement.

“How did you find spending time with my family?” he asked, concern evident in his words.

She smiled at him. He'd been right about his family. She'd found friendship in Emily and warmth from her mother-in-law and the children. She had yet to converse with Charles, but overall, she'd had a good day, and she told him as much.

Edward nodded and came to a stop as the butler opened the door. “I have some matters to attend to, but I'll see you at dinner.”

“All right.” She nodded. “Do be careful.”

She didn't know why she'd added that, but he nodded, and she turned to head inside, feeling warm.

They'd just had a conversation, and it had been... pleasant. She didn't know how to feel.

She admired the elegant oil paintings lining the hallways as she tried to make her way back to her room.

She rounded a corner, noticing she'd stepped into an unfamiliar hall with no maid or footmen about.

She turned to head back the way she'd come, but upon hearing a noise up ahead, she stepped forward to see if she could find someone to help her back to her room.

When she stepped into the next hall, she couldn't help the gasp that escaped her lips.

She spotted a couple in an embrace so passionate that she flushed from head to toe.

She turned away as they pulled apart.

"I'm sorry!" she blurted out as she saw their panicked attempts to right themselves.

"It's all right," she heard the woman say.

Arabella turned then and took in the couple. The woman looked to be a noble, but the man was dressed in livery.

"It's His Grace's wife," Arabella heard the footman tell the woman.

The woman's eyes widened as she looked at Arabella, but then she schooled her

features into a neutral mask.

“Are you lost, Your Grace?” she asked.

Arabella nodded.

“I’ll help you get back.”

Arabella nodded again but said nothing.

“I’m Joana,” the lady said when she fell into step with her.

Arabella didn’t know what to say.

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“We were all very surprised the Duke got married so quickly. We didn’t think...” the lady trailed off. “I must admit, I can see what he saw in you. You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

Arabella wondered who the woman was. If she were a maid, she’d understand why Edward hadn’t said anything about her, but she wasn’t dressed as a servant, so Arabella wondered who she was and asked as much.

“I’m the Duke’s ward,” Joana answered. “My parents died in an accident when I was young, and he took me in. We basically grew up together and have been as thick as thieves.”

Arabella couldn’t help the rush of jealousy that flared within her then. She couldn’t help but admit that Joana was a beauty, and she wondered why Edward had never married her, since they’d known each other so long.

He hadn’t even mentioned her.

They stepped into familiar territory, and she thanked Joana.

“You’re welcome.” Joana smiled, although she looked like she had something more to say. “I want to ask you for a favor.”

Arabella nodded.

“Would you mind...”

She understood immediately what Joana was asking.

“I won’t say a word.”

“Thank you,” Joana breathed. “I look forward to seeing you at dinner.”

“I look forward to seeing you too.” Arabella smiled at her and then bid her a good day.

Once she was safely in her chamber, she couldn’t help but wonder why Edward hadn’t said anything about his ward. Perhaps he’d forgotten, since Joana hadn’t come down for breakfast, and hoped he’d introduce them later on.

Arabella noted how beautiful Joana was and felt a twinge of jealousy as she wondered just how close she and Edward had been. Joana walked more elegantly than even Sarah, who had the prettiest smile and who Arabella had always looked up to.

She wondered still why Joana was kissing a footman when she looked beautiful enough to have any man she wanted.

She wondered what Edward would say if he got word of that but shook her head. He might be a gentleman, but he looked the protective sort.

She thought back to the conversation they had earlier, and she smiled. She’d felt so warm that she’d almost wanted to ask that they prolong the conversation.

Perhaps if they could continue as they had this afternoon, their marriage would work out well.

She shook the thought out of her head. Nothing good could come from expecting that

he felt the same way about their situation. Just because they had one nice conversation didn't mean that their marriage would work.

Feeling tired after the long day she had, she decided to skip dinner and rest.

ChapterEleven

“Charles, please...” Edward tried to beg off the conversation he was having with his brother.

He thought the matter had been settled days ago, when they'd discussed it after breakfast, but it seemed his brother was hell-bent on irritating him.

“You know why I do what I do, Edward,” Charles went on. “Your marriage has caused an uproar among the ton.”

“Of course it would!” Edward yelled, beside himself with anger. “When they have nothing more to do than gossip and drink tea. I beg you to leave my wife out of?—”

“I cannot, Edward. Can't you see you've made a big mistake by marrying beneath your rank?” Charles argued. “You should have?—”

“Well, I'm married to her now, aren't I? Would you have me divorce her so early in our marriage? Is that what you want? Would that not worsen the uproar you are so scared of?”

“Brother, you need to?—”

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“No. I’ve had enough of you nitpicking on everything I do.” Edward glared at him. “You want me to say that I’ve made mistake. I don’t know what you stand to gain from it, but I don’t see my wife that way. You’re my brother, and if the ton have nothing positive to say, you should have my back and tell them exactly where they should shove their opinions.”

“I do have your back. Don’t accuse me of not caring about my family.”

“You do care, but your actions are misplaced.” Edward rose from his seat, already tired. He was sick and tired of letting his brother and people who had nothing better to do with their time pick on every decision he’d made. “You do nothing but harp on me, when you should be working with me. Yes, her family may be ranked beneath us, but I have nothing but respect for the Earl of Thorne.”

“You can’t marry just because you respect her family.”

“Yes. But a man capable of building up his family’s fortune in such little time shows an ambition that could be beneficial.”

“He had help from Ridlington.”

Edward shook his head. His younger brother was hell-bent on seeing only the disadvantages of the marriage, just as he had chosen to do with everything else Edward had done. Edward was fed up with trying to prove himself worthy.

“He made something of himself from nothing, and not just sitting around, twiddling his thumbs and thinking of the next best bit of gossip to spread. That’s more than I

can say for half the ton. Perhaps they should take a page from his book.”

Charles frowned, just like he did at the end of every argument they’d had—and they’d had many. It hadn’t been so during their childhood, but since their time at Oxford, Charles had taken it upon himself to judge every decision Edward made and declare him unworthy.

He’d developed an unhealthy fear of the ruination of the family name and had since been a thorn in Edward’s side.

“I do hope she is worth it,” Charles spat out, his balled fists shaking.

Edward didn’t answer but stormed out of his study. He didn’t want to admit he didn’t know the answer to that question.

He thought back to their easy conversation the day she’d met his family and how for that brief moment in time, it had felt like they were really married. Like they could actually come to love each other if they tried.

He slowed down and breathed deeply, his eyes finally taking in the familiar corridor. He was walking the familiar route to the secret gardens, a place he usually sought solace in after arguing with Charles.

A part of him wanted to seek out Arabella and to just bask in her easy warmth. She’d been so much braver than him and had always gone after what she wanted, but he...

He remembered she’d skipped breakfast today and decided to go see if she had recovered. He quickened his steps, remembering there was a secret passage around there leading down to the kitchens. He’d stop by and get her something light to snack on or perhaps dessert. He had noted that she had a sweet tooth—she’d admitted as much to his mother.

As if summoning her by his thoughts, he heard her familiar laugh ahead of him. He shook the thought that she'd somehow been able to find her way to the gardens alone, but as he neared, he heard her voice clearly.

He rounded the corner and stepped back in shock at the sight in front of him.

Arabella was standing with her head close to a footman's, speaking about something that had her laughing.

As she put a hand on the footman's arm, red danced in Edward's eyes so much that he didn't think before he emerged from his hiding place.

They whipped around, startled to see him, but then Arabella gave him a bright smile that almost made him stumble.

Edward shook his head and walked on, undeterred. She wouldn't use her smile to get out of the compromising situation he had found her in.

Was this a habit of hers? Luring men into trysts and then playing innocent when caught?

"Yo—Edward."

"Duchess."

His eyes darted from her to the footman, anger filling him the longer he looked. The footman was dashing handsome, even if he hated to admit it.

"What brings you down here at this time?" Arabella asked, still smiling at him.

She wasn't showing an ounce of shame at the impropriety of her behavior, and it was

grating on his nerves. The footman, on the other hand, had the decency to tremble where he stood.

“Providence,” Edward answered.

“Oh.”

“Indeed,” he said calmly.

“Well, I was going for a stroll through the secret gardens.” She smiled excitedly. “I heard it’s most magical this time of day.”

“Indeed?” Edward asked. “And where did you obtain such information?”

“Oh, I mentioned it to Peter, and he offered to show me the way.”

“Did he?” he asked slowly, glaring harder at the footman. “That’s very kind of him.”

“It seems you were on your way there, too. Would you?—”

“May I have a word with you, wife?” Edward bit out, not caring that her smile turned into a dark frown. “Alone.”

“Peter, leave us,” Arabella told the footman, who looked hesitant to leave.

Edward’s anger flared even harder when she nodded, as if reassuring the footman that she was fine.

Edward wasn’t sure how, but he was surprised by how much he was able to refrain from strangling him, even more by how he waited till he was out of earshot to finally speak his mind.

“Do you know the level of impropriety you just attained by walking unchaperoned with a man towards a secluded part of the castle?” he growled. “If it had been anyone

else, do you know what they would have said? Arabella, you should have known better.”

“I don’t understand you, Edward.” She frowned. “He was just showing me to the gardens. I’m still unfamiliar with?—”

“That’s not what it looked like from where I was standing. To anyone else, it almost looked like you two were heading for a tryst in the?—”

“Don’t insult me, Edward.” Arabella’s eyes flashed.

“I’m not.”

“You are, by suggesting that I would... This isn’t... I would never,” she protested. “Just because I made that mistake with you doesn’t mean I’m used to doing it. Is that what you think of me?”

“Arabella—”

“No. It makes sense you would.” Her lips quivered, and tears welled up in her eyes, making his heart clench. She let out a mocking laugh. “Of course, you would. I behaved like a?—”

“Don’t say it,” he warned, sighing. “I won’t deny that I was worried, but... why were you standing so close to him? He’s a footman. Even if you weren’t doing anything inappropriate, he could have hurt you.”

He knew from observing her in her family home that she bonded with servants, but he couldn’t help but warn her of how dangerous it could be.

Her eyes widened, and she looked away, unable to meet his eyes, telling him she was

trying to hide something.

“He... he was just telling me the story of the garden.” Her eyes were still downcast, and she wrung her hands. “We should get going now,” she whispered. “I want to see the roses.”

He wrapped a hand around her arm when she turned to leave. “Arabella.” His tone brooked no argument. “What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything?” she answered, even though it sounded more like a question. “Why would you think I’m hiding something?”

He sighed, pulling her close to him. “Ara mine, you’re not a very good liar.”

She scrunched up her nose and folded her hands. “I know it’s not a skill to brag about, but what makes you say so?”

“Your eyes didn’t meet mine, you were sweating and flushed, you were wringing your hands, and you’re asking me this question.”

Arabella looked like she wanted to argue but thought it over, uncrossing and crossing her arms.

“Arabella, help me to trust you,” he coaxed. It was obvious she was having trouble keeping up her lie, as he could basically see the wheels turning in her head. “It’s strange when I see my wife standing so close to another man, and now she’s refusing to tell me what they were discussing.”

She turned away, groaning, then straightened, as if bracing for a fight.

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“Do you promise that no word of this conversation will cross this...” She looked around them, as if expecting someone to be spying on them. “Wait.”

She tugged at his hand, surprising him with her strength, and tried to lead him somewhere.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to get us somewhere private so we could talk.”

Edward didn’t like the way lust shot through him at the word private, which turned from a furnace to a raging fire when she led him into a small room and shut them in the dimly lit space.

As she closed the door behind them, her lavender scent became more prominent and teased his senses. If she touched him again, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep himself from taking her against the wall.

“Edward?” Her voice was small, as if she finally realized what she’d done.

“I’m here, love.”

“I...” she stammered out.

“Yes?”

“I... Do you promise not to repeat a word of what I tell you?”

He smiled at how she tried to defuse the tension that was building between them.

“I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She giggled. “I found him in a compromising position, and he wanted me to keep it a secret.”

Oh?

“What compromising position?” Edward asked, wanting clarity.

He knew several of his servants had relations with one another and had come upon some of them in compromising positions when he wandered the halls too late at night. He certainly hoped she hadn’t seen something similar.

“I saw him...” She blushed. “Kissing someone.”

He didn’t know he’d been holding his breath until he heard her answer.

“Oh.”

“Indeed.” She shuddered.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“I didn’t mind so much...” She paused, as if realizing what she said. “I mean?—”

“It’s all right. There’s no need to explain.” Edward laughed. “Do you still want to see the gardens?”

She nodded excitedly.

“After you.”

She opened the door and bounced on her heels excitedly. “I heard there are marigolds and peonies, too.”

He nodded, but before he could respond, Beatrice and Noah ran up to them.

“Uncle Eddie! Auntie Ara!” they cried.

“Good afternoon, little ones,” Arabella greeted, crouching down to ruffle their hair.

“How are you today?”

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“Auntie Ara, you said you’d teach us a new game today,” Beatrice chirped. “Mother and Grandmother said they’re too busy to play today.”

Edward noticed Arabella visibly pale, and her eyes darted to him, as if begging for help.

“I did, didn’t I?” She laughed nervously.

“Yes, and we brought out the cards too. So we have a whole day to play.”

Arabella paled even further.

Edward shot her a mischievous smile. “Auntie Ara is very good at games, isn’t she?”

The children nodded.

“Edward,” she whispered pleadingly.

“It’s too sad, though.”

“What is?” Beatrice asked, pouting.

“Auntie Ara won’t be able to play with you today.”

“Why not?”

“Because Auntie Ara and I have plans to visit the village.”

“Oooh. Can we come with you?” Noah asked excitedly. “I promise I’ll be very good.”

“No. This time it’s just the two of us,” Edward announced.

Arabella’s smile was a little too bright in the face of the children’s disappointment, but he felt ecstatic that he was able to make her happy.

“Why, Uncle Eddie?”

“Because I want to spend time with my wife.” He smiled, pulling her to his side and enjoying how she gasped.

“Are you going to kiss?” Beatrice asked, frowning.

“Don’t kiss her, Uncle Eddie,” Noah protested. “Auntie Ara is mine.”

“But she is my wife.”

“I… I want to marry her.” The five-year-old pouted.

“You can’t marry her because she’s already married,” Edward explained. “When you’re my age, you’ll find a?—”

Noah ran off, crying, before Edward could finish. His sister went after him.

“Well…”

A melodic laugh escaped Arabella’s lips, making his chest swell with pride that he’d been able to amuse her. He was even more stunned when she threw herself at him.

“I thought I would probably go to bed with a headache again,” she cried against his chest. “I love them, but I only have so much energy.”

“I know,” he answered, not knowing what else to say with her still wrapped around him like that.

The feeling of her lush breasts pressed against his chest had his heart racing as blood pumped to his nether regions. He felt himself swell with desire and prayed she didn’t feel it against her belly. He could tell her embrace had been purely innocent, but he was only a man. He was terribly attracted to her and couldn’t control himself around her.

“Ara mine...” he whispered.

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She gasped and stepped back from him, putting some distance between them.

“I... I apologize. I don’t know what came over me.” She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “I was just so happy and relieved and needed a hug.”

He laughed softly. “It is all right.” He smiled. “Feel free to use me any time.”

Her eyes widened, and a hot blush bloomed in her cheeks. It was only then Edward realized the double meaning in his words.

He coughed into his hands awkwardly and held out his arm to her.

“I was serious about taking you to see the village,” he told her when she took his arm. He could feel her tense up at first, but when she relaxed, he smiled. “I heard you didn’t come down for breakfast, and I was coming to see if you were all right.”

He didn’t know why he admitted his concern for her health, but she’d already broken the ice between them, and it had warmed to a considerably tepid state that scared and excited him in equal measure.

Arabella looked as shocked as he’d expected, but her smile widened, and he couldn’t help but think she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

“I am well now,” she answered. “I had a slight headache when I woke up, but I feel better now. Your concern is much appreciated.”

He nodded, not knowing how to respond.

“I do hope you’re wearing comfortable shoes?” he asked. “We’ll be walking to the village.”

She shot him a mischievous half-smile that had him imagining her sending him that same look as she proceeded to wreak havoc on his senses with her lush mouth. He shook the vision out of his head.

“I’m always prepared, husband.”

Chapter Twelve

“I’m always prepared, husband,” Arabella told him, feeling comfortable enough to tease him.

He’d shocked and delighted her with his concern for her health, and now she felt the need to return the favor.

“Is that so?” he asked, a lopsided smile touching his lips.

God. She groaned inwardly. He was unfairly handsome.

How was a lady to keep her wits about her when he went around, looking the way he did?

Today he looked less put together than he had usually looked in her family home, with his hair a wild array of curls that she itched to run her hands through. He was sporting a five o’clock shadow that gave a rugged edge to his dark looks. She bit her lip as she eyed the exposed skin at his collar, as he’d forgone the cravat. Her eyes took in his toned arms and broad shoulders, which were accentuated by his close-fitting linen shirt.

Her eyes met his, and she saw a knowing gleam in them that had her blushing as they walked.

“Did you ask a question, Edward?” she asked.

“Are we back to first names now, wife?” he teased.

She didn’t feign ignorance.

“Husband, did you ask a question?”

“I did, indeed.” He rubbed his chin. “I asked how you were settling in, so far. Have you written to your sisters yet?”

Guilt settled in her stomach as she realized she’d been so caught up in settling into her new life with Edward’s family that she had forgotten her family.

“I haven’t.” She bit her lip. “Would you mind if we get parchment and ink? I must write once we return. Oh, how they must have worried.”

“I am sure they’re thinking you are simply enjoying marital bliss.”

She knew he was only trying to reassure her and decided not to dampen the mood. She was already feeling much better from the exercise.

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The sun was warm on her face and neck, and the air was fragrant with blooming flowers. She loved spring among all the seasons.

“Lavender becomes you,” Edward commented suddenly.

“What?” she asked, not sure she had heard him correctly.

“I said lavender becomes you.” He looked almost boyish in the way he reddened.

She blushed at the compliment but asked how he knew the exact shade of purple she’d worn.

