



Married to the Ruthless Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "For these three nights, you will be completely mine to do with as I please."

When ruthless Duke Alexander discovers a contract that allows him to claim a bride, he sees a way out of his problems. And he will not be denied what he's owed...even if his alluring wife-to-be has other plans.

Forced to marry a cruel man, Helen will do anything to make him reject her. But testing the patience of a man like her new husband comes at a great cost...

Helen must spend three nights with him before they start living separately.

Only, a night with Alexander is enough to make her yearn for what she can never have: him.

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Married to the Ruthless Duke* is the novel for you.

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ChapterOne

“Does this even stand legally?” James, the Marquess of Montgomery, asked as they pored over a contract spread out on Alexander’s oakwood desk in the study.

Alexander had wondered the same when his father’s man of affairs had presented it to him the night before, asked the stoic-looking man as much, and was surprised by the answer.

“It does,” he replied curtly.

The contract in question was one between his late father, the former Duke of Blackhill, and the Viscount Honeyfield. The contract allowed him to marry any one of the Viscount’s daughters with no clear benefits or reasons stated. Another reason he thought the document a joke.

“That’s rather...”

“Ridiculous. I know,” he finished for his friend.

He had pretty much had the same response last night, but he had had a couple of hours to think on it since and realized it actually did save him a lot of trouble he had envisaged having in achieving his current goals.

“But I’ve given it a lot of thought between last night and this meeting, and I see that it does save me a lot of time and the tedious process of courting to find a suitable wife,” he continued. “The Viscount Honeyfield is a man of honorable standing, and if my

father, bastard that he was, God rest his soul, had thought him worthy of such a contract, then I will definitely honor it.”

“I still don’t understand why you’d honor the contract though, when there’s no consequence if you choose not to,” James argued. “Besides, you know nothing about his daughters. For all we know, they could be of questionable character or shunned by society. You can have any girl you choose, so why would you marry someone you do not know?”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Alexander sighed, folding his arms. “You seem to forget about my reputation with the fairer sex.”

“You’re being dramatic, my friend,” James scolded. “You’re the ton’s most eligible bachelor of all time.”

“Remember the Turninton Ball? The Earl of Washam’s daughter fainted after I greeted her.” Alexander reminded his friend. “I’ve literally been dubbed the Ruthless Duke. If that doesn’t further buttress my point, I don’t know what else will.”

It had been truly an embarrassing moment for him, but he had learned to live with their odd fear of him, especially since he discovered the moniker he had been given. It was annoying all the more because he’d been completely innocent of their accusations. He hadn’t kicked his stepfamily out when his father had died; they’d left him alone.

He was a shrewd businessman as anyone else would be when they had a lot of money. All other claims of his ruthlessness had been made by people who had a whole lot more to lose if he decided to out them for playing major roles in his family’s attempts to trap him in scandal.

“That was one time, and you have to admit her corset was too tight that night.” James

glared. “Perhaps if you tried smiling, it would have helped. Lady Emerson’s daughter is head over heels in love with you, and you know it.”

“I do, but she’s in love with every unmarried duke in London.” Alexander rolled his eyes.

“You’re only speculating.”

“Did you forget when she basically threw herself into the Duke of Bidden’s lap?”

“Some would say she fell.”

“And they would be wrong,” he retorted. “I saw it clear as day. She’s after any man that can make her a duchess, and that is not a trait I want in a wife.”

He sighed, shaking his head at his friend’s attempt to stroke his ego. Not that he needed it.

“I don’t really care so much for wooing any females at this point,” Alexander told him. “I know you’re rather knowledgeable about everything and everyone in London currently, so I don’t buy that you know nothing about the Viscount Honeyfield’s daughters.”

James shot him a wolfish grin that let him know he was spot on.

“Well?”

“All right. You’re in luck because I do know all about the Viscount’s daughters.” He smiled. “The older one, Miss Margaret, is a mystery as she typically keeps to herself and her books. She’s twenty-three and has never been courted despite being the belle of her first Season. There are rumors of heartbreak but nothing substantial. She’s

well-mannered but is a pronounced wallflower.”

Alexander grunted, contemplating her quiet nature and shaking his head.

Even if he didn’t necessarily need a wife for personal reasons, he surely wanted the woman who bore his family’s name to be someone whom Society’s darlings envied. He did have a reputation to maintain, after all.

“What about the other one?” he asked, despite himself. “Is she much like her sister?”

“On the contrary, she’s the exact opposite of her sister’s quiet nature.” James smiled. “Miss Helen has been a Society darling since her debut and has a growing number of admirers. It’s a wonder she isn’t married yet. Her beauty, charm, and wit have earned her an invite to almost every event of the year, despite the fact that they’re not of such a high rank.”

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Alexander nodded. "She will do then," he said, earning a raised eyebrow from his friend. "How old is she?"

"She's twenty."

"She will do, indeed." He nodded, folding up the parchment. "Drink?"

"You know I never refuse," James stated, raising his glass. "I would think you'd go for the older sister. She would pretty much stay out of your way and wouldn't be so picky at her age."

"While those traits are important, I need someone who will help me secure a deal that will take my investments to the next level," Alexander answered, topping off their glasses from his favorite brew of whiskey that he saved for celebrations.

"How exactly could the girl help you with that?" James asked incredulously.

Typically, Alexander would never share his deals until he was already reaping the harvest, but he had found time and again that James was to be trusted.

"Remember the deal with the Earl of Frampton?"

"The railway deal?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Every other investor that has gone to propose their ideas to him has been met with a staunch refusal. Do you know why?"

His friend shook his head.

“Because they all have one thing in common.”

“And what is that?”

“They were all single, young, hot-blooded males looking to make a quick pound.”

His friend gave him a confused look. “Isn’t that what you are now?”