“My mother decided to punish the fates for not giving her a daughter and dragged Charles and me with her whenever she went shopping,” he explained, shuddering. “Before then, my knowledge of colors had been severely lacking.”

Arabella laughed and tried to imagine little Edward in a shop, looking at fabrics.

“How old were you back then?” she asked.

“Ten, and Charles was eight.”

“Oh God.” She laughed. “You must have been traumatized.”

“I was for the first few years, but when I saw it made me popular with the ladies, I started to pay more attention.”

Arabella felt a spike of jealousy at his words but pushed the feeling aside. She couldn't have expected him to stay celibate all his life. He was a man, and society didn't exactly have the same expectations for him.

She slapped his arm playfully. "You're such a cad."

"I was young then." He laughed. "Did you never have any wanton moments? Perhaps a stable boy you kissed in your teenage years?"

She wrinkled her nose and slapped his arm again. "I was a prim and proper little girl," she said proudly. "There was no kissing for me."

"Anyway, everything changed when Charles and I went to Oxford," he continued.

A dark look crossed his face then, and he paused.

"Are you all right?" Arabella asked, squeezing his arm.

He nodded but said nothing.

She decided not to pry but was already missing the warmth his conversation brought.

"If it's any consolation, I absolutely hated fabric shopping and dress fittings."

His eyebrows dipped in a questioning look. "But you're a woman," he stated. "How old were you?"

"Twelve or thirteen," she answered. "I thought them pointless and entirely painful. There were so many pins."

"What would you rather you did?"

“Riding.”

He stumbled and nearly took her down with him.

“You like horses?” he asked, coughing awkwardly into his hand.

“Absolutely,” she chirped. “There’s nothing quite like feeling the wind in your hair.”

It had been so long that she missed it dearly. She hated that she had to leave her mare, Missy, behind, but it was one of many prices she had to pay for her actions.

“We should go together tomorrow,” Edward suggested. “I’ll have a mare prepared for you.”

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“I’d love that,” she told him, meaning it.

They finally neared the village, and before they’d gone in, the cries of excited children met her ears.

“His Grace is here!” they cried, running towards them.

“Your Grace!” they cried, all trying to hug Edward.

“Good afternoon, little ones!” He smiled at them, picking up a little girl with cute pigtails. “How do you do, Bessie?”

“I am well, Your Grace.” She smiled, handing him a small flower. “Mother said ye’d be coming today, so I picked this for you.”

“It’s as beautiful as you,” he told her, placing the flower behind her ear.

The little girl reddened and buried her face in his shoulders..

Arabella was struck again with the fact that they would never have a little one of their own, that Edward would never get to experience this sort of happiness if she kept herself tied to him.

He turned to her then, with a smile brighter than anything she’d ever seen, which faltered at the look on her face. She shook her head to ease his concern and stepped closer.

“You look very pretty, Bessie.” She smiled at the little girl.

“Thank you, My Lady.” Bessie blushed. “You’re also very pretty. Are you a princess?”

“No.” Arabella shook her head.

“Why not?” Bessie asked, frowning. “You look like a princess.”

“It takes more than that to be a princess, love.”

“Oh?”

“Mhmm.” Arabella feigned a serious look. “I would have to marry a prince.”

“If you marry His Grace, will you be a princess?”

She pretended to consider it and nodded. “Yes.”

“Hmm. We are supposed to marry when I am old enough.”

“Oh, really?”

“Indeed. My father told me so.”

“I am happy for you, then. Perhaps I’ll wear my pretty purple dress to your wedding.”

“Don’t you want to be a princess?”

“I do.”

“Then I will allow you to marry him.”

Arabella bit back a laugh. “You are far too kind, Bessie.”

“You are welcome.” Bessie wiggled free of Edward’s arms and came to take her hand. “Come and meet my mother. She makes the best apple pies.”

“We’ll come soon, dear one. Run along now.” Edward shooed them off. “I asked the baker to make you all cookies.”

Cries of joy arose as tiny feet rushed towards the center of the village.

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“Someone’s very possessive of you, Your Grace,” Arabella teased.

“I’m surprised she allowed you to marry me.” He laughed.

“What can I say?” Arabella smiled. “I have my way with children.”

“You seem to have stolen Noah’s heart,” he commented.

“I know. He’s declared his love for me several times.”

“You must enjoy it.”

“I do.” She laughed.

“Indeed, you do.” He shook his head. “Come. There’s a lot you have to see.”

He took her arm and proceeded to show her around the village, pointing out his favorite spots. Several villagers stopped to pay them compliments about the pretty couple they made, and she blushed as he introduced her as his wife.

He also took her with him when he went to check on the farmers at the edge of the village that had been affected by the flood. She admired the way he walked and how everyone seemed to lean in to hear what he had to say. He seemed to care deeply for his people.

The villagers presented them with wedding gifts, and while the men pulled Edward to the side, a couple of villagewomen pulled Arabella to the other side and handed her a

small package.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s a tea that helps keep things sweet for His Grace,” the first villagewoman, a pretty brunette, answered.

“Things?” Arabella asked.

“It makes you burn hot with desire for him,” the second one answered, sporting a naughty grin.

Arabella reddened and tried to look away, but her eyes met Edward’s, and her blush deepened further.

“Ye still blush like a maiden,” the first woman commented.

“His Grace probably wants to ease her into it.” The second one laughed.

“Don’t be so innocent in the bedroom, Your Grace,” the first woman advised. “Men always say they want a prim and proper lady, but that’s only outside the bedroom.”

“Here, here,” the second woman assented.

“You have to treat him like a…”

“And what are you all teaching my wife?” Edward asked, approaching them.

“Nothing, Your Grace,” they villagewomen chorused, flashing cherubic smiles.

He shot Arabella a lopsided grin and winked at her.

“Are you all doing well?” he asked them. “Mrs. Dougherty, how are Mara and Michael?”

“They’re doing better, Your Grace,” the first woman answered. “The doctor said they’d be as right as rain in a couple of days.”

“You’re welcome.” He nodded. “Would you all be so kind as to let me borrow my wife?”

“You can have her, Your Grace.” Mrs. Dougherty nudged Arabella towards him. “You have a good eye.”

He waved them goodbye and hurriedly led her away.

“Thank you,” Arabella whispered.

“You’re welcome.”

Edward led her to a trinket shop and went inside to discuss something with the owner.

She peered at items from even medieval times in awe. She had a secret love of history, and now she felt as if she had traveled back in time.

She spotted a pretty silver necklace made of ornately twisted silver wire that had a perfectly cut sapphire pendant. There were matching earrings and a bracelet. She stepped closer, her hands skimming the velvet lining its display case.

“You have a good eye,” Edward said suddenly from behind her, startling her.

She yelped and then tried to steady her breathing. “Indeed?” she asked.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the owner chimed in.

“It is a beautiful piece.” She nodded.

“And it’s yours.” Edward smiled softly. “I just went in to finalize the purchase. I was hoping to surprise you, but it seems we have similar tastes.”

Arabella was speechless.

“Edward, it’s too much.” She shook her head. “I can’t accept it.”

“It is not even enough.” He smiled. “Tell her the story behind it, Titus.”

“That pendant was first commissioned by a Scottish laird for his bride. He said the stones reminded him of her eyes, as that had been the first thing he’d fallen in love with when he saw her.”

“As it was for me.” Edward nodded. “It’s a late wedding gift from me to you.”

Arabella wished she could deny it, but her heart fluttered at his words, even though she knew they weren’t true.

She nodded, unable to say anything. Not even when he’d bought her a slice of the most amazing apple pie she’d ever tasted or even when he’d gotten her chocolate.

She kept reminding herself that it was all going to end in a couple of months, but a large part of her had already warmed up so much to him that she feared she’d be hurt badly when the time finally came.

Sensing her mood, Edward asked if she wanted to head back, and she nodded.

“Should I get us horses?” he asked, concerned. “If you aren’t strong enough to make the walk back, it’s all right.”

She shook her head. “I need the exercise.”

“All right. I’ll have them deliver our purchases to the castle, so you can walk unencumbered.”

She nodded. His thoughtfulness warmed her.

She watched him speak with one of the townsmen and then walk up to her all tall, lithe and elegant. Women turned to stare at him as he walked, and men stood straighter as he passed them.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back.

He frowned. “Are you sure you’re all right to walk back home?”

Home.

Her tears spilled over, startling him.

He put his arms around her, pulling her into him, and led her to a bench just outside the village, not saying anything as she cried. She cried even harder because he was being so sweet.

Why did he have to be such a proper gentleman?

When her tears finally stopped, she pulled back, wiping her cheeks and eyes, unable to meet his eyes.

“Use this.”

She turned to see he was handing her a handkerchief.

“Thank you,” she muttered, wiping her face and hands.

They sat in a companionable silence she was too scared to break.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked finally.

“Yes,” she answered thickly. “I feel much better. But...”

Edward turned to look at her, making the conversation harder than it should have been.

“I am having trouble continuing our charade,” Arabella began, unable to think of anything better to say. “I sit with your family at breakfast and see the way they smile at me, the way they’ve taken me in, and I instantly feel bad because all I’ve done is lie to their faces. I think about how we will separate in a few months, and I’m not going to lie, it is going to be difficult for me because I already feel comfortable being married to you.”

Edward looked stunned, as if he hadn’t been expecting her to say anything about their relationship, but he quickly masked his surprise.

“I don’t know what to say.” He sat back. “I’m sorry you’ve been carrying this burden alone.”

Didn't he realize it was words like this that weakened her resolve?

"You're not making this any easier." She laughed darkly.

He smiled softly at her. "What would you have me do, then?"

Did she even know?

"I need us to make both our families believe that we were a terrible match."

He nodded.

"You already make it easy because you don't sleep in my chamber, so we could just..."

"Why do you think I don't sleep in your chamber?" he asked her suddenly.

She looked at him, frowning. She wondered if she could be that honest. "I just assumed your attraction to me had passed the moment you were forced to wed me."

It wasn't an easy thing to admit, but she was tired of the lies she'd become too familiar with.

He suddenly laughed loudly, slapping his knee.

His unrestrained amusement annoyed her greatly. Why would he find her words funny?

She got up, storming down the dirt road. How dare he make her feelings so trivial?

"Arabella, you shouldn't walk alone," he called after her.

“Leave me be, Edward.”

“I cannot.” He jogged up to her, stopping her with a hand on her arm. “You’re angry because of a falsehood. But since you’re being honest, I’ll do the same. I don’t stay away from you because I’m not attracted to you. I stay away because you evoke a flame in me that’s hotter than anything I’ve experienced, and I fear that if I were to stay so close to you, I won’t be able to control my desire.”

Arabella’s eyes widened at his admission.

“I don’t need to touch you to be driven wild.” He pulled her to his chest, “All I need is to be near you, and all my senses will go mad.”

A thick lump formed in her throat that she had a hard time swallowing. Liquid heat pooled in her blood and flowed towards that spot between her legs.

If he felt this much desire for her, why had he never said anything?

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“Because I wondered if you burn for me the way I do for you. You haunt my waking and sleeping hours,” he said, as if reading her mind.

Arabella stared up at him, unable to say anything. What could she say in the face of a confession like that?

“You’ve been stewing under a cloud of mistruth, Ara mine.” He smiled, running a finger down the side of her face. “You’re not the only one who worries about our uncommon relationship.”

“Why have you never said anything?”

He frowned and seemed to consider her words. “I do not know,” he answered, at last. “I will do what you’ve asked of me. For my family and yours.”

She nodded, and then they resumed their walk back to the castle.

“I must ask,” he said suddenly. “Why didn’t you want to get married before?”

Arabella started but then calmed herself, wondering if he’d think her a weakling if she told him the truth.

“You do not have to speak of it if you do not wish to.”

“No, I will.” She smiled softly. “I just... I never expected I’d be talking about this with you.”

He nodded as if he understood, but he didn't pry, so she took her time constructing the fastest and shortest way she could explain.

"I was to be married once before," she began.

It was safer if she bore the pain once rather than prolong it. If he started asking questions, she was sure it would dampen the mood, hence ruining the rest of the day.

"To a duke, or at least until he decided he didn't want me anymore. He wanted someone better. It wrecked me for many days, but even worse, it hurt my family because I dashed Leonard's belief that he'd soon have someone to help raise our family's social standing. My sisters took it hard too because even if we tried to hide it, it was clear what had happened when the Duke married someone else not a few days later after breaking our engagement. It was a dark time for us."

Edward took her hands in his, squeezing gently, and she was grateful for his warmth because it helped her face the demons of her past once and for all.

"The thing that hurt me the most was that I actually loved him but I wasn't enough for him. Because of that, I started to believe I wouldn't be enough for anyone."

"Don't say that."

"How could I not?" she spat out bitterly. "I failed to secure a true love match and ended up in a marriage of convenience. It just goes to show how morbid my life is."

"Stop blaming yourself for other people's problems," he growled, angrily pulling her to him. "You are more than enough, and any man who can't see that isn't worth your time. You are beautiful, smart, kind, funny, beautiful and the absolute best fake wife a man could have."

She laughed and then slapped his chest, allowing herself to drink from his spring of positivity.

“If it’s any consolation, you landed a duke, so I would say your life is better than morbid.”

“I didn’t know you had a hilarious side, Duke,” she teased.

“There are a lot of sides to me you do not know, Duchess.”

“I’d like to think I’m starting to get to know you quite well.” She smiled up at him.

“Is that so?”

“Indeed.”

She didn’t know who moved first, but suddenly his lips were on hers, kissing her softly and then possessively, almost painfully as if he were trying to mark her.

Her hands delved into the hair at the nape of his neck, and she tugged on it, earning herself a groan from him that excited her. She stepped even closer to him, wondering how kissing could feel so wonderful.

Edward plundered her mouth, nipping her bottom lip gently and then a little harder in a rhythm that rocked her to the core. His hands gripped her waist tightly, pulling her flush against him.

When they pulled apart for air, she couldn’t help but wonder how she’d be able to leave him, knowing he kissed this way.

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“Come, wife.” He smiled. “We’ve put on a good show for the woodland creatures. Let’s head home before they decide to invite us for dinner.”

She laughed and then fell into step with him, talking as they made their way back to the castle.

When he bid her a good rest of the day with a soft kiss on her lips, Arabella knew she was going to have a difficult time saying goodbye to him.

* * *

Edward smiled, walking down the corridor after seeing Arabella safely to her room. It was no small feat leaving her at the door and not going in to finish what they’d started.

“Someone looks happy,” he heard a familiar say once he stepped into his study.

“Joana.” He smiled at his ward. “It’s been an age since I saw you.”

“Yes, it has.” Joana smiled. “You’ve been enjoying marital bliss, and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

He settled in his seat, arranging the papers on his desk.

“I thank you then for your consideration,” he teased. His answer apparently shocked her, for he asked, “What is it?”

“You finally have a sense of humor.” She smiled. “Marriage becomes you.”

“You say it like I didn’t have a sense of humor before.”

“You didn’t.” She laughed. “You always walked around like you had a stick up your arse.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’ve pulled it out, then.”

They shared a laugh, and he resumed his work, not bothered by her presence in his study.

“I really am happy for you, Your Grace,” Joana said after a long minute.

He smiled up at her as she curtsied and left the room.

He was grateful for the silence, as it let him think back to his day with Arabella.

She was indeed much braver than him by admitting her struggle with keeping up their charade. But once again, he was grateful for her strength.

If she weren’t right though, he would have thought her a very good match.

ChapterThirteen

“You’re always arguing with Eddie. That’s why you keep having headaches,” Emily scolded as she poured Arabella a cup of chamomile tea.

It wasn’t a lie, Arabella thought as she sipped her tea.

Ever since she and Edward had decided to put on a show in front of his family, they’d

bickered nonstop, earning themselves concerned looks and advice over the last few days.

“He just gets on my nerves,” she complained. “How could he think I’d like to go and see a Shakespearean play after I’d told him several times that I don’t like Shakespeare?”

Lies!

She absolutely adored the play, as she adored Shakespeare, but they didn’t need to know that.

“But you stayed for the whole play,” the Dowager Duchess pointed out.

“I didn’t want him to feel bad about wasting the ticket money,” Arabella argued.

The women rolled their eyes.

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“I think he should have listened to her,” Joana piped up. “He knew she didn’t like the play and yet took her anyway.”

“He’s a man, Joana,” Emily stated, as if that explained everything.

“They don’t exactly understand what women find entertaining.”

“Here. Here,” Harriet seconded. “When you get married, you learn to live with it.”

Arabella shook her head as she tried not to laugh. If Edward were here now, she was sure he’d be doing the same.

It was funny how his family’s distress over their fights was what they’d bonded over. They’d laughed at the situation over cups of tea late in the evenings in his study and even debated how to pass their points across.

“Or, remember yesterday, when he blamed me for your accident.” Arabella frowned. It had been so scary seeing Emily fall because the straps of the saddle had been cut. She shuddered to think she could’ve been the one riding the horse. “Now that annoyed me the most.”

Emily shook her head. “He was just spooked,” she insisted. “I’m sure he regretted saying so.”

“Why would he blame you?” Joana asked. “If this is what marriage is like, then I don’t think I want it very much.”

Harriet and Emily laughed.

“You’re still young.” Harriet smiled. “I said as much to my mother, but when I met my sons’ father, I wanted as many babies as I could.”

“The same was with me.” Emily smiled. “I used to try to escape to the Americas or France, but my father caught me every time. It was on an escape attempt that I met Charles. He used to annoy me to the core back then, but here we are today.”

All the women cooed at their story. It was so like something one would read in a romance novel.

Speaking of Edward’s brother, he was the only one in the family Arabella had yet to bond with. It was as if he were purposely avoiding her. He found every excuse to leave the room when she entered and avoided her questions at dinner, although tactly, as though she were being rude. But he’d been particularly joyous since she and Edward had started arguing.

“We know exactly what the both of you need,” Harriet announced, smiling almost like a Cheshire cat that Arabella couldn’t help but feel a twinge of fear.

“What who needs?” Edward asked, walking into the room and going to kiss his mother on the cheek.

When he looked at Arabella, he pretended to glare at her and went to sit on one of the other sofas. Seeing him sit in such a daintily colored chair made her burst into giggles.

“What is it, dear?” Emily asked.

“Nothing,” Arabella answered, but when she saw the tiny porcelain cup in his large

hands, she burst into laughter again.

“Is something funny, wife?” he asked with a growl.

“Nothing at all, dear husband.” She snorted.

“What has got you laughing, then?” Harriet asked.

“I just remembered something funny, that’s all,” Arabella answered once her laughter ceased. “I’m sorry.”

They shook their heads at her.

“Anyway, Edward, I was about to make a suggestion,” Harriet announced.

“Indeed?” Edward seemed curious to know, but with the way his eyes kept darting to the door, it was obvious he was ready to escape.

“Indeed.” Harriet smiled brightly. “It will help you two stop arguing every second.”

“Mother, I assure you there’s really no need to?—”

“You two are newlyweds, but you’re already behaving like an old married couple,” Emily scolded.

“But we’re?—”

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“Eddie, do you remember that lovely field overlooking the lake at the southern edge of the property?” Harriet asked, cutting him off.

“I do. Why?” He looked so skeptical that Arabella almost wanted to laugh and admit to their charade.

“Have you taken your lovely bride to see it?” Harriet asked suggestively. “It’s a beautiful day to familiarize your bride with the land she now owns. You’ve been too busy to spend time with her.”

“But, Mother, there are letters I must reply to. And?—”

“And they will be here when you return,” Harriet finished for him in a no-nonsense tone. “Besides, all the children would pay attention to their lessons if you two weren’t arguing every second.”

Arabella hid her giggle behind a bite of a yummy biscuit. One of the many things she’d come to love about her new home was the food. The chef, apparently of French origins, was well-trained in diverse cuisines and spices and knew how to bring life to each dish she made. More than once, Arabella had sent her compliments to the chef.

“But, Mother?—”

“I will hear no further arguments from you.” Harriet’s sharp blue eyes glittered dangerously as she gripped her butter knife menacingly. “You will take her, and you will do so today.”

Arabella's eyebrows rose of their own accord, impressed by the woman.

The Dowager Duchess had her son well and truly cornered with only a few sentences. Arabella really did admire the older woman's elegant manner of handling and resolving issues. Seeing her work now made her realize how she'd been able to run her household so efficiently.

"You win this time, Mother," Edward conceded with a sigh. "I'll take her."

Arabella pouted at his dour tone. "You don't need to sound so glum about spending time with me," she complained.

"I'm not glum." He frowned.

"Your tone says otherwise."

"Ara..."

"They're doing it again," Emily groaned.

"Doing what?" Edward asked.

"Arguing. And I see this time that it is your fault, Eddie." Emily frowned. "You should be excited you're taking the day off to spend time with your new wife. You've done absolutely nothing to make her feel welcome here. You haven't even shown her the lands she rules over now. Tsk!"

This time, Arabella couldn't hide her giggle at Edward's perplexed expression.

"It's not his fault, Emily. It's mine," she interjected, if anything because this time their argument was her fault. "Edward's been trying to take me on a tour of the

property for days, but I have been under the weather.”

“But you seemed fine all this time,” Emily pointed out, looking concerned.

“I hide it well.” Arabella feigned a grimace. She was getting too good at lying.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, dear,” Harriet soothed. “Do you want me to send for the family physician?”

“No,” Arabella answered almost forcefully. “I mean, no. There’s no need for that. I’ll be fine when I take some fresh air.”

“Are you just doing this to escape spending time with your husband?”

“Not at all.”

“Are you sure?” Harriet pressed. “Because if you must know, it was Bea and Noah who asked us to make you two stop fighting.”

“They did?”

“Yes, they did.”

“That’s so?—”

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“It’s settled then.” Harriet signaled to a parlor maid. “Rosa, do be a dear and ask Cook to prepare the basket I informed her about this morning.”

The maid curtsied and went on her errand.

“A picnic?” Arabella asked.

“Yes, a picnic.” Her mother-in-law nodded, rising from her seat. “Did you bring a riding habit, darling?”

“Yes, I did,” Arabella answered, rising from her seat as the matter had been settled. “I’ll go change now.”

“Do take a shawl with you, dearest,” Harriet added, patting her cheek softly. “It gets chilly outside.”

Arabella smiled at the concern in the older woman’s voice and was grateful she’d come to find a mother in her. Tears threatened to fall as she remembered her own mother, but she blinked them back, not wanting anyone to worry.

Joana followed behind her, offering to help her style her hair, but she declined.

“Surely you’d prefer to do something other than play lady’s maid for me.” Arabella smiled at her.

Their friendship was something she’d been grateful for, as she hadn’t had a friend close to her age since the scandal with the Duke of Green.

“I want to do this.” Joana smiled. “You have such pretty hair.”

They quickened their steps and had Arabella dressed in record time. She’d donned a forest green habit she rarely wore, since she’d spent most of her time around her family home or in it to escape the watchful eyes of the crowd. Joana styled her hair in a pretty chignon she didn’t think she’d ever be able to accomplish, with Matilda adding a small hat for a fanciful finish.

“Don’t you think this is too much?” Arabella asked, touching the hat.

“Not at all, Your Grace.” Her lady’s maid smiled. “His Grace won’t be able to keep his eyes or his hands off you.”

A hot blush crawled up Arabella’s neck and cheeks at the woman’s words. If anyone knew that they were yet to consummate their marriage, hell would be raised.

Arabella couldn’t help but laugh at the irony that it was her request for a night of passion that got them into this situation, and now that they were married, they were yet to experience any of the passion.

“Stop teasing her, Matilda.” Joana laughed. “Come, Your Grace, you’ll be late.”

“I’m coming.”

They walked together in companionable silence, but when Arabella turned to look at Joana, she noticed that the woman wanted to say something.

“Do you really want to stay married to His Grace?”

Arabella turned to her with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“If he makes you so unhappy, wouldn’t you want to leave him?” Joana asked.

“Yes, but...” Arabella paused. “I don’t know.”

“I’m just saying. If he loves you, he would do everything he could to make you happy.”

“I’m sure he just has some things on his mind,” Arabella told her. “He is a nice man.”

“Just be careful.” Joana smiled. “I’d hate to see you unhappy.”

“Thank you.” Arabella smiled back. “You’re a real friend.”

They skipped down the steps, and she collided with Edward’s chest when he appeared out of nowhere at the bottom of the stairs.

“Thank you for escorting her, Joana.” He smiled at his ward.

“It was my pleasure, Your Grace.”

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“Are you ready, wife?” he asked, steadying Arabella on her feet.

“Y-yes.” She nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.”

“I do hope we’re taking a horse this time.”

“We are,” he assured her.

“And you checked the straps?”

“I did.” He frowned.

“Did you find out what happened with the other one?”

* * *

Edward wondered if he should tell her the truth about what he’d discovered.

As if reading his thoughts, she squeezed his arm. “You can tell me anything, you know.”

“The straps were cut,” he answered with a sigh.

“Cut?”

“Yes.” He frowned.

Arabella was supposed to ride that horse. If Emma hadn’t joked about trying to mount a horse, who knows what would have happened to her.

“But why?”

“I can’t say. It makes no sense because I saddled the horses myself, and it was fine before.”

Her eyes widened, and she paled. “Am I in danger?”

He squeezed her arm reassuringly. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She looked up at him.

“I promise.”

She nodded. “I’m excited to see this famous picnic spot.” She smiled, and his chest warmed at that.

“Did my mother tell you about the story of the picnic spot?”

“No. Is it as romantic as all her stories are?”

“Indeed.” He winked. “My great grandfather met his wife after they wrestled for ownership of a deer both of their arrows had shot.”

“Your great-grandmother hunted?”

“Indeed. She wasn’t noble born.”

“Oh.”

“And he wasn’t a duke at the time.” He smiled, remembering the story. “They wrestled, and she won, claiming a kiss as well, and the rest is history. So now it’s a tradition in my family for every newlywed to go there with their spouse.”

“Well, I’m excited to see it now.”

ChapterFourteen

“You gave in quite easily to your mother,” Arabella remarked once they set off down the path.

She smiled as the sun warmed her face and bathed everything in a beautiful golden glow.

“I find it easier to do as she says than to argue and have her excommunicate me from parlor games.”

She laughed out loud. “Are parlor games that important?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes. They’re the crux of dinnertime entertainment every Saturday,” Edward answered seriously.

“If I didn’t know you well now, I’d think you were joking.”

He smiled brilliantly, and just because nature loved him, the sun hit him at an angle that highlighted his best features.

God this is too much.

Arabella groaned inwardly.

“I actually thought you’d be a little more grumpy,” she joked, before clearing her throat.

“Oh, I was, but I thought it only fair.” He chuckled. “We have given them hell these past few days. Do you think it’s working?”

She shot him a look. “It doesn’t seem to be if we’re here now.” She sighed. “Emily has been trying to counsel me, and your mother keeps showing me the baby clothes you wore. I really would hate to break their hearts.”

Or mine.

They both fell silent.

“Do we have to separate?” he asked, shocking her.

“Pardon me?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but we are good together. You make me laugh, my family loves you, and I like you.”

“Edward, I... I feel the same way. I find myself becoming comfortable around you, and I look forward to catching your eye across the room when your mother says something particularly funny,” Arabella admitted. “You make me feel like I’m home, and it scares me.”

“It scares me, too.”

“Is this how it feels like?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” He laughed. “I should be asking you. You’re the one who reads romance novels.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ve experienced it!” she retorted. “You’re the one who has had

many lovers.”

He gasped mockingly. “How dare you bring up my past?”

“I do dare because I’m your wife.”

“Fake wife.”

They halted their horses and looked at one another, as if finally seeing each other. They laughed at that and then took off in a small canter, but when they finally crested the hill, Arabella finally understood why his mother was adamant about him bringing her there.

“It’s so beautiful,” she gasped.

The lake below the hill glinted silver in the sunlight, and the field below was dotted with so many red, yellow and purple flowers that she wanted to run through them.

Edward led them to a shaded spot beneath a tall tree and set up the picnic while she took in the beauty around them. He was such a gentleman, but considering the stories he’d told her of his childhood, she could understand why.

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“Come sit.” He patted the spot beside him.

She sat, admiring the spread before them. Her favorite desserts and sweets were laid out before her, making her grin from ear to ear.

“Your mother knows me well.” She laughed. “I have a thing for sweets. It’s almost unhealthy.”

He smiled at her. “I prefer more salty snacks and crackers,” he said and then popped a cracker in his mouth.

He licked his fingers, which made her feel warm in places she didn’t know could feel warm. He noticed the look in her eyes and did it again.

“What are you doing to me, Edward?” she asked shyly. “You’re making me feel things I didn’t think was possible.”

“Like what?” He feigned innocence.

“You surely don’t expect me to say it.”

“I surely do.”

“But it’s not proper!”

“We are married now, Ara mine,” he reminded her. “There’s nothing we can do to each other that will be deemed inappropriate.”

“But, Edward...”

“Ara mine...” he drawled.

“Why do you call me that?”

“Because you are mine,” he answered, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“Ever since that night I saw you in the ballroom, I have wanted to have you, and now you are mine.”

She reddened at his words. “Why?”

She knew she wasn’t ugly, but no one had ever expressed passion so ardently towards her before.

“Just because you’re you.” He pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and then leaned back to place his head in her lap. “Can we pretend for now that we are truly married? We’ve played at being angry with each other, but we’ve not played at being in love.”

Her heart rate quickened at the suggestion. She looked around, wondering if anyone could see them.

His eyes were closed, but he was not asleep. He furrowed his brow.

“Are you all right?” Arabella asked.

“I will be if you run your fingers through my hair,” he suggested. “I quite enjoyed that when I was young.”

She obliged him, as it had been one thing she’d been craving to do. His locks were like silk between her fingers, and she smiled when he groaned in relief.

“From your many lovers?” she asked teasingly.

Edward chuckled. “Are you jealous?”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t be.”

“I’ll try not to.” She laughed. “So tell me, who was your first kiss?”

“Some girl I met at Court when I was sixteen.” He frowned, trying to remember. “She was a pretty little thing, but she’s married now with three kids.”

“That is interesting.”

“Indeed.”

“There was a meadow like this in the estate I grew up in. I loved to sit there and read for hours as a child.” Arabella sighed, remembering the long hours she’d spent under the sun till she’d been old enough to care about her skin being pale and not dark.

“Why did you stop?”

“I became a woman.” She laughed darkly. “Mother warned me that men liked pale-skinned, elegant London debutantes, not brown-skinned country bumpkins.”

Edward laughed boisterously. “I’d have married you even if you looked like a country bumpkin.”

“Somehow, I don’t doubt it.”

“What did you do for fun, then?” he asked.

“You really want to know?”

“Most definitely.”

“I loved fencing.”

His eyebrows rose to his hairline at her admission.

“Is it so odd that I find it interesting?” Arabella asked quietly.

He smiled. “Not at all.”

“So?”

“It’s just that I thought you’d say embroidery or the like.”

“Not all women have such placid hobbies, you know?”

“I’m starting to.”

She shook her head at him. “What was your favorite activity as a child?”

She expected he’d say playing pirates or knights, but his answer stunned her.

“Poetry?” she echoed.

“Yes.”

She sat back, looking down at him and trying to picture him as a little boy writing poetry. “That is rather...”

“Rather...?”

“Odd.”

“You aren’t supposed to judge childhood hobbies,” Edward pointed out playfully.

“I’m trying hard not to, but I imagine how adorable you must have been scrawling.”
She giggled. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“Oh God.” She laughed again, unable to control herself. “Do you still write?”

“Yes.”

She quieted at his brusque honesty.

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“You do? Can I see your work when we get back to the castle?” she asked curiously.

“I don’t usually...”

“It doesn’t matter.” She smiled brightly.

He seemed as though he were reconsidering his answer and then nodded.

She clapped her hands together. “I’m so excited!”

Then they fell silent. Arabella took that opportunity to admire the view. She wished to never go back. She let out a sigh that caused him to open his eyes.

“What is the matter?” Edward asked, concern lacing his words.

“Do we have to go back?” she asked. “I love how I can sit freely with you here. I love how at peace I am with you here. I... I’m tired of pretending I don’t have feelings for you. It’s all so complicated in my head that I forget why I never wanted to marry.”

“I understand. I feel the exact same way,” he admitted, sitting up and pulling her to his side. “But do you think we should try taking it one step at a time?”

“I would love that.” She beamed. “You know... I am curious.”

“What about?”

“You,” she said. “Why you never wanted to get married.”

He sighed and seemed to hesitate for a moment. “My father wasn’t exactly a paragon of manhood for me, and I saw how loving him dimmed my mother’s light,” he explained, his mood darkening. “I swore that I’d never subject a woman to the same fate in case I turned out like him.”

“That’s noble of you.” She smiled, squeezing his hand. “But you didn’t turn out like him.”

“I did.” He didn’t meet her eyes. “I have not lived a clean life, Arabella. I?—”

“Your past doesn’t matter to me, Edward,” she insisted, cupping his jaw. “What matters is what you do going forward.”

“But—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Ara mine, you’re the smartest woman I’ve ever met.”

“After your mother?”

“Of course.”

They shared a laugh and smiled at each other.

“You make this friendship thing easy.” She sighed. “I never thought I could be friends with a man.”

“Why not?”

“I’m interminably shy, Edward,” she pointed out. “I might not look it, but I am.”

“You hide it well.”

“I do, don’t I?” Then she paused for a while, before asking, “Do you think it’ll get better with us?”

She didn’t know who moved first, but their lips met in a kiss that spoke volumes, his hands gently cupping her jaw then trailing down her body as their kiss deepened.

She felt rather than heard him moan when her hands touched his chest. He reclined her on the blanket so he was hovering over her, cradled between her thighs, the bulge in his breeches evidence of his desire.

His weight on her was delicious, and the way he rubbed his manhood against her core drove sensations through her that she’d never felt before.

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“Edward, please,” she moaned.

“What do you want, love?”

“I... I...”

“Tell me what you want, Ara mine,” he purred, nipping her earlobe.

The sensation set her body ablaze, and she writhed beneath him.

“I want you to make love to me.”

* * *

Edward groaned at her words. He’d never expected her to say them. Her body already told him as much with the way it quivered beneath him.

“Do you know what you’re asking me, Ara mine?”

“I feel like I’m going to burn right through, Edward,” she complained, squirming beneath him. “My breasts feel so heavy, and I feel like I’ve drenched my shift. What is happening to me?”

Fuck.

He groaned inwardly. Did she know what her words were doing to him?

He was already throbbing painfully in his breeches, and if she stopped him now, he would probably die.

“Ara...”

“Please, Edward.”

He gave in, kissing his way down her neck down to the junction between her neck and shoulder. Her moan rent the air.

“You’d have to be a little more quiet, love.”

“I can’t,” she cried. “It’s too much.”

“Show me where.”

His hands ran up her thigh, and she squirmed harder, grabbing his hand and placing it on her round breast.

He groaned, palming her. He kissed the tops of her breast while his hands unfastened her stays.

When he moved to pull down the top, she stiffened.

“You have to trust me, love.”

He looked into her eyes to show her he’d take care of her, and when she finally relaxed into him, he felt elated.

“I do,” she breathed.

Edward pulled down her neckline, his eyes widening to take in her beauty. Her breasts were heavy and rounded with pink tips that called to him. He flicked his tongue over one and then nipped it lightly, enjoying the way she squirmed and tried to hold back a scream.

He laughed against her breast, nipping and sucking and licking, enjoying the way her cries rent the air. She tasted sweet like honeyed wine that he was ready to overindulge in. He palmed her other breast and massaged it so it didn't feel jealous.

He pulled her dress further down and kissed his way down her stomach, lifting her skirts. His finger teased her inner thigh, a shiver running through him at how drenched she was.

He lifted his finger to his mouth to taste her, and she reddened.

“You taste sweeter than honey,” he told her, kissing her so she could taste herself.

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He lifted her skirts higher and moved downward to taste her.

“No, Edward, you can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s... it’s...”

“I told you, nothing we do can be deemed inappropriate,” he reminded her. “We’re married now.”