“Yes, but not for long.” Alexander smiled. “I took the liberty of studying the man and his past dealings, and they were always with men he deemed family-oriented.”

“Wait... you’re marrying to secure a business deal?” His friend gasped. “That’s downright...”

“Save me a new moniker, my friend,” Alexander groaned. “You now see why I need Miss Helen. I need a wife who can charm the Countess of Frampton.”

“You do realize how impossible a task that would be?”

Indeed, Alexander knew.

Even though the woman had a charming, flowery personality, she had a knack for sniffing out falsehoods and would quickly raise thorns. She was so quick to feel displeasure that many families had given up trying to gain favor with her.

“I expect Miss Helen will have to use her oh-so-famous charm to win Lady Frampton over.”

“You make a dangerous gamble, Blackhill.”

“When have I not?”

“But surely there’s more to this than just the business deal,” James probed, because he never knew when to leave things well enough alone. “I would not think you to be the type to have such a small-minded goal behind the marriage. If you really wanted to, you could charm the Earl and Countess without marrying Honeyfield’s girl.”

Alexander gripped his glass a little tighter, hiding his displeasure at being so well-known by another. Yes, they’d been friends since they’d been in leading strings, but he prided himself on his ability to hide his thoughts from people.

“You can trust me, you know?” James continued, his words striking guilt in Alexander’s heart.

Alexander did trust his friend, considering how much they’d been through together, but he found that bitter finger of fear rearing its ugly head at odd times.

James, as always, was understanding of his friend’s quirks and had rarely expressed displeasure at the distrust he was shown.

“I received a letter from my stepmother,” Alexander announced, rifling through the pile of letters on his desk, stopping when he found it.

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He handed it over to his friend, who scanned it quickly with a frown.

“Do you think they’ll try to—” James asked.

“I am certain they would,” Alexander responded with a nod. “That’s why I need to marry. And quickly.”

“Will Honeyfield’s girl be wise enough to manage your family?”

“I certainly do hope so,” Alexander replied. “If she isn’t, she’ll have to learn quickly.”

“But it’s not fair to put such pressure on the girl.”

“It isn’t, but she’ll learn to live with it as I have.”

James glared at him, shaking his head. “I didn’t think you the type to put someone through something so horrible.”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me,” Alexander spat.

Guilt was not a feeling he was accustomed to, and he hated how his friend’s words gutted him. He knew dragging a girl he didn’t know into his family’s mess was unfair and the most heartless thing to do, but the benefits he had to gain from the business deal and giving his family a new target far outweighed the guilt he felt.

“You’re a ruthless bastard, Blackhill.” James laughed darkly at last.

“That’s all I’ve ever been.”

“Mate...”

“I will see you tomorrow,” Alexander announced, rising from his seat, rudely interrupting his only friend’s attempt to comfort him.

He didn’t need it. Not now and not ever.

He wasn’t the sad little boy he had been when his father had died and his stepmother had packed up her things and left with his step-siblings.

No. He was a man grown now, forged from the fires that would have broken lesser men, a formidable force to be reckoned with.

Even if he claimed repeatedly that he didn’t care for the ton, he was ecstatic about their fear and admiration of him, and he derived even greater pleasure from evading his family’s attempts to trap him in scandal, since he refused to waste any more of his hard-earned money paying off his half-brother’s gambling debt.

Not that his half-sister was any better with her constantly racking up debt in the modiste’s shop and jewelers, but he tolerated her excesses, as she wasn’t tarnishing their family name.

“I will see you tomorrow then,” his friend bit out, rising from his seat. “Hopefully you’ll be in less of a pissy mood.”

Alexander watched his friend leave through the window of his study, which overlooked the front of his home, smiling at the obscene gesture his friend made before stepping into his carriage.

His thoughts drifted to his soon-to-be wife, Miss Helen, daughter of the Viscount Honeyfield. He wondered if she was as beautiful as the mythological bearer of the name. James had described her as a beauty and a social butterfly, but he wondered at how she remained unmarried at twenty.

Perhaps she was like the other debutantes and marriage-minded mamas trying to trap a duke, so they could raise their family's social standing.

"Your Grace," his man of affairs, Foley, greeted, stepping into his study.

"Yes, Foley?" Alexander asked, returning to his seat.

"A letter arrived for you."

Foley presented the small envelope to Alexander and stepped out.

Alexander's eyes widened when he looked at the seal on the envelope. The Earl of Frampton had written back to him. Anxiety welled within him as he searched for a letter opener.

When he finally found it, he slipped into his seat, hoping for a positive response to his request to have dinner with the man. He frowned as he read the letter. The Earl had declined his invitation to dinner, which was an expected outcome but one that stung, nonetheless.

He crumpled the paper and threw it in the fire, deciding he had to go see the Viscount Honeyfield and secure the marriage license as quickly as he could. The reports on the man had come in quickly and had shown his nearly impoverished state. He would have to be a fool to turn down a marriage proposal from a man of Alexander's standing.

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Alexander did his nightly ablutions and slipped into bed with plans for the next day already sealed in his mind. There was no way he was missing out on a deal with such valuable returns.

ChapterTwo

“Have a good day, girls.” Helen smiled, waving goodbye to her friends as she was helped out of the hackney they’d shared on their outing.

“You too, dear Helen.” Joana, one of her bosom friends, smiled.

“Will you be attending the Haversham Ball in the next couple of weeks?” Ariadne, her other bosom friend, asked.

“I am not certain yet,” Helen told them, and seeing the hackney driver’s impatient look, she waved to them. “I’ll write to you both once I decide.”

They blew her kisses as the carriage rolled away, and Helen smiled as the sun kissed her face. The day had been nothing short of perfect, and she could not wait to tell her sister, Margaret, all about it.