“But—”

“Tell me, Ara mine.” He slid a finger inside her, lust ripping through him at how tight she was. “Have you ever touched yourself here?”

“No,” she cried.

“Why not?” He kissed her there, and she jolted, trying to sit upright, but he pushed her back down with a hand on her stomach. “Rest, love. Let me take care of you.”

He tasted her and groaned at her sweet nectar. Then he plundered her with his tongue so she’d know what a delicacy she was.

She writhed and mewled beneath him, her arousal leaking out of her when he slid another finger deep inside her.

He held her as she climaxed, savoring how beautiful she looked flushed and spent beneath him.

“Edward,” she gasped.

“I’m right here, love.”

“I... I feel...”

“I know.”

He helped her dress and held her while she slept. He felt so content at that moment that he couldn’t even believe he had been averse to marriage before. She made him feel things he’d never thought he’d feel, and it scared him how much he could imagine spending the rest of his life with her.

When she awoke hours later, he helped her onto her horse, and they rode beside each other in companionable silence.

“I... I thank you for today,” Arabella said, surprising him. “I feel... good.”

He beamed, glad that she was now comfortable enough to discuss topics she had found otherwise improper before.

“I’m glad you do.” He nodded.

“Would you mind if we walked the rest of the way home?”

He looked ahead, noting they were only a thirty-minute walk away from the castle, and then dismounted. He reached his arms out to her and helped her dismount her horse.

He began to turn around, but she stunned him when she pulled him back and kissed him on the lips. He didn't move, sensing she wasn't looking to deepen it, and tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear.

“What was that for?” he asked.

She turned red, and he decided he'd never seen her look more beautiful.

“I just wanted to do that again.” She blushed.

He tilted her face up to his and kissed her long and deep this time.

“You can do it as many times as you want.”

ChapterFifteen

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“You can do it as many times as you want,” Edward murmured, bringing a smile to her lips.

Arabella blushed but couldn't help but smile up at him, basking in this newly discovered sweet side of him. There were so many sides to her husband that each new one he revealed had her falling harder for him each time.

He was just too perfect that she didn't know what she'd done to deserve him. He held her hand and swung it between them as they walked their horses back.

The castle appeared in the short distance, and she sighed, leaning against him.

“What is it, love?” Edward asked against her hair.

“Is it so terrible of me that I've started feeling at home here?” she asked in a courageous burst of honesty.

Edward stopped them in their tracks and smiled brightly down at her. “It's not terrible, love,” he reassured her. “I know my family loves having you here.”

Arabella folded her arms and tried for a mock hurt look. “Don't you love having me here, too?” she asked, pouting.

He frowned and wrapped his arms around her, looking deep into her eyes. “I love having you here, too. Have I done anything to make you feel otherwise?”

She tried hard but failed to keep the pout on her face. He looked so worried that she

couldn't help the laugh that escaped her. Did he really care so much for her?

"I'm sorry, I was jesting." She laughed, trying to pull away from him.

He tightened his hold on her and gave a lopsided smile that had her insides melting.

"You jest with my feelings, wife?" His fingers dug into her sides, making her reel with laughter.

"N-n-," she answered, struggling against his hold.

He dug his fingers deeper into her sides, eliciting a shriek of laughter so loud that the birds flew off the trees.

"All right!" she cried. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

"You had better not," he warned playfully. "Come. We've tarried too long. They must be beside themselves with worry by now."

She nodded and commented on nothing and everything as they walked. When they neared the gates of the castle, she spotted Joana wringing her hands as she looked out. She noticed the woman stiffen as she caught her gaze and frowned, wondering what could have upset her friend so.

"Your Graces." Joana smiled, startling Arabella with the transformation. "How was your picnic?"

Arabella tried to mask her surprise, deciding she'd ask Joana when Edward wasn't around.

"It was delightful, thank you," she answered.

“That’s wonderful to hear.” Joana smiled, her eyes darting around. “I had best be off now. Cook might need my help.”

Arabella watched her go, noticing her hurried, shaky steps. She frowned in concern. Had something perhaps happened between her friend and Peter?

“Edward, I have to go now,” she said, keeping her eyes on Joana’s retreating back. “Would you mind if we talk tomorrow?”

She didn’t notice the worried look on Edward’s face.

“All right,” he told her. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

She nodded, smiling shyly at him, and then took off after Joana. She spotted her turning down the hallway leading to her wing of the castle.

“Joana!” she called out, stopping the woman in her tracks.

Joana turned around with a bright smile on her face and skipped over to Arabella, as if she’d not been upset earlier.

“Are you all right?” Arabella asked, concerned for her friend’s well-being and hoping that her sincerity showed in her words.

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“I am, Ara.” Joana nodded, linking their arms. “Come. You must tell me everything that happened at the picnic.”

“I will, but only after you tell me what’s bothering you.”

Arabella really was worried that Joana was only putting on a facade so she wouldn’t worry, but there was no way she wouldn’t worry about the woman she’d come to see as more than a friend.

Joana had been a constant companion for Arabella when she was trying to sort out her feelings for Edward, and had helped her settle in his home smoothly.

“I am well, Ara.” Joana sighed. “You worry too much. I was only disappointed by an outcome I thought I foresaw, but there’s nothing more to it.”

Her tone sounded final, like that was all she was willing to reveal, so Arabella didn’t pry, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

In due time perhaps, Joana would open up. Arabella hoped so.

“I’ll accept that for now,” she told her. “But if you need any help or even someone to talk to, just know that I’ll always be here for you.”

She was shocked when Joana hugged her.

“You are an amazing friend, Ara,” Joana said, before pulling away from her.

“It’s only because you are, too.”

They giggled and continued their stroll.

“How are things with you and His Grace?” Joana asked suddenly. “I noticed how close you two are.”

Arabella blushed, not knowing what to reveal to her. It was true that they’d attained a new height in their relationship, but she wondered what seeing him again would be like in front of his family.

Would he still be the sweet man that had held her hand and kissed her breathless, or would he feign indifference?

She wondered if she had been too improper in admitting her feelings so easily for him. She’d done the same with the Duke of Green, and it had hurt her greatly. Edward seemed very different from the man who’d hurt her, but he was still a man.

Even if they proceeded to fully enjoy their marriage, wouldn’t he tire of her with time?

She thought back to how he’d sent her body to new heights of pleasure with his mouth earlier and blushed hotly. He was so experienced in the art of love that she feared she’d never satisfy him.

She felt a tap under her chin that pulled her out of her thoughts.

“Is everything all right?” Joana asked, concerned. “You’re as red as a tomato, so I can only assume you two have come to an understanding.”

Arabella blushed deeper, nodding.

Joana squealed, and soon they were hopping like two little girls discovering chocolate cookies.

“You must tell me everything,” Joana pressed. “We can talk while I pick up my medicine from the apothecary.”

“Oh, Joana, I’m so confused,” Arabella confessed.

“What about, Ara?”

“Everything. Edward. Us.” She sighed exasperatedly. “I don’t know where to begin.

“Start from the beginning.”

And so she did, feeling she could trust her friend to keep her secret.

“Wait... he married you to save your reputation?” Joana asked, her eyes wide.

Arabella nodded, biting her lip. “I tried to dissuade him, but he was adamant,” she added. “You know how he can be. And we had to concoct a plan, so our families wouldn’t know. He did all of this to help me—a lady he barely knew. All the arguments we’d been having were attempts to help all of you accept our eventual divorce in six months, but now...”

“Now you’re not sure you want the divorce.”

She nodded with a sigh.

“I just... He makes me feel so... I’m so confused,” she admitted. “There’s this uncomfortable fluttering in my belly that makes me feel like I’m going to throw up, and my heart pounds when he’s near. At the same time, he makes me feel so angry and so afraid. It feel so many things at once that I can’t help but feel perhaps there’s something wrong with me.”

“You haven’t still told me what happened between you this afternoon to make you blush so,” Joana probed. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me everything.”

Arabella wondered if it was proper to discuss such intimate things with an unwed lady.

“We...we kissed.” She blushed.

It wasn’t a lie, but it was all she was ready to admit.

“And? Did you like it?” Joana asked as they started up the stairs.

“Oh, Joana, it was wonderful,” Arabella gushed. “I felt... I felt like I was floating. It was so very magical.”

“So you love him, then?”

Arabella froze. Did she love Edward?

Yes, she loved his little, lopsided smiles, which twisted her insides in a knot, and his full grins, which made him look even more handsome. She loved how he would throw his head back and laugh loudly, boisterously.

She loved how he listened to her jokes and the odd jokes he made himself. She loved how he worried he'd hurt any woman and loved how he'd been honest about his past.

Most of all, she loved...

"I... I don't know... Do I love him?"

"It is possible you have come to love him," Joana mused. "What do you think?"

Arabella thought back to how he'd chosen to marry her to save her from ruin and how he'd gotten angry on her behalf when she'd told him about the Duke of Green. She thought of how much she wanted them to have children of their own someday that they'd both try to escape from when they were tired.

"I guess I am in love with him." She laughed as a heavy weight lifted off her chest. "I can't wait to tell him tomorrow. Oh, I?—"

Pain suddenly burst inside her as she registered a sharp blow to the back of her head. Her legs gave out, and she landed hard on the edge of the step she'd been about to climb.

"What..." Black spots dotted her vision as she tried to process the pain racking her body.

"Jo..." she tried to call out, but she turned to see the woman glaring down at her with

so much hatred.

“He...”

Help, she wanted to call out, but she couldn't get the words out as she finally fell unconscious.

ChapterSixteen

Edward tried not to stare at Arabella as she walked away, but it was hard with the way her hips swayed. He couldn't believe how their relationship had transformed so quickly, couldn't believe he'd found himself so at ease with a woman that he'd been in no hurry to take his pleasure.

He remembered how she'd sounded as she'd come apart in his arms and the sweet taste of her, and desire began to simmer in his veins again.

They'd talked about staying married, but he couldn't help but wonder if she was having second thoughts, as she'd asked if they could discuss it on the morrow.

He'd been honest with her about his feelings and felt a twinge of fear that she'd only said what she said in the heat of the moment and was fast regretting her words.

He led their horses to the stables and handed them to the stable master, trying not to let the dark thoughts weigh him down, but it was a difficult feat, considering how deep she was imprinted in his mind and heart.

He considered how loudly she'd laughed when he'd teased her and her soft smiles when she wanted to say something she was afraid to admit. She'd made it easy for him to open up to her, and now that he had, he couldn't help but worry he'd handed her his heart too quickly.

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He shook thoughts of her out of his mind as he walked to his study to finish up some correspondence he'd abandoned but was startled by his brother's presence.

"Charles, what can I help you with?" he asked with a sigh, pouring himself a drink.

If Charles was here now, he was sure it wasn't with good tidings, and he was in no mood to deal with his brother's foul moods and negative criticism.

He could only wonder what the man wanted to complain about now.

"I ask you again, Brother..." Charles began. "When do you plan on fixing this grievous error in judgment you have made?"

Edward frowned, trying to decipher his brother's cryptic question. "Excuse me?"

"Don't feign ignorance, Brother," Charles chided. "You know what I'm referring to."

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"I'm talking about the error you made marrying that... girl," Charles stated. "I do not see why you insist on having her?—"

"I already warned you against speaking about my wife," Edward interrupted him, not wanting to continue the conversation.

"And I will continue to do so until you see how foolhardy your decision was." Charles was nearly yelling now, betraying his anger. "I refuse to believe that silly

story you fed Mother and Emily in the dining room. You must have bedded her and then been forced to wed her by her social-climbing brother?—”

“Enough!” Edward yelled, slamming his hands on the table. His chest heaved as anger turned his vision red.

If Charles weren’t his brother, he was sure he’d have throttled him or worse by now.

“I have tolerated your criticizing my decision to marry Arabella, and I will continue to do so until it sinks into your head that I do not intend to do as you ask,” he hissed, his voice slow and threatening. “What I will not stand for is you slandering my wife’s name and reputation or that of her family, who are now our family by extension?—”

“They are no family of mine,” Charles snapped.

“They will cease to be as will Mother and I if you push me into excommunicating you.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Charles yelled in outrage.

“You forget, dear brother, that I am renowned for making rash and brainless decisions,” Edward threatened, throwing words his brother had said to him back in his face.

Charles turned positively red and stormed towards the door, but not before he had the final word.

“When the time comes and she shatters the heart you have so willingly handed her, I hope you will remember that I warned you.”

The loud sound of the door slamming shut did nothing to silence the racing thoughts

his final words had set off in Edward.

Was it that obvious he'd handed his heart to Arabella?

He took another long sip of his drink, rolling the liquid around his tongue before letting it burn a path down to his stomach.

Edward had meant every word he'd said to his brother, but a little part of him feared his brother's warning.

He shook the thoughts out of his mind, choosing to focus on the one thing he had control over—the estate he'd inherited. When he found himself confused or needing an escape, the numbers helped him deal with whatever emotions raged inside him.

He was cross-checking a sum he just did when a knock sounded at the door to his study.

He wondered briefly if it were perhaps Arabella and hastily bade her to enter.

The door opened to admit Joana, who was dressed less than appropriately in a night robe. She was holding a food tray which made him realize he'd missed dinner.

"I thank you, Joana," he said once she set it in front of him, averting his gaze when she leaned down and her cleavage came into view.

He coughed into his hand, keeping his face turned away till she straightened up.

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“‘Tis not proper to walk around in your night robe, Joana,” he scolded, although his words held no bite.

Perhaps she had been in too much of a hurry to get him dinner to remember her state of undress.

Joana shot him a lopsided smile that confused him as she walked around to perch on the edge of his desk, the slit of her gown sliding back to reveal the pale skin of her thigh.

“What are you doing?” he asked, leaning back in his seat with a frown.

She was being too improper, and he wondered if perhaps she had over-imbibed on wine during dinner.

“I had an interesting discussion this evening, and I’m positively excited to share it with you.” She smiled, visibly excited.

“With whom, if I may ask?”

“Arabella, of course,” she chirped. “She is positively divine.”

Edward tried to school his expression to hide the way his stomach twisted with curiosity.

What could they possibly have discussed?

“Indeed?” he asked, surprised by how even his voice was.

“Indeed.” She smiled. “I finally understand why you surprised us all with your marriage, but, dear Edward, you shouldn’t sacrifice your happiness to preserve someone’s honor.”

Edward couldn’t hide the frown on his face. “What do you mean, Joana?”

“Arabella told me all about how you heroically saved her from certain ruin by marrying her.”

“She did, didn’t she?” he asked darkly. “You two seem very close.”

“Indeed, we are.” She pouted. “She tells me everything, and I’m sorry, but the next thing I have to tell you will not be pleasant.”

Edward didn’t ask but arched an eyebrow at her. The sweet wine accompanying his dinner did nothing to quell the emotions coursing through him. His body craved a much stronger drink, but it was by sheer will that he refrained from entertaining his craving.

Since he had married Arabella, he had entertained the unhealthy habit too often.

“She told me she was happy that you two had finally talked and she was happy that your charade is finally coming to an end.”

A hollow pit settled in his stomach at her words. Joana could have meant Arabella was happy they’d finally agreed to stay married, couldn’t she?

“Indeed?” He swallowed past the lump in his throat.

He pushed the tray of food aside and moved to his side table, pouring himself a much-needed drink. To think his day had been going so well.

“Indeed,” Joana affirmed. “She told me how she has been looking forward to finally ridding herself of the burden when all she’d wanted was to experience passion.”

Edward frowned, wondering if he’d perhaps misread everything that had happened between them that afternoon. Arabella was the one who had confessed her feelings, and she’d come willingly into his arms.

Had that been all for show? And why had she discussed something so intimate with Joana?

He looked at Joana sitting on his desk still, now with a concerned look on her face. She’d been his ward since the accident that had claimed the lives of her parents and his father, and he couldn’t deny that he’d noticed she’d harbored affections for him, but he’d been quick to dismiss the notion before it became something dangerous.

Especially considering he’d never hidden his escapades from her. He wondered if perhaps this was just another attempt at getting what she wanted, but he’d never known her to possess such a dark side.

Perhaps Arabella had been telling the truth.

He shook his head.

There was no way she could have said those things. She was the most expressive woman he’d ever met, and if she really meant the words she’d told Joana, then she was indeed a good actress.

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He was so deep in thought that he didn't notice Joana had walked up to him.

“Oh, Edward.”

That was all the warning he got before she planted her lips on his.

He froze for less than a second and then pushed her off him, glaring at her. “Don't ever do that again,” he warned, wiping the taste of her off his lips.

“Why not?” she asked, pouting as tears filled her eyes. “I just want to help you forget her. See how she's hurt you?”

Edward stared at her, wondering when she'd become such a cunning woman, using tears to get what she wanted. It was a clear contrast from Arabella, who didn't play such paltry games.

He wondered why Joana would even think to do something as absurd as kissing him when he'd never shown any romantic interest in her.

“Because, Joana, I am married,” he explained, choosing to believe perhaps she was confused.

“But she doesn't even want to be married to you!” she cried, trying to put her hands on his chest. “She has deceived you and hurt you. Let me help you forget her. You and I were meant to be together from the beginning.”

He grabbed her hands before she could touch him and pushed her off him, not caring

how her face crumpled.

“I never had any intentions of marrying you or anyone else,” he told her. “I see you as nothing more than a sister.”

“But you married her!” Joana cried, startling him. “I’ve known you longer than she has. I know everything about you and have kept your secrets. I have seen your secret smiles and how you watch me when I walk. How can you say you don’t love me?”

She looked so unlike herself that he couldn’t believe it. Neither did he care. His skin crawled where she’d touched him, and he couldn’t believe she’d even kissed him.

He was still having a hard time believing that Arabella had truly said she wanted their relationship to end and was determined to get the truth from the source. He was tired of hiding and burying things. He wanted to know—no, needed to know if they were going to remain married.

“I did marry her, and I hope you remember that,” he warned her. “I will forget what you did tonight, but I warn you never to attempt such folly again.”

“What does she have that I don’t?” he heard her whimper as he stepped out the door, heading towards Arabella’s chamber.

He couldn’t help but recall how his wife’s eyes crinkled at the corners when she laughed, or her uncontrollable love for sweets. He loved how polite she was to the servants and how she’d immediately integrated herself into his family.

He loved how, in just a few days, she’d turned his whole world upside down and wrecked the self-control that had been his pride, making him feel so many confusing things all at once.

He'd written bloody poetry about her!

He loved...

He loved her.

And he didn't know if it was a good or bad thing that he had fallen in love so quickly, when he'd said he wasn't capable of such a paltry emotion. Yet, it had crept up on him like a slow stream, knocking down the walls he'd built around his heart.

"Fuck," he breathed, drawing to a halt.

He loved her.

Somehow, he'd come to love his wife, and he didn't know how to feel about it.

Fear snaked down his spine as he wondered if she'd really said those things, but he pushed forward.

He needed to know the truth of her heart. If she did want to end things, he'd make a good case for them. There was no way he would let her go so easily now that he realized how much he wanted her.

ChapterSeventeen

"Mmh," Arabella groaned as she started to regain consciousness and pain began to creep into her awareness.

She tried to move her hands to the sore spot that throbbed at the back of her head, but she found she couldn't move, as her hands had been tied behind her back. Her eyes popped open, barely registering the unfamiliar room as she flailed.

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She tried to call for help, but her mouth was gagged too, so she could make any sounds.

After flailing helplessly, she decided to calm herself and understand what exactly had happened.

She remembered talking with Joana, and the next thing she knew, she'd felt a sharp blow to the back of her head, and before passing out, she'd seen Joana glaring down at her.

Could she have done this? But why?

She'd done nothing to the woman, so why hit her on the back of the head and kidnap her? It made no sense to think that Joana was capable of something so terrible.

It was only then that Arabella heard voices coming from the doorway. She recognized the room she was in as one of the least used rooms in the wing reserved for guests. She'd been placed on the floor in the bedroom, and the voices were coming from the sitting room.

She recognized the voices as those of a man and a woman, and as she strained her ears, she realized they belonged to Joana and... Peter.

What are they up to?

"You don't understand," she heard Joana say.

“I do understand. More than you know,” Peter answered softly. “Let her go, and maybe she won’t even know what you’ve done.”

“No!” Joana yelled. “I cannot. You will take her once the men get here, Peter. Your absence won’t be as noticeable as mine. As such, you’re the perfect?—”

“I won’t help you hurt the Duchess.”

“She’s not the real Duchess!” Joana hissed. “She was never meant to be the Duchess. She stole what was rightfully mine, and she must be punished.”

Arabella frowned, wondering what they were talking about.

What did Joana mean by Arabella stealing what was rightfully hers? Did she perhaps?—

Oh.

The answer became so clear that it was almost frightening. Joana loved Edward and had hoped that he’d marry her.

Arabella thought back to every conversation they had, fear rising within her. She’d basically talked nonstop about her problems with Edward to a woman who was madly in love with him. It must have been such a painful experience for Joana.

Still, she frowned, wondering why Joana was dallying with Peter if she loved Edward.

“It was not her doing, Jo,” Peter reasoned, his voice thick with emotion.

Arabella felt so sad for the man whose heart Joana had just shattered. He had been in

love with her, risking his job and quite possibly his life for her, but she'd been using him to bide her time.

"It was!" Joana practically yelled. "She threw herself at him like a little harlot, and my darling Edward fell right into her trap. But I'll fix that mistake."

A cold shiver ran down Arabella's spine at the censure in the woman's words. Somehow in her love for Edward, Joana had developed an unhealthy obsession.

"Joana!" Peter yelled. Arabella didn't know what had happened, but she heard a yelp. "Snap out of it before it's too late. You do not have to be the Duchess to be happy. You can run away with me, and we could live happily together. I love you, Joana, and I will do all I can to make you happy."

"No. I only want to be with Edward," Joana snarled. "Run away with you, Peter? How do you think you can make me happy? You were only a temporary distraction to scratch an itch. I don't love you. I never have, and I never will. Edward will forever be the only man I love, and if I can't have him, then no one can."

Peter gasped. "You don't mean that," he pleaded. "You cannot mean that."

"I do," Joana snapped. Her voice was so cold that Arabella felt pity for the man. "Did you really think that I would ever settle for a peasant? This is real life and not one of those romance novels you love to read."

"You have hurt me with your words, Joana."

"That was my intention. Now, you either stand with me or against me. But I warn you, I never deal nicely with my enemies."

"I could never be your enemy, Joana, but I want to stop you from doing something

you'd regret."

“I will never regret getting rid of her.”

Joana’s hatred was so palpable that it sent a shiver down Arabella’s spine. She wondered how the woman was able to pretend to like her all this time.

“And if His Grace found out you had a hand in his wife’s disappearance?”

“He’d never know I had a hand in it, and even if anyone told him, he would never believe it.” Joana sounded so sure, but Arabella knew she wasn’t wrong. Even she still found it hard to believe it was Joana speaking. “Who would believe that the proper Lady Joana was capable of such despicable behavior?”

“Joana.”

“Enough, Peter,” Joana snapped.

“I cannot stand with you.”

“Then you leave me no choice,” she warned. “I owe you one last bit of mercy because you were useful for a time. Be gone by the time I arrive, or you will meet the same end I have planned for her.”

The sound of the door slamming shut alerted Arabella that Joana had probably stepped out of the room. If she wanted to escape, Peter was her best choice. So she struggled against her restraints, trying to move. If he heard the noise, then he would know she was awake and would try to free her. She heard his footsteps coming in her direction, and she almost sagged in relief.

“Oh. You’re awake.” He sounded scared, rushing over to her and helping her to sit.
“Here, let me help you.”

His hands shook as he tried to remove the gag in her mouth. She noticed the sheen of tears around his eyes and felt sad for him.

“I’m sorry about this, Your Grace. I?—”

“It’s all right, Peter,” she told him once he removed the gag. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was,” he answered. “I should have tried...”

“Don’t blame yourself, Peter,” she insisted once her hands were free, placing a hand on his shoulder. “There was no way you could have known.”

He smiled at her as he began to undo the rope around her feet, and she smiled back. She barely looked up when she noticed Joana rush inside and bury the knife she’d been holding in Peter’s back, before pulling it out.

“I told you not to be here!” Joana yelled.

Arabella screamed as he cried out and fell to the floor, clapping her hands over her mouth. “Peter!”

“It wasn’t enough that you stole my Edward, now you’re trying to steal Peter from me, too,” Joana spat out. “You’re a right proper whore, Arabella. Tell me, have you also given yourself over to Peter? Have you?!”

She rushed towards her, knife still in hand and covered with blood.

“N-no, I have not,” Arabella stammered out.

Palpable fear like nothing she'd experienced before filled her. Joana had a crazed look in her eyes, and Arabella knew at this point that the woman wasn't against killing her if she misbehaved.

"You're afraid of me now, aren't you, Arabella?" Joana cackled. "You had better be, because you haven't seen what I have in store for you. You'll learn never to steal anything of mine ever again."

She stood back and called to someone Arabella hadn't noticed before. Two men in matching dirty, worn-out tunics and breeches stepped into the room.

"This is the lady?" one of them asked with a gruff voice.

"Yes, it's her," Joana hissed. "Pick her up and let's move."

"Joana, please," Arabella cried. "Please, don't do this."

They ignored her. One of the men picked her up and threw her over his shoulder, as if she weighed nothing. He not only looked dirty but he smelled so foul that her eyes watered. She pounded on his back and swung her legs, but when he swatted her bottom, she stilled.

"Ye better behave, missy," he growled. "I ain't against teaching a lady some manners."

"I'd advise you to remain quiet, Ara mine," Joana cooed. "I'd hate for these men to kill you here."

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Arabella shivered, knowing full well that it was possible.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, in case anyone was around to help her.

“It’s a surprise.” Joana smiled. “But I’m going to make sure you never come back to my castle again.”

“Why are you doing this?” Arabella cried. “You could have told me you loved him.”

“And then what?” Joana asked. “You’d have left him for me? Cry? You have no idea how much you sicken me. How much I have hated you. How tired I’ve been of your excessive whining about Edward, when you could have simply just left.”

“I—”

“I do not want your cast-offs. He was mine from the beginning, and I’m going to make sure I get rid of you for good.”

They stepped into the back garden now and were fast approaching the small gate leading outside the castle. The men seemed to know where they were going, and Arabella wondered how they knew their way around so well. It almost seemed like they’d visited several times and mapped out the entire place. She even wondered how Joana knew them. They looked like cutthroats and thieves, unlike the villagers she’d met, who seemed nice people and loved her husband.

“I mean, you wouldn’t even die. I went through so much trouble poisoning those stupid snacks you love so much, but still, you came back with your hands around my

Edward.” Joana seethed. “MyEdward.”

“I don’t know what’s worse,” she continued. “The fact that he doesn’t want me or the fact he married someone as dumb as you. I mean, you were so desperate for sex that you threw yourself at a man you didn’t know. But you must have known. You must have known how powerful he is. That was why you set up that trap. Yes, that’s it. You must have known that he is rich and powerful, and you used his penchant for women to concoct your plan. But do not worry, I’ll take care of him now.”

“I did no such thing,” Arabella protested.

“Oh?” Joana quirked an eyebrow. “But where’s the proof, since you so willingly admitted it to me? That’s why you kept it from the family too, so they wouldn’t know what a whore you actually are. So that your dear mother-in-law and sister-in-law won’t shun you. Isn’t it? If you think properly about it, you should be thanking me. I’m saving you from true ruination by sending you away. Imagine how much shame you would bring upon your family if the truth comes out.”

The man tossed Arabella into the back of a cart, before helping Joana in. Arabella’s body felt bruised where she’d landed, and her feet itched where the ropes dug into them.

At least her hands were free, so she was able to sit up by herself. Joana was speaking with the men, so she looked around at the place she’d begun to think of as home. The sun was beginning to dip below the horizon, and in no time, night would be upon them soon. Would Edward be able to find her then?

A few moments later, they set off towards the west, she noted. She looked around, trying to memorize her location in case she was able to free herself.

Joana laughed darkly as the cart jostled them. “I can’t believe that’s exactly how you

did it. That's the oldest trick in the book. Perhaps I should have thought of that myself."

"Joana, I promise you, I did no such?—"

"Do you think I believe you?" Joana sneered. "A lady from an impoverished family obviously looking to raise her family's social standing? I'm surprised Edward fell into your trap so easily. He's never been able to resist a pair of open legs, so I don't blame him. He's a man, after all."

Arabella cringed at her crude words. She couldn't believe the words were coming out of the mouth of a woman she'd started to think of as a sister.

Tears welled up in her eyes, threatening to fall, but she attempted to blink them back.

"Don't tell me you're going to cry?" Joana laughed. "You're so weak, it's so annoying. What does he even see in you? You're just like all the brainless, spineless debutantes he droned on about, but in your case, it's just sad. Perhaps that's why you resorted to such desperate means to marry."

Arabella stayed silent, letting the acidic words roll over her. She had behaved wantonly, and that was what got her into this mess in the first place. She already knew she was to blame for their predicament.

"You know I'm right, don't you?" Joana mocked. "That's why you choose to keep silent. It's all right, your secret is safe with me. They'll probably only hate you for your desertion."

She turned back to discuss something with the men, and Arabella noticed her grip on her knife had loosened considerably.

She weighed the option of going for the knife, but she feared getting cut in the process. And if she did get the knife, what would be next? She shook her head. Once she'd successfully disarmed Joana, she could figure the rest out.

She watched and waited, looking away from her when they turned back to look at her, and when the opportunity presented itself, she lunged at Joana, pulling the knife out of her hands. She felt a sharp pain in her hand but didn't dwell on it.

Her hands shook as she pointed the knife at the woman and her companions.

The cart shook dangerously, and she nearly fell to the ground. The men turned back to look at them, grinning menacingly. The cart swayed again, but she managed to keep her balance. It was obvious now they were trying to make her lose her balance and fall, which made her all the more adamant about standing her ground.

"Give me the knife before you hurt yourself, Arabella," Joana scolded, not in the least bothered by the knife pointed at her. "Or at least don't jump off and die so foolishly. I'd hate to have to bury you here. I don't need a whore's blood on my hands."

"N-no," Arabella stuttered, her hands shaking violently.

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She didn't have a plan even if she somehow managed to escape, but she wanted to try. Even if she had to hide in the woods, surely someone would pass by eventually.

The cart jostled again, throwing her back. The knife flew out of her hands, landing at Joana's feet.

Joana picked up the knife laughing. "See what I said?" She inched closer to Arabella and loomed over her. "You're absolutely stupid. What did you think you'd be able to do? Escape?"

Arabella didn't see the slap coming but felt the blow, the force of it throwing her head to the side. Her cheek throbbed, and her vision turned blurry.

"Don't ever do that again, Arabella. I'd hate to hurt you. I won't be able to sell you at a good price then." Joana laughed maniacally, pressing the knife to Arabella's throat. "Even if you managed to escape and run off, where would you go? Into these woods? You'll be dead by nightfall. A barely recognizable corpse once the animals are done with you. I'll hate to have poor Edward mourning over you too long. That's why I planted the letter telling him you'd left him, so he can hate you enough to forget you. Guess who'll be there to comfort him through the whole ordeal?"

Arabella didn't answer. She didn't even dare swallow. Not with the knife still pointed at her throat.

Joana laughed again, pulling back from her. "You're lucky I'm feeling gracious." She checked her reflection in the blade. "I packed your things and added some money for you to live on for a time. I even paid these two in advance to take you halfway. When

that point comes... well, we'll see just how they would like their payment. You seem to be good at sharing your favors. Perhaps you'd suffice."

The men looked back at Arabella, flashing their yellow teeth, and she shivered, trying to suppress a shiver of disgust.

"We'll take good care of yer friend, Miss." One of them laughed.

"Aye." The other grinned, slapping his friend's shoulder. "We'll make her scream so good that she'll forget her husband."

"You wanted to experience a night of passion. Now you'll have more than enough to keep you warm this winter." Joana laughed. "And if you're good, they might keep you and not sell you to the nearest brothel."

Icy dread ran down Arabella's spine as she realized that these men looked like they meant what they said. She drew her knees to her chest and buried her face in them as she sniffled, sending a silent prayer.

Oh, Edward. Please come find me.

Joana had told her that she'd written a letter telling Edward how she was leaving him. What were the odds he'd believe it?

Arabella looked out at the greenery around them as it turned sinister with the waning light, nature seeming to reflect her mood. She wanted to cry at the fact that even her family would think her a deserter.

Oh, the shame Leonard would feel when he was finally informed. And Sarah. And Madeline.

A tear rolled down her cheek, and then two, and then she was fully crying, her knees muffling her sobs.

How could her life have turned out so miserable?

She had barely even had a taste of marital bliss before it had been snatched away from her, and now she'd never get to experience it if Joana had her way.

Oh, Edward. Would he hurt much?

To think she'd just confessed her feelings for him. He would think her a liar and probably hate her for treating him the way she had.

Please. Help him find me.

ChapterEighteen

Edward stopped outside Arabella's door, his heart pounding as he prepared himself to admit what he felt to her. He had tried to come up with an argument he'd use if she indeed wanted to leave but had failed.

He shook his head, steeling his resolve.

He had to try if at all. Arabella wasn't the type to hide her feelings, and if she still decided to leave, then he'd give her what she wanted.

He knocked on the door and waited for an answer, but when he didn't get one after a long minute, he opened the door. He stepped into her room, which smelled of the lavender essence that haunted his dreams, and looked around for her.

Her vanity was lined with her essentials, and the bed looked undisturbed, as if she

hadn't even slept in it. Perhaps she hadn't even come upstairs yet, but that would be odd, considering she'd been with Joana, who had obviously gone downstairs for dinner and then retired to her chamber.

He moved to leave the room but paused upon spotting an envelope on her bed, still sealed. His curiosity was piqued.

He broke the seal and opened the letter, his frown deepening. It was a letter from Arabella to him.

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My dear husband,

I am sorry to not have said this to you earlier, but I cannot continue this marriage any longer.

I thank you for confessing your struggles, so you'll understand why I did this.

If you're reading this now, I'm already on my way home.

Please don't look for me.

Goodbye.

Arabella.

Edward read the letter again, frowning. The Arabella he'd come to know wasn't one to put up false pretenses. Even with her family, it had been difficult for her to keep up their charade, and she'd nearly exposed them. And he'd come to know she was bold, having no qualms about voicing how she felt.

It was hard to imagine she just wrote a letter and left, when the woman he knew would most definitely have faced him head on.

He stepped out of her chambers, asking a maid scurrying past if she'd seen her.

"I haven't seen Her Grace, Your Grace," the maid answered with a curtsy.

Edward nodded. "Do send her my way if you do."

"Yes, Your Grace." She curtsied again, before scurrying away.

He went down to the dining room and then the drawing room. He spotted his mother and Charles deep in conversation.

"Mother, have you seen Arabella?" he asked, not looking at his brother.

He was yet to forgive him after the last argument they had and didn't need any looks that would aggravate him now. There was an uncomfortable buzz under his skin, but he didn't want to acknowledge it.

"No, Eddie," Harriet answered. "At least not since this morning when you left for the picnic. She didn't even come down for dinner, so I assumed you two were still together. Is everything all right?"

Edward looked away from her, trying to hide the frantic look in his eyes.

"Yes, Mother," he answered. "We were just playing a game, and I am yet to find her."

Harriet let out a laugh and waved her hand dismissively. "You young love birds are always playing such funny games."

He walked off before she could say anything and stepped outside, tracing the path she'd taken when he'd last seen her.

He considered asking Joana where she'd last seen her but froze when he saw her bonnet on the floor near the bottom of the stairs leading up to the apothecary's shop.

He picked it up, rushing up the stairs to the apothecary's shop, which was empty. He rushed back down, moving towards his family wing and sending out the footmen to look for Arabella.

Fear started to creep into his heart as he wondered if she truly had left him. But if she had, how had she done it?

She was still new to his duchy, so she couldn't have known anyone who would help her, but a suspicion lingered at the back of his mind.