One of her favorite places to spend time in London was Gunter’s Tea Shop. She was sure that most debutantes and young women of marriageable age would argue that a visit to the modiste or the theatre was more riveting and engaging as well as proper if one wanted to secure a husband. But Helen believed there were very few things better than the refreshment she got from having ice at Gunter’s plus the even more rewarding benefit of hearing the latest gossip circulating among the ton.

And she could trust her friends to have in-depth knowledge of that sort. They were reliable in that way, residing always in their London homes as compared to her, who often returned to her family home in the country at the end of the Season.

The latest story was about the Duke of Blackhill, who was better known by the moniker the Ruthless Duke. Apparently, after years of studiously avoiding the institution of marriage, he had decided to get married. It was a general consensus among the ton that it was not going to be difficult because even with the multitude of scandals attached to his name, he was still a prime catch with a dukedom that went back several generations. He was second only to the royal family, and there was no young lady who wouldn't kill to be associated with a dukedom, not to mention possessing the most coveted title of Duchess. Well, none but her, of course.

The marriage in itself wasn't what had caused such a stir amongst the ton but his plan. Somehow, word had gotten around that he was apparently not going to choose his bride from among the debutantes but would be honoring an arranged marriage contracted many years before.

That was what had caused such a stir within the ton, as in one fell swoop, he had dashed the hopes of several debutantes and ladies who had always dreamt of acquiring the title of Duchess.

The ladies of the ton had declared their determination to hate the Duke's betrothed simply for daring to land the Duke without so much as lifting a finger, which amused her greatly, as her friends—Joana, daughter of the Marquess of Kilburn, and Ariadne, daughter of the Viscount Yardley—were of the same opinion.

Helen well understood their plight even though she didn't share their obsession with the Ruthless Duke. She understood the anger that came with disappointment from losing things longed for, even worse when it is granted to a seemingly undeserving person on a silver platter. She simply hoped whoever the unfortunate damsel was

would be someone with a spine who could handle their censure.

“I still do not understand what you two see in him to make you act so... uncharacteristically weird.” She laughed after a sip of cool strawberry-flavored ice.

Joana rolled her eyes while Ariadne gasped.

“Have you seen his eyes? Or his jaw? Or his broad shoulders?” Ariadne asked with a whisper, because if she were to be overheard, she would never survive it.

“All normal parts of any man.”

“The Duke has no normal parts,” Joana gushed, still whispering. “He’s extraordinary.”

“Mhmm. His smoldering stare across the room makes me feel all hot inside.”

Helen frowned in wonder at her friends, wondering if she herself perhaps was starting to develop challenges with her eyes.

While Helen admitted that the Ruthless Duke was undeniably handsome—if you were partial to the dark brooding male type compared to the more popular blonde Adonis type—she could not ignore the fact he had such a dark aura about him that screamed danger.

Even without knowing his history, it was obvious to everyone who cared to look that he was a man with a dark past and not strictly of an amorous nature.

Although he was also known to be a ruthless rake, she figured he hadn’t even had to work hard to earn much affection. Apparently, his dark looks drove women insane and made them lose all sense of propriety. Young widows, matrons, and a few

ruthless debutantes threw themselves shamelessly at him if he so much as nodded his head in greeting or smiled at them.

Not that he smiled often. He just curled his lips in a mocking smirk of amusement at the antics of members of the ton when he attended some of their flamboyant affairs. She could not even fault him for that because she had pretty much done the same when she was witness to it.

“Remember when my mother introduced us at the Spring ball in Cheshire court?” Ariadne gushed. “I thought I’d die when he kissed my hand.”

And that one encounter had firmly sealed the love she had for the Duke in her heart. She had felt so special that she had wept when he had kissed Joana’s hand just two balls later.”

“I know.” Joana sighed. “His lips were so soft, and his voice so deep.”

The two of them got into an argument that made Helen laugh, drawing attention to them.

“You two are absolutely too much,” she teased.

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They shot her matching glares, but her words caused them to proceed on another long tirade about him.

Even with his dark charm, he tended to lounge at odd corners of the ballroom while casting disinterested looks at the members of the fairer sex that batted their eyelashes relentlessly in his direction. His disinterest strangely enough did not protect him from becoming involved in several scandals that would probably have been more damning if not for his powerful title.

Unfortunately, his propensity for scandal scared the more sensible mamas of the ton, who warned their daughters of the dangers of being caught with him—ruination being a prime example. This invariably led to most of the debutantes avoiding him. His brooding temperament didn't help his cause. Most of those girls just fresh off the schoolroom were scared of him, and he appeared not to care.

Frankly, Helen didn't envy his future bride because it was obvious he was a cold, calculating man, and she strongly preferred a softer, considerate, and loving man for a husband.

She reckoned a man who was rumored to have thrown his family out and disinherited them would not be kind to any failures of his wife, and knowing her headstrong tendencies, any marriage with a man possessing the Duke's temperament would be disastrous.

Helen wished him good luck in his new life with his bride and hoped strongly that she would change him. She would admit that she was curious to see who the future Duchess was. Knowing the capricious attention span of the ton, she was certain there

would soon be some other gossip to occupy them before the week ran out.

“Good day, Madam,” their butler, Mr. Biggins, greeted while taking her coat when she finally stepped into her home.

“Good day, Mr. Biggins,” Helen replied with a cheerful smile. “Is Father in?”

“I believe so, Madam,” he answered. “I saw him earlier in the drawing room.”

“All right,” she replied, before heading towards the drawing room, removing her gloves as she went. When she got closer, she could hear her father’s voice

“... don’t know why you could not be more like your sister. You are already three-and-twenty, already firmly on the shelf. Instead of trying to find a good match, you prefer to consort with the wallflowers. The suitors you do get, you reject them offhand for the most obnoxious reasons. What is wrong with you, dear girl?”