What if she'd been kidnapped?

He remembered the incident with the straps of the saddle. They'd most definitely been cut, and he'd been grateful that Emily hadn't been hurt badly.

He wondered how possible it was for Arabella to have made an enemy so quickly, and he couldn't even imagine anyone wanting to hurt him, even for political reasons.

He'd been neutral in most parliamentary decisions, so he didn't know anyone who could have cause to harm him.

He was pulled out of his thoughts when a painful groan rent the air. He looked up to see a footman tumble down to the ground.

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He rushed towards him, shocked when he saw the trail of blood on the floor.

“Your Grace,” the footman cried, looking up at him.

Edward lifted the man’s head, eyeing the fresh blood on the floor. “What is your name?” he asked. “What happened to you?”

“Your Grace, I... I’m sorry,” the footman choked out. “The Duchess... Joana... in trouble.”

At the word trouble, Edward’s mind went into overdrive. He ordered the maid that had caught up to them to send for the physician and held the footman’s head up.

“Speak slowly. The physician is on his way.”

“Your Grace, I’m sorry,” the footman whispered, his voice so low that Edward had to lean down to hear him. “Lady Joana has her and is taking her to a ship to the west.”

Panic immediately filled Edward, and he wanted to move, but the footman stilled him with a bloody hand.

“She’s not alone...” he trailed off as his eyes fluttered shut.

Edward pressed his fingers to the man’s wrist, relieved to feel his pulse, though it was weak.

He signaled to another footman who joined them to hold the man’s head while he got

to his feet and rushed to the stables. He sent a footman ahead of him to tell the stable hand to saddle a horse, grabbing his pistol and a hunting knife in the event he needed them.

The ominous warning that Joana and Arabella weren't alone could mean many things, and he didn't want to take a chance that could end up endangering Arabella.

He sent a message through his butler to Charles and then to the constables, and tried to look for tracks around the castle walls.

He spotted a fresh trail in the dimming light leading from the back garden entrance and kicked his horse into a fast trot down the track.

His heart pounded in time with his stallion's hooves as he worried about what he'd find ahead of him. He hoped his wife wasn't hurt.

Be brave, Arabella. I'm coming.

He found himself wanting to yell, to punch something, to throttle Joana for putting her life and Arabella's in danger.

Fear like nothing he'd ever experienced pushed him down the trail till he got to a point in the road where the tracks started to merge.

He dismounted his horse, trying to identify the trail he'd been tracking, but with the anxiety flowing through him, he could barely focus.

"Fuck!" he yelled, kicking a shrub.

How was he going to save her when he could barely find the path? For all he knew, they were more than halfway to their destination. If he'd known, he'd have restrained

Joana in his study and stopped her from carrying out her foolish plan.

Fuck!

Charles had been right about him all along. He really was incompetent in all he did. He'd failed to identify the hidden threat and protect his wife.

"Edward!" he heard a familiar voice yell.

He looked up to see his brother approaching him at top speed, pulling his horse to a stop at the last minute.

"Calm down, boy." Charles patted his horse, dismounting. "I got your message. Are you sure she hasn't run off?"

Red filled Edward's vision, and he had to clench his fists to keep from hitting his brother. "If you've come to insult my wife again, you're welcome to return home," he barked.

"I'm not here to—God, man, what am I supposed to think? Joana? The woman has been your ward since?—"

"You don't think I know that?" Edward snapped.

"You don't have to be so rude. I'm only here to help."

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“Are you certain? Or are you here to tell me, again, that I’m incompetent?”

“Edward, I don’t think you’re incompetent.” Charles sighed. “I know I am hard on you, but?—”

“You don’t?” Edward asked incredulously, running a hand through his hair. “You’ve been against every decision I’ve made since I inherited the duchy.”

“That’s only because I worry about?—”

“The ruination of our family, I know. You’ve screamed it in my ears every day for the last ten years.” He knew he sounded like he was whining, but he didn’t need Charles to tell him he was a failure. He already knew it. “But I am not Father. I want the best for our family, too. You’re not the only one who lost a father. You’re not the only one with that stain on your soul. You’re not the only one who has to carry that burden. I do too, and I have to put on a smile while doing so, so you can live freely.”

Charles frowned, looking away from him. “I meant no harm by my actions.”

“It matters not whether you meant it or not. Your words... they’ve become reality. I have failed my wife. Our family. I have failed to protect my home.” Edward hung his head.

Charles walked up to him, squeezing his shoulder. “You cannot give up just yet.” He smiled. “Tell me what you’ve?—”

The sound of approaching hooves drew their attention. They turned around and saw

the constables approaching at top speed. Edward was grateful they'd come speedily and mounted his horse.

"Your Grace," they greeted as they stopped before them.

Edward wasted no time answering them but pointed at the tracks he'd been following.

"They're moving fast, but from here I can't seem to identify which trail is theirs."

The route was a common one used by many wagons, so his tracking ability, albeit useful for prey, was limited here. He sincerely hoped they'd prove useful, even though he'd had countless reasons not to trust them in the past. He hoped they at least had a good tracker in their ranks, or the wait would have been futile.

The head constable nodded, beckoning one of the younger constables to come forward.

"Mikhail's the best tracker among us. He can sniff a trail from?—"

"Then let him get started," Edward snapped, not caring for a speech about their proficiency.

"Y-yes, Your Grace."

Edward would have felt some degree of shame for how he'd acted if he was in a better mood, but his worry for Arabella's safety made him irrational. He would worry about apologizing later.

He had yet to process the fact that it was Joana who'd done something so despicable, all because she... loved him? It made no sense whatsoever that she'd behave the way she did.

She'd been so close with Arabella and seemed the most happy about his marriage, but it seemed they'd been effectively misled.

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the thoughts, and looked at his brother, who was beckoning him over.

"Come, they've found their trail," Charles called.

Edward nodded, drawing closer.

The young constable, Mikhail, pointed to their left. "They're heading west."

"West is towards the coast," the head constable pointed out.

"And they are at least an hour ahead of us," Charles added. "We need to ride hard if we are to catch up with them."

They spurred their horses into action, not even slowing as the light dimmed and night fell. They hoped the people they were tracking would be at least more cautious and slow down.

They rode hard till they emerged into the open road. Edward kept whispering the same prayer over and over again.

"We have to slow down, Your Grace," the head constable yelled over the sound of horses' hooves. "'Tis dangerous to travel so fast so late at night."

Edward ignored the man, kicking his heels into his stallion's flanks.

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“Edward!” Charles shouted. “You’re no good to her dead.”

“I have to get to her.”

“You will. Slow down.”

Edward sighed, pulling the reins to slow his beast.

They rode at a much slower pace, crossing into a town alive with night festivities.

“We should ask around if anyone has seen anything suspicious,” the head constable suggested, and they nodded, agreeing to separate and meet up in a quarter of an hour.

Edward scanned his surroundings for any familiar face, but when he saw none, he decided to visit places travelers would most likely frequent.

He stopped by the stables, but no one had come in for fresh horses. The baker and apothecary told him they hadn’t seen anything suspicious, but when he went to the blacksmith, he knew Providence was on their side, for he overheard a conversation that piqued his interest.

He stayed off to the side of the shop but close enough that he could hear the conversation.

“The blonde whore thinks we’ll let her go.” A man laughed. “We’ll make a fortune off the two of ‘em.”

“Didn’t I tell ye our luck will soon turn around, Sam?”

“Aye, ye did.” The first man laughed. “It’s too bad the wheel broke now.”

“There’s no way the lass’s husband will find us so quickly.”

Edward spotted Charles and the constables approaching and motioned for them to wait.

When the men emerged from the shop, wheel in hand, he snuck behind them, making sure to stay out of sight.

He apparently didn’t need to explain anything to the other members of his party. They followed his plan, taking up different positions until they neared their final destination.

Edward was grateful they’d made camp in the woods away from the town, so their arrest would be easy.

When he spotted Arabella tied to a tree trunk, his heart pounded hard against his ribcage, but relief washed over him. They found her.

When the men entered their makeshift tent, Joana stepped out of the shadows to meet them.

“Well?” she snapped. “Were you able to fix it?”

“Aye.”

“Good. Fix it and let’s move.”

“We make camp here tonight,” the bigger man answered.

“No. We move now. That was the deal.”

“That was before ye stepped out of yer lands.” He cackled, stepping closer to her.
“Ye have to play by our rules now.”

“And if they find us?”

“They cannot.” He laughed. “We made sure of it.”

“You do not know Edward.” She looked around. “He’s very persistent.”

“I thought you said you made sure he won’t follow us.”

“I did, but...”

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The man stepped closer to her, running a finger down her cheek. “I do hope we do not run into any problems, lass,” he warned, keeping his voice dangerously low. “I do not want to have to kill anyone today.”

She scoffed and pulled back from him. “I did my job. I’m just being careful.”

He smirked. “If ye did, ye’d be in his bed, riding his cock, not here with us.” He laughed. “Ye’re a fine woman, and it’s a cold night. If ye come to me, I won’t turn ye away. Let me show ye what a real man’s cock looks like.”

Joana gasped and slapped him. “How dare you, you worthless scum?” she yelled.

Edward watched the man’s temper rise, but before he could hit her, he stepped out with his pistol raised.

“If you take another step, you’ll find yourself without a brain.”

ChapterNineteen

“If you take another step, you’ll find yourself without a brain.”

No sooner had the words left him than he felt grateful he’d carried his pistol.

The man charged at him, stopping short when he noticed the pistol. He made to run into the treeline, but the constables stepped out, brandishing their standard-issue rifles.

His accomplice's eyes darted around, trying to look for a gap to escape. Edward watched, creeping closer for any sudden moves, not surprised when he started towards the smallest member of their group.

It seemed Charles had the same idea as him and tackled him to the ground. The other constables tackled the other man, tying his hands behind his back.

Edward got off the man he'd been holding down once he'd been shackled and headed towards Arabella, who was awake now. Her eyes were wide with fear as she looked at the scene before her.

He could tell the moment she saw him because she burst into loud sobs, struggling against her restraints.

He rushed to her, holding her against him as she wept. His heart pounded in his chest as relief washed over him. She was all right. He'd saved her. She was in his arms again.

He held her till her sobs stopped and pulled back to see just how tired she was. He nodded to the constable who had cut her free and swooped her up in his arms.

She fell asleep immediately, her hands wrapped tightly around his neck as if she was afraid to let go. Edward kissed her hair, holding her tighter to his chest.

"I've got you now, love," he whispered. "I'll never let anyone hurt you ever again."

"You'll need to get a carriage to return home, and it won't be until we get into town," Charles stated, stepping up to them. "The road here is filled with potholes—that's why their wheel broke. It was such a stroke of good luck, wasn't it?"

A lump formed in Edward's throat, and he managed a nod. He was grateful for his

brother's level-headedness and how he'd taken charge of Arabella's rescue when he'd been too emotional to think.

"I—"

"Don't thank me," Charles interrupted. "Come. The walk back to town is long."

They started down the path, but Edward remembered then the reason they had to make this journey.

"Where is Joana?" he asked finally, unable to hide the anger in his voice, looking around.

He spotted the constable pushing her onto the floor beside the blackguards as she screamed and hurled insults at him.

"She has been taken care of," Charles answered with a frown. "They'll be transported to the nearest prison to await trial."

Edward nodded, walking off.

"Edward, please!" he heard Joana yell behind him. "You should be with me not that whore! Edward!"

He ignored her words, holding his wife tighter. They decided not to sleep in the inn and resumed their journey back home immediately.

"I'll stay back to give a statement," Charles told him, patting his back. "Take care of her."

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“I will.” Edward nodded. “I thank you.”

“You better leave now, so she can get some rest.”

He took the path that led to the village, heading straight to the physician’s home so the bruises on her wrists and feet could be treated.

He’d had to explain the whole ordeal to the man before he agreed to treat her, fearing it was a case of domestic violence.

Somehow, Arabella was able to sleep through the whole ordeal, for which Edward was grateful, although the silence gave him much to think about.

“The bruises aren’t so serious, so she will heal quickly,” the doctor told him.

Edward nodded his thanks to the man, making a mental note to send him a substantial payment once he returned home.

“Do take care of her,” the doctor advised. “She’s been through a terrible ordeal and would need you now more than ever.”

“I will do my best.”

Edward had to wake her to help her into the carriage, but once he sat down, he pulled her into his lap and held her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Arabella nodded, shuddering in his arms. "You saved me," she whispered.

"I did." He kissed her temple. "I'm sorry I didn't catch up to you earlier. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, burying her face in his chest. "I just want to forget," she mumbled.

"You will," he promised. And he intended to keep that promise. "Sleep now, love."

She fell asleep in minutes, leaving him time to think, and he found that he'd been doing that more often since she'd come into his life.

He whispered a small prayer of thanks that she was safely back in his arms. When they walked through the gates of the castle, he roused her again.

"We're home, love," he whispered against her hair.

Arabella nodded. She protested as he carried her out of the carriage, but he only held her tighter to his chest.

"I'm feeling strong enough to walk, Edward."

"You're not walking anywhere if I can help it," he insisted, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Then he carried her inside. He heard the gasps of the maids they passed, but he ignored them, taking her upstairs to her chambers.

"I'll send them to draw a hot bath for you and get the doctor," he told her as he gently lowered her onto her bed.

He moved to leave, but she held his hand and shook her head.

“You want me to stay?”

She nodded shyly.

Edward smiled, pulling back the bed covers for her to slide under. He took off his boots, before removing the pistol and knife from his belt and putting them aside. Then he slid under the covers with her, pulling her to his chest.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “I should have sensed something was wrong and come to look for you. I...”

“You saved me.” She smiled up at him. “That is all that matters.”

He kissed her hair again, breathing her in.

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“I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you,” he admitted. “I was so scared that I wouldn’t see you again. When I read that letter... I worried that I misread your affection, but I didn’t believe that you would be so cowardly as to use a letter to convey your feelings, when you’d always used your words. You’ve made me feel so many emotions I never thought myself capable of feeling these past few days.”

He sighed. “I have never felt fear so potent as I did tonight. I couldn’t even stay still. My heart felt as if it was going to burst out of my chest. What have you done to me, Arabella?”

He hadn’t been expecting an answer, but when she laughed softly, he frowned. Was confessing his feelings funny to her?

“I love you too, Edward.” She pressed a kiss to his chest. “I love you.”

Edward looked down at her and let out a laugh, pulling her closer to him. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve her, but he was grateful he’d married such a perfect woman.

“I love you too, Arabella.”

Her eyes widened as a blush bloomed in her cheeks. He smiled, kissing her forehead and then tilting her face up to his. He planted a chaste kiss on her lips, nipping her bottom lip at the end.

Her eyes fluttered open when he pulled back, and he smiled at the sight of her desire. His hand slowly trailed up and down her back, his body becoming more aware of the

beautiful woman wrapped around him.

“Arabella,” he whispered.

He wanted her so badly now that he felt if he didn’t have her, he could die. His hand cupped a buttock as her legs moved, brushing against his aroused member.

“Ara...”

“Oh, Edward,” she moaned against his shoulder. “Love me.”

He lifted her face to his, kissing her deeply, flipping her over so he was lying between her legs.

He moved his hips, aligning his straining member against her core, groaning when she moaned into his mouth. He moved again, swallowing her cries.

Her fingers dug into the hair at the nape of his neck and then his shoulders, not settling in one place.

He loved how responsive she was to his touch. It sent more blood to his already painfully hard member.

Her hands then trailed down his chest and stomach, and he nearly spilled when her fingers wrapped around him.

Edward caught her hands and pinned them above her head. “I won’t last very long if you do that, love.”

“Please,” she moaned.

He pulled back from her, unfastening her nightgown and stays, then pulling them up and over her head so she was blissfully naked beneath him.

He drank in the sight of her beauty, highlighted by the golden glow of the candles around them, from her pink nipples to her toned stomach to the dark curls at the apex of her thighs. The red bruises on her wrists stood out harshly against her pale skin, reminding him of what he'd almost lost.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed, stilling her hands as she tried to wrap them around herself. "You never have to cover yourself around me, love."

She struggled to meet his eyes and tried to close her legs, but he wouldn't let her.

He was used to brazen women who flaunted their bodies and knew how to put on their charms to seduce men, but her sheer innocence aroused him more than his former lovers' skills ever had.

"You're so beautiful," he told again, leaning down to kiss her.

She accepted his kisses eagerly, moaning into his mouth as she impatient writhed beneath him.

He pulled back and took off the rest of his clothes, before leaning over her, empowered by the way her eyes drank him in.

"Now we will be one," he whispered, hooking his arms beneath her legs and wrapping them around his waist.

As he lined himself with her core, he felt her stiffen beneath him.

He kissed her deeply and slowly, communicating how he felt with his lips and

tongue.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

She nodded, her eyes hooded.

“Tell me what you want,” he told her, teasing her again.

“You,” she whispered. “I want you.”

He groaned, nipping her bottom lip. His hand trailed down to her folds, and he bit back a groan at how blissfully wet she was. He slid a finger inside her to stretch her then two, stoking her as she writhed beneath him. Her moans beat the music of any coordinated musical troupe he’d ever heard.

She was boundless in her desire, her hips bucking against his hand. When she reached ecstasy, he enjoyed the way her walls clenched around his fingers, her cries loud as her nails dug into his shoulders.

He waited till she came down from her high to notch his member at her entrance, pushing ever so gently. She stiffened again, but when he kissed her, she relaxed.

He wanted to shield her from the pain, so he moved inch by slow inch until he was fully seated inside her, not moving till she’d adjusted to his girth.

He slid out of her and then slowly thrust back into her, groaning at how tight and perfect she felt.

Arabella bit her lip, her eyes squeezed shut, and he couldn’t help but laugh. She

looked so adorable.

“Open your eyes, wife,” he cooed. “Let me see your desire.”

“I can’t,” she cried.

“You can, love.” He smiled. “There’s no need to hide from me.”

She opened her eyes slowly, tentatively, meeting his eyes, and at that moment, Edward started thrusting into her. He tried to move slowly and steadily, but as his desire peaked, his thrusts became harder, faster, and less coordinated.