Helen opened the door and walked in to see her sister sitting on one of the sofas, her spine ramrod straight and her hands primly folded in her lap. Margaret was looking straight ahead. Helen recognized that look; Margaret had zoned out like she always did whenever their father scolded her.

Compared to Helen, who was a firecracker in her own right, Margaret was calm and was usually called an ice queen because of her eerie ability to mask her true feelings, but she was Helen’s sister, and as such, Helen knew her better than most and could vouch for the fact that Margaret was flesh and blood.

She just wasn’t the social butterfly that Helen was and was most comfortable among the wallflowers at the fringes of the ballroom at every ball.

Helen was very sure it was not due to a lack of dancing skills, because her sister was

an exceptional dancer, rivaling Helen, who was known amongst the ton as the queen of the dance floor.

Margaret had always been reserved, but in the past year, Helen had noticed that she retreated even more and more into her shell.

Helen had her suspicions that it had something to do with heartbreak, but for some reason, Margaret refused to confide in her, so she kept her suspicions to herself until Margaret deemed it fit to open up.

It also didn't help that her father had taken to criticizing Margaret for her unmarried state, and unlike his usual self, Helen had noticed he was even more on edge these days

"Father, what is it this time?" Helen scolded. "I thought we agreed that you would stop the comparison between my sister and me. I am hardly the yardstick for female virtue, so cease the scolding. It is still much too early for that."

"But—"

"No, Father." She shook her head, sighing at how red he was. "You are overexerting yourself, and now your whole face is red. Calm yourself and have some tea."

She urged him to relax on the sofa, signaling to a drawing room maid to prepare a tea service and placing an affectionate kiss on his weathered cheek.

"I'm just worried about her living life alone." He sighed, giving his older daughter an apologetic look. "Forgive me, Margaret, if I come across as overbearing. I only want the best for you and your sister."

"All is forgiven, Father," Margaret said, her lips curling into a rueful smile.

“I just worry so much about you two. Ever since we lost your mother...” His voice broke off into a sob, bringing tears to their eyes. “I don’t know how long I will live, and I want you girls to be well settled with well-placed gentlemen to take care of you when I am gone. I don’t trust that your cousin, Thomas, will take care of you.”

“Father, you are not going anywhere, at least not any time soon, and we will be fine. Trust me. You raised strong women, you know,” Helen said while rubbing her father’s shoulder in reassurance.

But she quite understood her father’s fear. Even with her acting like she cared little for society and her future, she was not oblivious to the way society treated women who were not attached in a way that suited them. There were very few respectable occupations an unmarried female could take up in the event they came to ruin, and Helen could never trust her cousin, Thomas, who was her father’s named heir to his title and estate, to care for them when he did inherit the title.

Thomas, who was two years older than Margaret, was a drunkard and dissolute skirt chaser. He spent most of his time getting roaring drunk and wenching in taverns. He had even propositioned Margaret to be his mistress if she remained unmarried when he inherited on one of his visits to their townhouse, so Helen knew that none of them would be safe in his care.

It was unfortunate that fate didn’t see it fit to grant a male son to her father and mother, who had died in childbirth trying to give him an heir. Helen suspected that her father still suffered unresolved guilt about their mother’s death, but he hid it well.

Helen poured the tea and added a cube of sugar and a splash of milk, sharing the latest gossip she had heard.

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“You truly don’t believe that about him, do you?” Margaret asked, taking a sip of her tea.

Helen smiled at how elegantly her sister moved and sat a little straighter, trying to emulate her.

Margaret, with her chestnut-brown hair, green eyes, and slim frame, which she had inherited from their mother, looked like a woodland creature and moved as elegantly. As a child, Helen had been endlessly jealous that she had not inherited their mother’s looks.

Helen had inherited her short and curvy frame from her father’s side of the family, as well as his dark hair and blue eyes. Those were her favorite features.

“I do not, but all of Society seems to think that of the Duke of Blackhill,” she told her sister.

“It isn’t nice to judge someone you barely know.” Margaret sniffed. “For all we know, he could just be shy.”

They shared a laugh at that, but their laughter subsided when a knock sounded at the door. Mr. Biggins walked in looking downright startled.

“A caller is here to see you, My Lord,” he announced, visibly buzzing with excitement but still looking spooked.

Helen wondered what could have spooked him so.

“A caller? I’m not expecting anyone.” Their father frowned. “Girls?”

“We didn’t invite anyone.”

“Who is it, then?” her father asked. “I’ll have to give him a piece of my mind for...”

“The Duke of Blackhill is here to see you, My Lord.”

Helen’s eyes widened, as did her sister’s and father’s.

Speak of the devil, and he really would appear.

What was the Ruthless Duke doing in their house?

She shot her sister a questioning look, which her sister returned. When Helen looked at her father, there was an interesting change in his demeanor. He shifted in his seat a little uncomfortably.

“Send him in,” he instructed, rising from his seat.

They rose too as the man himself was led in, looking every bit regal in an elegant coat that framed his body nicely and accentuated the broadness of his shoulders and narrowness of his waist. There was not one strand of dark hair out of place, and his dark green eyes glittered like emeralds as he gave them a polite smile. He looked every inch the perfect gentleman and nothing like the man he was rumored to be.

Helen had known he was handsome when she had randomly seen him in ballrooms, but having him here in her home and so close... her cheeks flushed as she became well aware of his masculinity. When his eyes met hers, she looked away quickly.

Her friends had been right, after all. His jawline was impeccable. She stole a quick

glance at him and found his eyes on her sister this time, and a weird feeling crawled into the pit of her stomach.

“Honeyfield,” he greeted her father with a tilt of his head. “It has been an age since I last saw you.”

“Your Grace,” the Viscount returned with a short bow. “Indeed, it has. Last I saw you, you were still refusing to wear your knickers.”

They shared a laugh.

“And lest I forget the lovely flowers in your home.” The Duke smiled. “You two are indeed as beautiful as I was informed.”

Helen and Margaret curtsied politely.

For some weird reason, Helen reddened even further. When she turned to look at her sister, Margaret also had red cheeks.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Margaret answered.

Helen, remembering her manners, thanked him as well when her father shot her a glare.

“You are welcome to our home, Your Grace,” her father said, leading him over to one of the sofas. “What brings you by?”

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Margaret called for a tea service to be brought in while she sat, not feeling the courage to speak for the first time in her life.

The Duke waited till Margaret had finally sat down before taking a seat. Whatever the Duke of Blackhill was, he was a gentleman through and through.

“Honeyfield,” he started. “I’m here to discuss a contract between you and my father, the Fifth Duke of Blackhill.”

Helen noticed that her father suddenly dropped his gaze and made a studious point of looking everywhere but at the Duke.

“I see you remember, so I’m spared the hassle of refreshing your memory,” the Duke said, a triumphant smirk playing on his lips.

Her father laughed awkwardly. “That was a deal your father and I made a long time ago after I saved him from losing his head over a card game in a local tavern.” He laughed. “I thought it became void when he died.”

Interestingly, no one laughed along with him. The Duke just watched him with a stony expression while Helen and her sister just looked on, confused.

“It didn’t,” the Duke said seriously. “My father’s man of affairs presented it to me two nights ago on the date stated in the contract.”

“Still, it was nothing official,” the Viscount argued.

“It had both your seals.”

The Duke’s words held a note of finality that resonated around the room.

“You can’t possibly mean to hold me to that promise. That is ancient history between your father and I,” the Viscount argued.

“But then again, it was not just a promise but a contract,” the Duke said tonelessly. “I could show you the proof if you want.”

He made to pull out something from his jacket pocket, but the Viscount tried to still his action.

“That will not be necessary...”

But the Duke had already pulled it out of his jacket pocket and extended it towards him.

The Viscount hesitated, piquing Helen’s curiosity, which drove her to collect it to pass to her father, but not before reading through it. Her eyes widened as she realized it was a betrothal contract to one of her father’s daughters, which meant either she or Margaret would be the future Duchess that all of Society would hate.

“Helen!” her father scolded, extending his hand and snatching it from her. But the brief glimpse she had had was enough.

It was the irony of the highest kind how she was so used to gossiping about people that she didn’t really know, but now her family happened to be the main characters of one of the popular stories that made turns in the ton—it was quite a unique experience.

Even then she paled in fear for her sweet sister, Margaret, who would no doubt be the bride of the Duke. Of all the ways in which her sister could finally be married off, this was the worst, in her opinion.

If it were some other gentleman, she might have been open to arranging a meeting between them to see if they would be well-suited, but not the Ruthless Duke.

He was too cold, calculating, and intimidating for her mild-tempered and nonconfrontational, sweet sister. If Helen let her get married to the Duke, she knew he would intimidate Margaret until he crushed whatever was left of her fragile spirit.

The Duke needed someone who could match him in temperament and challenge him, not someone who would easily agree to his dictates.

Her sister deserved someone who was kind and mindful of her mild nature, not someone as ruthless as the Duke. She could never allow it simply because two men decided to sit and decide their children's future even before they were of age.

She turned and marched angrily towards the Duke.

"I don't care whatever arrangement you have with Papa, but you are never marrying my sister. I will never allow it!" she snapped, and from the heat in her face, she could tell she was already red in the face.

Anger flowed red hot in her bloodstream, and even though she knew she was behaving at the height of impropriety, she didn't care. If she even scared him off considering either of them for marriage, she would be much happier.

"Helen!" her father scolded, visibly embarrassed by her behavior.

The Duke just stared at her with a blank look, then slowly rose from his seat to his

full height. He looked down at her with that trademark smirk of his, green eyes glinting dangerously.

She felt his eyes roam down her frame, the intensity of his appraisal leaving a heated trail from the crown of her head to her shoe-clad feet. If he was aiming to intimidate her, he was succeeding because he towered over her with his impossible height against her diminutive frame. She imagined she looked like a child stomping her feet while throwing a tantrum.

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“Your Grace,” her father started. “I...”

The Duke’s eyes on him stopped the words about to come out of his mouth. With his eyes on her father, she was granted some respite from being the target of his intense gaze.

“I apologize for my daughter’s rudeness,” her father finished, finally finding his voice with a pointed glare at her. “May we retire to my study to further discuss the situation?”

“All right,” the Duke conceded. “After you, My Lord.”

Helen watched her father step out of the room in disbelief. He had just dismissed her protest by moving the meeting to a private space where they could decide when he would send Margaret to the chopping block that marriage to the Duke would be.

“You will never have my sister,” she spat just before the Duke stepped out of the room.

He turned back to her, his eyes lit with dark promise.

Helen reddened and looked away, but not before noticing his trademark smirk directed at her.

“Interesting,” he muttered.

She sank back onto the sofa in an ungracious heap, but she didn’t care, even though

her handmaid would scold her for wrinkling her dress.

“Betrothal? To the Duke of Blackhill?” Margaret whisper-yelled, her voice unusually high-pitched.

Helen turned to see that her sister’s face was white with shock and fear.

“I can’t marry the Duke,” Margaret said, wringing her hands. “Why would Father draft a betrothal agreement without informing us?”

“I don’t know,” Helen answered, equally as distraught. She stood up, walking over to sit with her sister. “I think it was drawn up when we were still infants, and he didn’t tell us because he thought that it was void since the former Duke died.”

“Well, I can’t marry him,” Margaret cried, tears streaming down her face. “I... I love someone else.”