“Edward!” she cried.

“Arabella.” He groaned in her hair. “I love you.”

“Please.”

“I got you, love.”

His thrusts got even faster, and when he climaxed inside her, she climaxed with him, their breaths coming fast.

He rode out their orgasms, before collapsing beside her and pulling her to his chest, panting.

He felt the moment she fell asleep, and he smiled, letting himself drift off.

ChapterTwenty

Edward was having a really delicious dream that involved lavender-scented silk

pressed to his face and soft skin under his fingers.

He squeezed his hand experimentally only to be rewarded by a soft sigh. Slowly, he opened his eyes, blinking till they adjusted to the daylight. He smiled, feeling sated and happy.

An expanse of pale skin caught his eye, and he looked down, his lips curling into an appreciative smile. Arabella was just so beautiful, looking like a goddess with her hair glowing in the sun like dark honey, her sweet lips puckered in sleep.

Their limbs were tangled, and as he looked, she drew him even closer with a delicious sigh. She looked like an angel, framed by the covers. His very own wood sprite.

She, who could summon spring in his heart simply by smiling.

He really had fallen helplessly in love, if he, the cold cynical Duke of Soulden, was now spouting poetry again.

The depth of his feelings for her sometimes scared him with its intensity. It was never easy to be that vulnerable with someone without the protection of the walls that had safeguarded his heart throughout the years, but he felt them crumble in his wife's arms.

The love he received in return made it all worth it in the end. Hence he now understood what it meant to walk on clouds.

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His reverie was interrupted by the feel of Arabella moving her legs, inadvertently rubbing her core over his already aroused member. He hissed as intense lust shot through him.

It was really concerning how much he already wanted her, when he had already had her through the night in all the different ways known to man.

He already felt guilty for not controlling his desire for her, for she'd most definitely be sore this morning and would need to rest. But while his mind understood, his body was not cooperating—it burned for more of her.

She moved again, and lust shot through him once more. With a groan, he gave in to the demands of his body, lowering his lips to hers and devouring her sweet mouth. Arabella responded with a sweet sigh and pressed her body closer to his.

It amazed Edward how in tune her body was with his even while asleep.

He gently rolled her on her back and kissed down her stomach till he got to her core. Arabella answered with a sleepy moan.

“Edward,” she gasped, waking up as he licked her folds.

He shot her a lopsided smile, his tongue darting out to taste her again.

“Awake already, my love?” he asked, a smug smile on his face.

He suspected she had been awake much earlier but decided to initiate this erotic

interlude—not that he was complaining. Maybe she wasn't an angel, after all.

“What are you...” She gasped. “Doing?”

“Tasting you, of course.”

“But...”

“Yes?”

“It's morning,” she said shyly, trying to hide her blush.

“I know.” He kissed her there again, applying pressure to the nub at the apex of her sex. “It's better this way.”

“But anyone could see us.” She blushed again, burying her hands in his hair.

“Tell me you want me to stop, then.”

“Don't you dare.”

He laughed against her folds. He had forgotten she could be a teasing minx, too. It surprised him how she could turn from a bold temptress one minute to a blushing maiden the next. But that was one of the many things about her that intrigued him.

This marriage was definitely going to be an interesting adventure going forward, and he was ready for it. But first, he had to perform his duty of pleasuring his wife, which was not at all hard since her sweet, responsive body never ceased to inflame his passions.

He continued strumming her hidden pearl and was rewarded with her throaty moans

that only served to inflame his lust to unbelievable levels that he feared he was going to combust and spill like an adolescent boy. Just then, Arabella stiffened and screamed in ecstasy.

“Arabella, I need you. I can’t wait any longer,” he groaned, hoarsely, his voice sounding alien to his own ears.

In a few moments, he surged into paradise and almost immediately after a few strokes climaxed while groaning her name. Afterwards, the feeling of satiation was so acute that he collapsed on top of her. Arabella she ran her fingers through his hair as he caught his breath. When he had significantly recovered, he rolled onto to his side, taking her with him

“Good morning, wife. I must say, this has become one of my favorite ways to wake up.” He laughed, squeezing her bottom.

Arabella laughed and gave him a lopsided grin. “Well, that can be arranged,” she purred as one of her hands trailed down his stomach towards his already hardening member. “If you keep performing as you do.”

He caught her hand in his. “While I would love nothing more than to continue this delicious interlude, we have pressing matters to handle. We have to go down for breakfast before Mother decides to come here to ascertain we are still alive. We also need to speak with them about what to do with Joana. I think we have to finally be honest with them, even though I’m definitely not looking forward to their censure.”

Arabella pouted in disappointment. “I understand. This is definitely not going to be easy, but it must be done.”

Seeking to wipe the sullen look off her face, Edward looked down at her naked body hungrily. A knock sounded at the door, interrupting his thoughts.

“Your Grace?” a small voice called from outside the door.

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Arabella's eyes widened with fear as she looked at Edward. "Oh God," she hissed. "What do I do?"

She jumped out of bed, scrambling for her clothes.

"While I do appreciate the view, I don't think I want anyone to see you naked. If not for anything, we need to maintain the facade of the proper miss you present to the world," he said saucily.

Arabella gasped and attempted to gather the bed covers.

"It is a little late for that, don't you think? I have seen every inch of your delectable body."

She shot him a warning look, before running to the screen to dress.

Edward laughed with obvious enjoyment. He was definitely enjoying needling her.

Her maid knocked again, before opening the door and stepping into the chamber. She was still blissfully unaware of his presence in the room.

He saw the moment her eyes took in the clothes strewn all over the floor and the bedsheet that covered the floor.

He was surprised when her lips curled into a smile, but the next minute, that stoic mask slid back into place, making him wonder if it was just a trick of the light.

“Your Grace?” she called out, walking towards the bed. “Is—oh, Your Grace!”

She turned away quickly, surprised to see him.

“Matilda, you should have waited for me to bid you to enter,” Arabella scolded, stepping out from behind the screen.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” The maid curtsied.

“It’s not her fault, Ara mine,” Edward said slowly, rising from the bed, already wearing his breeches. He picked up his shirt and pressed a kiss to Arabella’s cheek. “Has my mother gone below stairs to break her fast?”

“Yes, she has, Your Grace,” Matilda answered.

“All right.” He nodded. “Help Her Grace get ready quickly. We’ll be joining the morning meal.”

He shared a look with Arabella and then went to get dressed. He dreaded the conversation he was about to have with his family, but it had to be done to tie up loose ends. It was about time they put an end to all the lies between them.

As soon as he finished dressing, he stepped out of his rooms, only to find a radiant-looking Arabella standing in front of the door, with her hand poised to knock.

“Wife, I was about to come to you.” He smiled, pulling her into his arms. “Perfect timing.”

She smiled, moving up on her tiptoes to kiss him. “Indeed. You look handsome.”

“And you look ravishing.”

“Is that all that’s on your mind?” She laughed.

“When it comes to you, yes.”

“We have to discuss what we’re going to say to them.” She reminded him, her mood turning somber.

“Do not fear.” He smiled, squeezing her hands. “They will understand why we did what we did.”

Arabella smiled sweetly at him, looping her arm through his, and then they went downstairs. The joy in his heart was ridiculous, and he smiled down at her.

Various images of little girls with her beautiful eyes and smile, and a boy with honey-colored locks, flashed in his mind. The pictures were so vivid that he was sure he had a ridiculous grin on his face, but he didn’t care.

He was jolted out of his reverie when Arabella stopped abruptly, staring at the dining table in in pure terror. He followed her gaze to see Joana sitting primly at the dining table, as if nothing was wrong. She lifted her head and gave him a smile that sent cold shills down his spine.

“Arabella, you overslept,” Joana said, before turning to Edward with a dark look. “It is obvious why.”

Then she gave a saccharine smile.

Harriet picked up on the tension and looked from them to Joana.

“Of course,” Emily piped up in her cheery voice. “What do you expect from newlyweds who are crazily in love with each other? It was how it was with Charles and I. It is such a joy to marry for true love. I’m so happy there are so many love matches in this family.”

“Is that what you believe?” Joana asked, plastering a tight smile on her face and gripping her cutlery very tightly.

“What are you doing here, Joana?” Edward glared at her. “How did you escape?”

“Escape?” Harriet frowned. “Eddie, what are you talking about?”

“Yes, Edward.” Joana sneered. “Why don’t you tell the family everything?”

“You are no family of mine,” Edward growled. He turned to a footman and ordered him to send for the constables.

“Edward, what is going on?” Emily asked incredulously.

“Joana tried to kidnap and ship Arabella off to the West last night,” he hissed. “Charles and I assisted in her arrest, but I don’t know how she managed to escape.”

“I am very good at getting what I want when I want.” Joana smiled, before suddenly

picking up a knife and pressing it to Emily's throat.

"Joana, what is wrong with you?" Harriet gasped. "Put down that knife."

"I will. When dear Edward tells you the truth."

"What truth?"

"The truth about their sham of a marriage," Joana spat.

"What?"

"Harriet, I was caught in a compromising position, and Edward was kind enough to step up and marry me to rescue me from ruin. We planned to separate after a few months, but down the line, we fell in love, and we want to have a real marriage now," Arabella blurted out.

"Well," Harriet said after a long minute of silence. "There are many marriages that started on worse notes. I am just happy that you and my son are happy."

"What?" Joana yelled, throwing the knife. "You're not angry?"

"Oh, I am, but what does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" She screeched. "Your son would not have had to marry her if she was not a whore who was willing to do anything to lie with a man. She is a nasty wench not fit to be the Duchess!"

The hate in her eyes was so vivid that it made Edward shudder.

"Neither are you, going by your actions yesterday," Arabella answered, the steel in

her words arousing him.

That seemed to drive Joana to the limits of sanity.

“You disgusting whore. You can never have him. He belongs to me! You are just a fortune hunter and a disgusting whore. Only you could ask a gentleman to bed you. You can never have him. If I can’t have him, no one else will. Least of all you!”

In a blink of an eye, she threw a knife in Arabella’s direction.

Edward managed to move Arabella out of harm’s way at the last minute, but the knife speared his shoulder. Joana was gearing up to throw her fork next when the Dowager Duchess gave a command with a simple tilt of her head. Joana was immediately restrained by two footmen who were conveniently standing around the dining room.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” Joana screeched, squirming violently.

She whipped her head around and bit one of the footmen. He yelped but managed to keep hold of her. She turned to Arabella then.

“You think you’ve won, don’t you? I should have killed you when I had the chance, but you just wouldn’t die, would you?” she hissed. “You even managed to escape the trap I set for you. Miss Goody Two Shoes offering your horse when you were supposed to ride it. I should have known that those incompetent fools would not get the job done. As usual, if you want to get a job done properly, you should do it yourself. Humans are incompetent, and men are not to be trusted—except for you of course. You are the exception.”

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She smiled maniacally at Edward.

Edward suppressed a shiver.

“Don’t worry, I will get rid of her, and we can live happily. I know you love me. You always have,” she said as the footmen dragged her away.

“No, Joana,” Edward called. “I never saw you as anything other than a sister, but I’m starting to regret that now.”

The eerie silence was broken as she flew into a rage.

“No, you love me. You have, and you always will!”

She screeched, attempting to free herself of her captors’ hold, screaming and kicking. Emily and the Dowager Duchess stared after her with such shock that it would have been comical under different circumstances.

“That was definitely very dramatic,” Charles mused as he stepped into the room.

“Husband!” Emily cried, running into his arms. “Are you all right?”

“I am well, wife.” He smiled down at her, pressing a kiss to her lips. “How are you?”

“Better now that you’re home.”

Edward smiled at the sweet scene but swayed on his feet.

“Edward?” Arabella gasped, holding tightly onto him.

“I’m all right.”

“No, you’re not. There is a knife in your shoulder,” she scolded. “Come, sit.”

“It’s nothing. Only a flesh wound,” he said flippantly.

“Only a flesh wound?” she cried. “You’re hurt.”

“It is nothing, wife,” he protested.

“You don’t know that.” She wept.

“Francis, get the doctor,” Harriet ordered the footman standing nearby.

The man rushed off to do her bidding.

The doctor came rather quickly, seeing as he’d been tending to Peter, the footman Joana had stabbed.

“Come, Your Grace,” he ordered. “You need to retire to your chambers.”

“There’s no need for?—”

“He’s going now,” Arabella interjected.

Edward gave in, knowing his wife would resort to several means to get him to comply.

She helped him undress, and after the doctor inspected wound, he confirmed it was a

flesh wound. While cleaning the wound, her composure finally broke, and her hand started shaking as she worked hard not to break down in tears.

The numbness was starting to wear off, and it was obvious she understood how much danger all of them had been in and how worse things could have been. The Dowager Duchess noticed this and took over from her.

“Here, let me help you, dear.”

Arabella handed over the supplies and then proceeded to burst into sobs in her sister-in-law’s arms. Edward looked on helplessly, her sobs tearing at his heart.

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He was grateful for his family's understanding of their situation. When her sobs finally ebbed, Emily led her to the sofa and laid a blanket over her.

Once he was declared fit to move around, he donned a shirt and moved to carry his wife to the bed. Her face was still puffy from her tears. Emily smiled at him and motioned for him to leave. Edward hesitated, before he nodded to her and stepped out of the room.

On his way to his study, he met Charles, who looked like he'd been awaiting his arrival.

"Is something wrong?" Edward asked, bracing himself for another onslaught of criticism.

It was only because of sheer will and the fact that he remembered how his brother had helped him rescue Arabella that he hadn't dismissed him.

"We have much to discuss, don't you think?" Charles smiled ruefully.

"Indeed." Edward nodded, motioning for him to step into the study.

Once inside, he poured two glasses of whiskey and handed one to Charles. Charles received it with a word of thanks and took a bracing sip.

"Things definitely haven't been the same since..."

"I know." Edward sighed.

So much had happened in so little time, and he wondered how they'd adjust to everything. The sun outside shone irrespective of the dark mood he was in, a testament to the fact that the rest of the world had no idea the battle they'd just overcome.

"I... I knew about Joana's infatuation for you, and I never understood it, but for her to go so far?" Charles shook his head, taking another sip. "You've never had good luck with women."

"I used to think otherwise until yesterday." They shared a laugh. "To think she was bold enough to return here after yesterday shows how far gone she was."

"That's the funny thing. I spoke to Emily, and she said that after the footman you sent to me informed us of your movement, she went to see Peter, and he told her everything. She found it hard to believe that sweet Joana had done anything of the sort and even confronted her about it before Mother came into the dining room. But Joana denied everything."

"I can understand her hesitation." Edward nodded. "I didn't want to believe it until I saw it with my own eyes."

"And when you returned with Arabella yesterday, she promptly forgot about it," Charles continued. "I'm sorry I was quick to insult your wife. It seems I have a lot of apologizing to do."

"She's the stubborn sort, so you better prepare yourself."

They laughed again, and for the first time in many years, Edward found himself feeling at ease with his brother.

"I should know, for Emily and I were wrapped up in the same passion in our early

days as a married couple.” Charles smiled. “I was only startled by how quickly you married. It was like one minute you were the ton’s most eligible bachelor, and the next you were leg shackled with a lot of salacious gossip surrounding your union.”

“You really need to stop entertaining gossip, Brother.” Edward laughed. “You’re a father now.”

“It has helped us in the past,” Charles argued. “But I do understand, and I apologize for treating you poorly. I truly do respect you and all you’ve achieved. I should never have projected my fear and hurt from Father’s behavior on you.”

“All is forgiven, Brother,” Edward assured him, feeling a weight lift off his shoulders. “We do have other important matters to discuss, including Joana’s trial.”

His expression turned grim. “When I remember how she almost got my wife killed, I get so angry that I want to see her hang,” Charles hissed, voice thick with anger. “But then I remember she was family and I get confused about what should be done. I think she should be sent to Bedlam. Hopefully, some time there will return her sanity.”

Edward bent his head in thought. As much as he did not like the idea of Joana going to a mad house, there seemed to be limited options available.

“All right,” he answered. “I’ll write to the judge. Another matter worth discussing is Peter’s health. How is he?”

“Doctor Bellingham said he’d make a full recovery, but it would take time. He lost a lot of blood.”

“Keep me abreast of his recovery. He helped me save Arabella, and I would like to extend the same favor.”

“I will.” Charles stood up to leave and shot him a look over his shoulder. “You do know Mother is going to have your hide for lying to her, right?”

“Don’t remind me,” Edward groaned.

Charles then left the study, his laughter echoing in the hall.

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Edward sat in his chair, deciding to catch up on his correspondence. When he looked out the window sometime later, he realized he'd missed luncheon.

He lifted his hand to ring for a maid when a knock sounded at his door, and it opened to reveal his mother. She had a team of maids with her carrying trays of all his favorite foods. The maids immediately set about laying out the food.

"Mother," he greeted, rising from his seat.

She indicated the coffee table, and he obliged, settling into the sofa uneasily. She had a grim look on her face even while she made him a plate and waited till he'd finished eating.

"You lied to me," she began, not one to play games.

She and Arabella were alike in that aspect.

"Yes." He decided not to beat about the proverbial bush and face her censure head on. "It had seemed the best course of action at that time. We are sorry for it."

"I like her," she said at long last. "Arabella. She's strong, sweet, beautiful, and above all, she's made you more... human."

"Human?"

"Yes." His mother smiled warmly at him. "Human. You used to carry such a heavy burden on your shoulders that you barely even laughed or smiled. I see you with her,

and I remember..." Her voice broke.

Edward wanted to go to her but knew she'd resent him for it, so he stayed in his seat till she regained her composure.

"I remember my early days with your father." She smiled. "Not that I'm comparing you with him, and neither do I expect you to become like him. I remember how in love we used to be."

"What happened, Mother?" he asked, taking her hands in his.

She seemed so small now that she had finally started talking about something he'd always wanted to know.

Had something really happened to have turned their father away from them?

"I... I don't know." She sighed. "I think it had always been there, but I was just too blind to see it."

Edward sighed. "I'm sorry to make you remember something so painful."