“Who?” Helen asked, surprised, trying to identify anyone her sister had been close to, and her eyes widened when it finally clicked. “Lord Wesley?”

Margaret didn’t answer, but the look on her face and the way she looked away, blinking away tears, was answer enough.

How was Helen supposed to console her sister, who was in love with a married man?

Rubbing Margaret’s shoulder in consolation, she murmured, “You won’t have to marry the Duke, I promise.”

* * *

It wasn’t every day that people stood up to him, and he would admit that Miss Helen

looked adorable while she confronted him. James' words hadn't been sufficient to describe the cherubic face on top of a body made for sin. At the sight of her full pink lips in a defiant pout, Alexander instantly felt the insane urge to kiss her. He had had to pinch himself to rid himself of the thought.

That was no way to think of a wife he was just marrying to sort out problems outside the marriage bed.

He liked the fiery spark he saw in her, though. It would serve her well against his family when he finally introduced them to her.

He was shocked to see that she had been the damsel that had caught his eye all those months ago at a ball he had been forced to attend by his best friend. He could tell she recognized him too but said nothing. He had watched her often at balls they'd attended, and the bright aura she carried around herself had captured his attention when some thought her too loud.

But then that was what made him notice her, at first. She was the only gleam of fun he had gotten from attending all those dull affairs to maintain the image of the dukedom and maintain public appearances for the sake of his business pursuits.

But then, he would have never imagined marrying her if it was not for the insistence of Lord Frampton that he preferred working with married gentlemen.

Finding out about the contract had helped Alexander kill two proverbial birds with one stone. Besides, it was time he got married, and there was no better time than the present to do so. He would marry the belle of the Season and gain the use of her hospitality skills to win the contract that would catapult his business dealings, and that was all that mattered.

It helped that she was beautiful, even though he didn't have any intention of claiming

his marital rights, no matter how tempting she looked.

Tempting, indeed. With sweet visible curves, her dress accentuated the softness of her body.

It was no wonder he spent several minutes staring at her. He was grateful that Lord Honeyfield had called his attention, or he would have given away his lust.

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When they got to the study, the Viscount offered him some whiskey, but he declined. His mind was already muddled where Helen was concerned, so he would prefer to keep it as clear as possible.

“Your Grace, I acknowledge that it was presumptuous of me to think that you would not hold me to the contract, but you must understand that this agreement was between your father and me. I didn’t think that you would want to follow your father’s wishes, since young people these days prefer to choose their partners themselves.”

“Well, I have my reasons for deciding to go this way. Besides, it is a well-known fact that you raised your daughters into well-mannered ladies despite the loss of their mother. I simply want the best,” Alexander said, smiling softly. “And I know this marriage will not just be beneficial for me but for you as well. I know about your near financial ruin. I promise to support you, despite the rumors you may have heard about me, and very well if she pleases me.”

There was nothing like adding subtle flattery and playing on a man’s greed when one wanted to deflect suspicion, and it had the desired effect.

The Viscount visibly relaxed and smiled in obvious pride.

“Well, Margaret is a well-mannered young lady with a good head on her shoulders. She is calm and nurturing but perhaps not the best when it comes to social gatherings. She will outgrow it with time. The two of you would do well together.”

“You seem to be mistaken, My Lord,” Alexander clarified. “I didn’t come to request Margaret’s hand in marriage.”

“Then why did you come?” the Viscount asked, visibly confused.

“I want to marry your younger daughter, Helen.”

Chapter Three

The meeting between her father and the Duke was taking longer than she had expected, but then she felt that if they were going to discuss her sister's future, they should take their time and be thorough about it.

Not that she would ever allow her sister to be drawn into such an agreement. But she would prefer to get the confrontation with the Duke over with before her bravado completely deserted her.

Helen hadn't expected the reaction he had evoked in her and found it hard to speak, but now that she knew her sister's plight, such silly emotions had to die so she could protect her.

Just about then, she heard footsteps as the Duke and her father made their way down the stairs. Her heart beat a frantic rhythm as she watched him descend the stairs she had walked a thousand times, marveling at how his aura seemed to dwarf the ancient wood structure.

She agreed wholeheartedly that the Duke was attractive in a way that left one staring in awe. Every movement he made was oddly graceful for such a large man, and the way he filled out his waistcoat gave hints that he might have a well-sculpted body beneath all the proper apparel of gentlemen. She had spotted his large hands when he had sipped tea, and they'd looked calloused with a light dusting of hair, more like a workman's than an aristocrat's.

The Duke cleared his throat, and it had the desired effect of jolting her out of her

reverie. She met his gaze, and the amused look in his eyes showed he had caught her gawking at him. She flushed in embarrassment.

Since when did she start having a vivid imagination about the anatomical proportions of gentlemen? She would like to blame it on the fact that she had recently just visited Lady Hamburg's statuary, where she saw a lot of Roman sculptures that exhibited the male anatomy in a tad exaggerated fashion. Exaggerated, because she doubted that the lean figures of the typical English lords, who were given to excess food and drink, could have such a level of muscles. But the Duke looked like he might have a body similar to those of the statues.

The smug smile on the Duke's face seemed to widen, making it obvious that he could discern the path her mind was clearly taking. Her flush intensified till she was sure she resembled a bright red tomato. She tilted her chin and composed herself, despite her embarrassment.

"I fail to see what is so amusing, Your Grace," she said in a voice that was surprisingly steady.

"I am sure that you could guess the cause of my amusement. Surely, you would not like me to say it aloud," he said with amusement in his voice, even though she heard the veiled warning.

He was so clearly enjoying her obvious discomfort. Helen opted to change the topic of discussion.

"Helen, you're being very rude," her father scolded. "Come pour the Duke some tea."

She sighed yet went to obey, resisting the urge to breathe in deeper when the Duke's sandalwood scent permeated the air the closer she got to him.