"I am happy to have discussed it finally." She laughed. "For the first time in years, I feel so free."

He smiled at her, envying her strength.

"So, tell me, what exactly has been happening this past week?"

And he did, leaving no detail out, including his decision to send Joana to Bedlam.

"I agree. It is a wise decision."

He nodded, and they sat in comfortable silence. Edward replayed everything that had happened and realized that somehow, all the change he'd feared marriage would bring had been nothing but good for him and his family.

He could finally boast of a relationship with his brother, his mother had been freed from her prison of grief, and he had finally gotten peace that he had never experienced before.

Indeed, the breeze of change had blown across Soulden with Arabella as it's harbinger.

Epilogue

THREE MONTHS LATER

"You really should have more tea, darling child," Harriet cooed, putting a cold compress on Arabella's head.

Arabella had been down more often with a headache and had been near emptying her guts each morning with dizzy spells that worried everyone, especially her husband, who had a penchant for dramatics when it came to her.

"I believe she's had more than enough tea, Mother," Edward deadpanned, pointing at the huge teapot she'd just finished. "When does the doctor arrive?"

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Arabella smiled despite his rude tone, a telltale sign he was worried about her. Though he sat beside her on the bed, his body shook like a bird preparing to flee from prey.

“He is due to arrive today, Eddie,” Emily answered. “He shouldn’t be too long now.”

“All right,” he answered.

He held Arabella’s hand, intermittently squeezing it softly to give her a massage.

Arabella stared up at the man she had chosen to love and spend the rest of her life with. Looking back, she couldn’t have imagined herself so deeply in love with anyone, but here she was, happily married to a man who was worried sick about her.

She smiled, watching her mother-in-law and sister-in-law tease him for his worry. He finally turned towards her, noticing her smile, and he smiled back at her.

He leaned over, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “What makes you smile, wife?” he asked with that lopsided grin that made her stomach flutter.

Arabella bit her lip, causing him to arch his eyebrows, those dreamy eyes she had fallen for the first time she saw him boring into hers.

“I was just thinking about you and how much I love you,” she admitted shyly. “And I think maybe you are the cause of my headache, because I think of you too much and I can’t help it.”

She chuckled and so did he.

“Oh, can you stop it already, or else I’ll tear up,” Harriet said with a watery smile.

Edward opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter,” he called.

The doctor walked in, led by Arabella’s maid, Matilda.

“You finally came, Doctor.” Harriet smiled. “How are you today?”

“Very well, Your Grace.” He smiled. “Who is my patient today?”

“My wife,” Edward answered. Arabella sat up, giving the doctor a nod.

“Your Grace.” He bowed.

“There’s no need to stand on protocol, Doctor,” Edward told him.

“What are your symptoms, Your Grace?” the doctor asked.

“I have these bad headaches. Oh, and I can’t seem to keep anything down. Especially in the mornings.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“About a month now.”

“Permit me to ask, but have you had your monthly courses?”

Arabella pursed her lips, looking lost for a second. Just then, it hit her that she hadn't had her period for a while now. For about two months, she hadn't, but she'd barely noticed.

Wheels started to turn in her head. She had been throwing up, and Edward had told her it was fever and had given her bitter herbs that made her throw up even more. She had eventually chosen to just smile and say she was fine if he ever asked, never wanting to see the worried look on his face.

"N-no... I... I haven't," she replied, swallowing hard.

"I suspect congratulations are in order, then." The doctor smiled. "You're expecting."

"Oh, wonderful!" Harriet cried.

"Another baby in the family," Emily gushed, hugging her.

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“I’m expecting a baby?” Arabella asked.

It was hard to believe that she was carrying a child.

Edward jumped suddenly, wrapping his arms around her, and once again she felt comfort. She didn’t know when she started crying.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cry,” she told him when he began to worry.

“It’s all right, love.”

He could feel his shirt getting wet from her tears, but he just hugged her more tightly and let her cry. At least they were tears of joy.

Edward smiled down at her. She had given him everything he didn’t know his heart had desired, and now his heart was overflowing with joy.

The doctor excused himself and turned to leave. He opened the door but then jumped back. They all turned to see what had happened and saw Charles rub the side of his head. Apparently, he’d been hit by the door.

“My apologies, My Lord,” the doctor said awkwardly.

“It seems you’re after getting another patient.”

“Not at all.”

They laughed as he scurried off.

“I heard you all screaming. Is everything all right?” Charles asked.

Edward laughed. “Oh, just shut up and come here. I know you too well,” he said with a smirk, loosening his grip on Arabella.

“Look who is becoming a father.” Charles walked over to give Edward a warm hug. “Prepare to mourn your freedom.”

“Eavesdropping bastard!” Edward laughed. “You’re lucky the door didn’t take your eye out.”

Charles raised both hands in the air innocently, but he couldn’t hold back his laughter. “Congratulations, Brother.”

They hugged again.

Arabella and Edward started a debate on baby names, with the others chiming in once in a while.

“If it’s a girl, we’ll call her Emma, and if it’s a boy, we’ll call him David,” Arabella suggested.

“Why David? James is perfectly charming.”

“David is courageous.”

“And?” Edward deadpanned. “No woman wants a courageous man—just one who appears to be.”

Everyone laughed as Arabella pouted.

“So, you’re not courageous, husband?” she asked with a lopsided grin.

“I’m an exception, love.” He winked at her.

They fell silent for a while.

“Umm, I’ll go get... water,” Harriet announced suddenly, getting up and grabbing Charles’s hands. “Charles, you should get water, too. Let’s go.”

“I don’t need water, Mother.” Charles frowned. “You could just send a maid to fetch it.”

“No. You know I like to move around.”

“Then you can go and get it.”

“I want to drink with you there watching me,” Harriet pressed.

“What? Why?” Charles asked, still not the hint.

Harriet slapped him softly on the back of the head. After murmuring about how he’s being treated unfairly, Charles finally followed after her.

Emily trailed behind the two, laughing and waving to the couple.

Arabella and Edward shared a laugh over their family’s weirdness. Edward wrapped his arms around her again, and she rested her head on his chest.

“I’m scared,” she confessed, anxiety filling her mind and heart.

“Scared? Of what exactly?” Edward asked, concerned.

“Of being a mother, building a home. You know?” She bit her lip, placing her hand on his chest. “It was hard for me to accept the fact that I needed to marry, but being with you made it easy. But this is birthing a child. I don’t want to be a bad mother and then hurt our son or daughter.”

Edward chuckled. “Ara mine, you worry too much.” He smiled at her. “There’s no way you won’t be a good mother, with a heart as big as yours. Besides, all of us will be by your side, so you have nothing to worry about. Our child would be beyond blessed to have you as their mother.”

Tears pooled in her eyes.

“Thank you, husband,” Arabella said with a sniffle.

“You are welcome, wife,” he replied, wiping her eyes and placing a kiss on her forehead.

She laughed, pushing him away when his hands started to trail down her back. “Oh, no, you don’t.”

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Don’t what me.” She laughed. “I know what you’re up to, and I won’t have it.”

“But I’m not doing anything.” He smiled, rolling her on her back.

Arabella looked up at him with a faint smile on her face. He moved closer to her, cupping her chin in his hands.

“I love you,” he murmured, his deep voice thick with emotion.

His warm breath fanned her lips, making her stomach flutter.

“Boring,” she teased, making him arch his eyebrows.

“What part? The part that I love you or the part that I mean every word?”

Silence fell over them.

“Can we skip to the part where you kiss me already?” Arabella whined.

He chuckled as she bit her lower lip. “Are you seriously seducing me right now?” he asked, leaning closer, his eyes lingering on her lips.

Their lips were half an inch apart. Edward was so aroused that he was ready to take her. He about to kiss her when the door swung open.

“Errm... sorry.”

It was Charles. He left after they shot him an awkward look.

Edward and Arabella stared at each other before bursting into loud laughter. His arms were still wrapped around her waist.

“I love you,” he was about to say when she cut him off.

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“Shut up and kiss me before we get interrue?—”

He leaned over and kissed her deeply.

“Have you written to your family?”

The words evoked deep guilt and sadness in her as she realized that in the past three months, she hadn’t written to her family.

Edward, knowing her moods quite well, squeezed her softly. “Don’t worry, Arabella,” he soothed. “They’ll understand you’ve been basking in marital bliss.”

She tried to laugh, but it was difficult with the guilt gnawing at her.

“How about this?” he added. “I’ll give you space to write it now. Once you’re done, I’ll help you send it.”

“How can you be so sure I’ll write it?” she asked, pouting.

“I’m sure because you’re no coward, and you’ve always spoken your mind.” He smiled. “You might as well write it now.”

She sighed. “All right.”

“I’ll be back within the hour.”

He gave her a kiss before he left her with her thoughts and a blank canvas on which

to express her thoughts, for which there were many.

Arabella started writing, not knowing what she should say, crossing out the first few words she'd scrawled on the paper. How could she best convey her thoughts without exposing the truth of their marriage?

She shook her head. She and Edward had decided to stop lying to the people around them, and that included her family. She poured her thoughts into the letter, starting from the beginning.

She hoped Leonard didn't end up having an apoplexy when he found out the truth, but she was sure Sarah and Madeline would find it a riveting tale. She surely hoped they'd forgive her for nearly forgetting them, and she didn't forget to mention she was expecting come fall.

She smiled when she was done, a lone tear rolling down her cheek.

She stepped out of her chamber, intent on finding Edward, and was surprised by the familiar voices coming from the drawing room.

"Ara has always had a taste for adventure," she heard her brother say, his voice full of humor.

But it wasn't possible. Her brother should be at home, shouldn't he?

She stepped into the drawing room, clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle a loud scream.

Her siblings sat there with Edward's family for tea. They were interspersed with each other—Sarah and Harriet; Madeline, Beatrice and Noah; Charles and Leonard; and last of all, her husband, who was smiling at her.

“Ara!” her sisters yelled, running to hug her.

Tears flowed freely down her cheeks as she hugged them. To think she’d dreaded reuniting with them, fearing their censure, but here they were, as warm and loving as ever.

“How?” she asked once she was finally able to speak.

“His Grace invited us a week ago,” Sarah explained. “We arrived last night and had to hide to surprise you.”

Arabella looked at her husband, her heart swelling with love and anger in equal measure. He knew they were around and still asked her to write that letter.

“How could you?” she asked, glaring at him.

“It’s oh so fun to annoy you.” He laughed, coming to press a kiss to her cheek.

She watched as her siblings grinned like Cheshire cats.

“I will leave you to visit with Ara. I will be back to collect her later,” Edward said, before ushering his family out of the drawing room.

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“Look at you, exchanging moon-eyed looks with your husband. I thought you swore an oath never to fall in love?” Sarah teased.

“I think I will be the first to accept that am so not immune to cupid’s arrow,” Arabella relented.

“Well, I can see that marital bliss agrees with you, Sister,” Leonard said.

“She is definitely glowing,” Sarah remarked with a wide smile on her face

“Well, am glad to have found love like you did.” Arabella beamed.

“Your husband told us the truth. I am just disappointed that you felt the need to resort to such intricate deception. I thought we had always accepted you despite all odds. I just don’t understand why you didn’t tell us, Ara,” Leonard said, frowning.

“I’m really sorry, Brother, but considering how it all started, I was ashamed to admit to you that I was willing to have an affair out of wedlock simply because I felt I was never going to experience true love. And when I was facing ruination, Edward stepped up to save me. We thought we could have a marriage of convenience, but we fell in love eventually.

“I confess I was already half in love with him before we got married, but I think I propositioned him in order to get close to him, while denying my feelings. I suspect now that the arrangement would never have worked for me, as I would have fallen deeper in love with him. I am really sorry for lying to all of you and not coming to visit, but I must confess I was still battling with my feelings, and I was really

occupied. Do you think you can forgive me?"

"All is forgiven, my darling," Sarah reassured her. "I think the happiness on your face is reward enough. We are just happy you have found love with your husband. He obviously adores you."

"Well, that was really heated. I think you have forgotten that some of us are still unmarried, but I confess I am really happy that you are happy," Madeline commented.

"I think we might be hearing wedding bells soon," Sarah said, giving her a sly look.

"What are you talking about?" Madeline asked with a seemingly innocent look that was betrayed by her flushed cheeks.

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "I have seen you exchanging flirtatious looks with the young Earl of Winston when you thought no one was looking."

"It is not what it looks like. We could never act on it. I admit that I am attracted to him, but nothing can come out of it. We have not even been introduced," Madeline argued.

"You can take a leaf from Ara's book. I am not advocating for a torrid affair, but you could always find a way to start a conversation with a gentleman. You can never tell where it could lead you," Sarah said.

"Let's hope that doesn't lead you to being caught in compromising positions—suffice to say that not all men are as chivalrous as Ara's duke. I would hate to see you ruined, Sister," Leonard interjected. "It is against the rules to have a discussion with a gentleman who has not had the honor of being introduced to you."

“Rules are there to be bent if not broken, and there are several ways to kill a rat—if might use that expression. Leo, you could always make the introductions at Lady Ashworth’s ball next week. It is always popular with members of the ton, so Madeline’s Earl is sure to be in attendance,” Sarah suggested, a persuasive look on her face.

Leonard recognized that look. He was about to be roped into her matchmaking schemes.

“I am not even acquainted with the gentleman in question, so how am I supposed to perform the introductions?” he asked, trying to extricate himself from the proverbial noose he could feel tightening around his neck.

He was sure Sarah would have an answer to his question, and he was effectively proven right.

“You can always make his acquaintance. I hear that he visits White’s, of which you are a member. Perhaps after one of your fencing lessons you could invite him over for a drink?”

“What makes you think I am willing to go along with this intricate plot best suited for a play?” Leonard asked in exasperation.

“You would help because you want Madeline’s happiness just like we do, don’t you?” Sarah asked, still smiling and blinking prettily up at him.

She knew she had him when he looked over at Madeline to see that she had dropped the indifferent mask and was looking expectantly at him. Arabella was giving him her legendary doe-eyed look

“All right,” he groaned. “You win. I will make the acquaintance of the Earl of

Winston, but this will be the last time you rope me into one of your harebrained matchmaking schemes.”

“Of course. Thank you, Leo.” Sarah beamed.

Of course, she was happy. He had forgotten her legendary skill of subtle manipulation. If she were a gentleman, she would have had a seat at the House of Lords. He was sure every bill she presented then would have been passed, such were her powers of persuasion.

Seeing the scowl on his face. Sarah smiled brightly at him. “Don’t worry, good brother, when we have Madeline successfully matched, we will find you the perfect match. You too deserve happiness.”

“No, thank you. I am perfectly content with my bachelorhood. I am not looking to be leg shackled in the nearest future,” Leonard said, shaking with revulsion

His sisters burst into uncontrollable laughter while he looked on with a confused expression on his face.

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“I fail to see the humor,” he huffed.

“You should see your face, Leo. You looked disgusted, as if you were asked to muck out the stables. But I strongly believe that in the year to come, you will be madly in love and loving it, just like I did,” Arabella said between fits of laughter.

“I think that is very unlikely to happen,” Leonard claimed.

“I will make sure to remind you of your statement when it happens,” Arabella answered, giving him an amused look.

Lenord gave her a bland smile and looked out the window. While he never admitted it to his sisters, he sometimes felt the weight of his solitary existence too keenly. He sometimes envied the easy camaraderie between his married sisters and their spouses, but the women he had met so far were capricious creatures—his sisters excluded, of course.

He had not really met a lady that made him willing to leave bachelorhood, and deep in his heart, he knew he could never really settle for a typical marriage of the ton. He had seen how most of them carry on, and he had acknowledged to himself that he preferred a deeper connection. He did not expect love, as he understood that it was rare, and his sisters were the few exceptions, but he at least hoped to like his spouse and have a budding friendship with her.

He wondered what stupidity had possessed him to think that he would have been happy if Arabella had ended up with an indifferent husband. He was just grateful that fate played out the way it did to grant her marital bliss.

Arabella, seeing he was deep in thought, stood up and touched his shoulder affectionately on her way out the door. She wandered through the house and then stopped at Edward's study when she noticed that the door was slightly ajar.

She poked her head around the door, seeing him sitting behind his sturdy oak desk and calculating the books, going by the way he kept pushing his glasses up his nose.

Edward was always handsome, but there was something about him wearing glasses that took his allure to a whole new level

"If you stare any harder, you are going to bore a hole in my face," he said without raising his head. "Like what you see?" he asked, raising his head and giving her a seductive wink, a saucy smile on his lips.

With that single expression, he turned from attractive to irresistible. Her mouth went dry in response.

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, walking towards him after closing the door behind her

"That is one thing about you, love. I am attuned to you at an elemental level. My body just recognizes you whenever you are within a mile radius. I don't know if that makes sense?" he murmured, pulling her into his lap.

"It does, because I feel the same way," she whispered.

His lips were just a breath away from hers, and it just made sense to kiss him. Their kiss deepened quickly, and soon they were panting for breath.

"How did your visit with your siblings go?" Edward asked.

"It went very well. I can't express how grateful I am to you for inviting them over. I

love you.”

“I love you too, and it was purely selfish on my part. I like seeing you happy.”

“I haven’t given you anything since we got married. I feel guilty being the only one receiving.” Arabella winced.

“You make me happy just by existing, my love. Soon you are going to give me the greatest gift of all. You are making me a father,” Edward said with so much tenderness in his eyes

“What do you think we will name our son?”

“How do you know we’ll have a son? I fancy having a little princess who looks just like you before having a son.”

“I just have a feeling we would have a son first. Besides, I think you need an heir first to preserve the duchy.”

“Who cares what the duchy wants? I want a daughter,” he stated mulishly.

It was so adorable and uncharacteristic of the powerful Duke that she burst into laughter and pressed a kiss to his lips.

She gave him a seductive smile. “You could always make love to me instead of wasting time arguing. Let’s put our time to good use.”

Edward didn’t have to be asked twice. He was all too happy to oblige her, putting the sturdy oak desk to good use.

Afterward, while he recovered, he contemplated that several months earlier, he would have never imagined that such heights of happiness existed, and he was ever grateful

to fate for handing him this boon.

The End?