“Thank you,” he told her with a thick voice when she handed the cup to him.

“You’re welcome,” she answered, nearly breathless.

Their fingers lightly brushed when she moved to hand the cup over to him, and she nearly dropped it at the spark that went through her.

She cleared her throat and returned to her seat, earning a confused look from her sister.

“How was your discussion, Father?”

“It was quite satisfactory if I do say so myself,” the Duke replied, smiling triumphantly.

“It was fine, Helen,” her father answered. “But that is not talk to concern yourself with. It’s men’s matters.”

“It concerns us when you’re deciding our future, Father.”

“Helen!”

“No, Father.” She shook her head, rising to her feet. “I am telling you that you can’t marry my sister off to this man when we barely know anything about him. There are so many other ladies who would be very willing to marry him. He could select a bride among them.”

“Yes, those ladies might exist, but none of those ladies have a contract with my family. And you seem to be misunderstanding something. I never came to marry your sister. I want to marry you, my dear,” the Duke answered.

Helen stumbled back in shock. “What?”

“You heard me clearly.”

“Why would you want to marry me?” she spluttered in surprise.

“It’s quite simply because I want to,” he answered smugly. “You were so against me marrying your sister, so I decided to listen to you. Isn’t that what a good husband does?”

Her mouth opened and closed in rapid succession as she struggled to formulate a response. A snort escaped Margaret’s lips, drawing her attention.

Traitor.

“You can’t just stroll in here and demand to marry me,” Helen argued.

“Would you prefer I marry your sister instead?” he asked with a lazy smile.

“That’s not...”

“It’s settled, then.” He smiled triumphantly.

Helen stared at him in shock.

How could he be so insufferable?

“Margaret, I think we should give the new couple time to get acquainted with each other,” her father announced suddenly, rising from his seat.

“Yes, Father,” Margaret agreed, rising from her seat and rushing out of the room like there was a fire on her heels.

Traitors.

“I am so going to make sure you regret choosing to marry me,” Helen promised darkly when they were alone.

The teasing smirk disappeared from the Duke’s face, and his eyes darkened and narrowed in annoyance. He started towards her, his steps slow and purposeful, and even though she wanted to stand her ground, when he neared, she was forced to take a step back and then another until she was standing with her back against the wall with nowhere else to go.

The Duke leaned in closer till the only space between them was a sliver of air. Even then, that disappeared quickly as he leaned in closer.

She knew she should have been afraid because he surpassed her in both size and strength, but instead, she felt a thrill that was completely at odds with the situation at hand. His proximity meant that she was assailed with his unique sandalwood scent and his natural musk, which made her want to breathe in deeper. It was only by sheer will she didn't do it. He smelled so good, she wanted to bite him.

His closeness meant she could feel every hard ridge of his body and the heat coming off him in waves, which sent her heart spiraling, giving her a feeling she dimly recognized to be... desire.

The Duke was obviously not immune. His green eyes were almost black, with his pupils dilated so wide that they shocked her. Her eyes dipped of their own volition down his face, noticing that his nostrils were flared, and his breathing had slightly quickened.

Her eyes dropped to his lips, which were full with an enticing bow on top and oh-so pink, calling to her. They reminded her of a succulent fruit, and she wondered dimly what it would feel like to be kissed by the Duke. As she watched, the said lips were getting closer, and it was clear he was moving to kiss her.

She should have stopped him—at least a logical part of her brain cried for her to stop him—but instead, she closed her eyes in anticipation. Seconds passed, and she felt him grip her jaw, running a finger across her lip, leaving tingles in his wake and then nothing. She opened her eyes and felt the Duke's breath on her ear.

“You said you were going to reject me? I would like to see you try, little one,” he said, the low timbre of his voice sending shivers down her spine. “I can see just how much your body sings for mine. Marry me, and you'll never have a cold night again.”

“I will never...”

“I will be expecting you for luncheon tomorrow. I’ll send my carriage to pick you up an hour before,” he stated, calmly rising to his full height. “Don’t attempt rebellion by not coming.”

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With that, he left her and walked out of the drawing room, leaving her a mess of hormones and intense embarrassment.

By the time Helen had gotten herself together, he was long gone. So much for confronting the Duke. She was the one who was reduced to a puddle at his feet.

Her hands touched her lips subconsciously, and even though she hadn't been kissed, her lips tingled. She knew if he had kissed her, she would not have stopped him even though they stood in the drawing room, where anyone could see them—such was his power over her.

* * *

Later that evening, Helen had dinner with the family. She was distracted by her thoughts, and the dining table was unusually quiet, with her father also being unusually preoccupied with picking food and placing it in his mouth with a faraway look in his eyes.

While she was sure that Margaret might not mind having a quiet table at dinner, she preferred to use dinner time for family discussions, since it was one of the few times when the family was together.

“I am going to meet the Duke for lunch tomorrow. I wonder if he mentioned anything of that sort to you, Father?”

“Yes.” The Viscount nodded. “He agreed to my proposition that he takes his time to get to know you. I guess this is his way of doing so.”

She nodded and was about to say something when she was interrupted by Mr. Biggins, who presented her with a letter from the Duke which had just arrived.

It was an invitation to a meeting at her favorite tea shop for luncheon. She wondered whether he knew that or it just happened to be his favorite tea shop too. The invitation was written in a neat masculine cursive and signed simply as A. O. She wondered if that was his Christian name and decided she would ask him when they met. Maybe even torture him with it, since in her experience, most names that began with the letter O were usually atrocious.

“I was actually very surprised when he said he was offering for you instead of your elder sister. Do you have any idea why he would do that?”

Helen shook her head in denial.

The Viscount turned to Margaret. “This goes back to what I was saying. You have to be more welcoming and sociable to attract good suitors. Under normal conditions, your sister is not supposed to get married before you because it will further reduce your chances of getting married, but this situation has taken the decision out of my hands. You have to do better, my dear girl. Do better.”

Helen looked at Margaret, and while her elder sister maintained a stoic expression, there was a sheen of moisture in her eyes, and Helen suspected that Margaret was minutes away from weeping. So, she decided to change the topic.

“How is your venison, Papa? I think mine might be a tad undercooked.”

It worked. Her father’s face became guarded.

“It is fine as always,” he answered, not meeting her eyes. “It suits my palate very well.”

“All right.”

But she was not quite sure that was completely true because she had noticed a drop in the quality and quantity of the fare they got these days.

She had brought it up to her father and the cook, and they just brushed it aside. Maybe the cook was losing his touch in his old age. Monsieur Frederick had been with them since she was a child, so he might just be suffering the effects of aging.

“Thank you, Father, for the meal. I would like to retire early above stairs,” Margaret said, standing up.

He just nodded without looking up as he polished off his coffee and read his newspaper. Helen looked at Margaret’s plate and saw that she hadn’t eaten much of her meal, but Helen didn’t want to draw attention to that to avoid providing further ammunition for her father to scold her sister.

She decided to retire too because she felt Margaret required consolation.

“I believe I will retire too, Father,” she said, rising from her seat. “I have an early day tomorrow.”

At that, he raised his head. “No stay. I have some things to discuss with you.”

She nodded, and Margaret left the room at a sedate pace while Helen reclaimed her seat at the table.

“You are going to be meeting the Duke tomorrow over luncheon, and I would like for you to be on your best behavior and try to get to know him. Also, I’m not unaware of his looks and charm. Don’t be foolish, dear girl, and avoid doing anything that would bring you shame and this family ruin,” he said with such seriousness that Helen was

stunned.

She could not believe how little her father thought of her. There was no way she would succumb so easily to the Duke when she already disliked him with a burning passion.

“Have I made myself clear, Helen?”

She nodded.

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Helen fought to maintain a straight face, even though she was boiling inside with rage.

“You know what happens between a man and woman can be very exciting, especially?—”

“You don’t need to explain Father. I think I know enough not to get myself ruined. I have married friends, remember?” she said, giving him a reassuring smile.

He heaved a heavy sigh and gave her an apologetic look.

“It is at times like this that I miss your mother,” he said with a sad smile. “She would have been best placed to educate you on what to expect in the marriage bed and on proper etiquette, but...” He sobered. “Do I have your word that you will be on your best behavior during your meeting with the Duke tomorrow?”

“Of course, Father. I will just be myself,” she said, smiling at her father. “When have I ever not been on my best behavior?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, then shook his head, leaving the dining area with a look of uncertainty that had her laughing. He really did know her so well to know that her promise to be herself was a promise that chaos was going to erupt soon.

Now that she thought about it, she was looking forward to the meeting tomorrow. The Duke was definitely about to get more than he bargained for. A plan was forming in her head that made her grin with evil intent. After what she had planned, he wouldn’t waste time dissolving the stupid contract.

She made her way above the stairs, passing by Margaret's room to check in on her. There were tendrils of light seeping beneath the edges of the door. Apparently, Margaret was still awake.

Helen hesitated at the door, debating whether to check in on Margaret or leave her alone and return to her room. A soft sniffle coming from the room made the decision for her. It seemed that her sister was crying.

"Maggie?" she called, knocking on the door. "Are you still awake?"

There was silence, then Helen tried again.

"Are you well?"

Even as she asked, Helen mentally kicked herself.

Of course, she is not well. Who would be when she is being repeatedly degraded for something that is not purely of her making?

"I am well, Helen," Margaret replied. "I am well, so you can go to bed."

Helen opened her sister's door and slipped in, since the thickness of her sister's voice let her know she had been crying for a while. Helen found Margaret in bed still in the clothes she had been wearing at dinner.

When Margaret looked up, her eyes were bloodshot, and her face was puffy. It was obvious she had been crying for a long time.

Helen made her way over, sat at the edge of the bed, and then patted her sister's hand, which sent her into another fit of tears. She waited patiently till the last of the sobs, handing her sister a kerchief.

“I am well now,” Margaret told her, but Helen just nodded, sitting still beside her.

They sat in silence for a while, but Helen decided not to push. When Margaret was ready, she would open up to her.

They were silent for so long that Helen almost gave up on Margaret speaking to her, but she was quite content to sit with her sister in silence if that was the emotional support she needed.

“You know,” Margaret began with a voice that sounded like it came from somewhere far away, “if someone had told me a few years ago that I would still be here, living with Papa, unmarried and unhappy, I would have laughed it off as a cruel joke. The picture I had then was that by the time I had seen three-and-twenty years on this earth, I would have been married to my betrothed, and I would have had one or two children, living happily while running my own household, with the love of my life by my side. But then Fate is a cruel taskmaster, no?”

Helen rubbed her shoulder in consolation. Of course, she understood firsthand just how fickle fate could be.

Two years ago, Margaret had been madly in love with a lord she had been secretly courting and was looking forward to their happy life together, until disaster struck. When Margaret discovered that love was not all it took to have a happy life, that the opinions of Society could make or destroy a relationship, regardless of one’s intentions.

Margaret was so sure she was going to be walking down the aisle, since her betrothed had already informed her papa of his intentions to wed her after a long time. It had taken a lot of convincing, but her papa had finally agreed. He was set to announce their engagement during a ball that was going to be held in his family’s home. Margaret had been delirious with joy that she would get to spend the rest of her life

with a man she so loved... or so she thought.

The tragic day began as all other days began, normal with clear skies and no hint of rain in sight. There was no inkling that it was going to be the worst day of her life. She had prepared carefully, donning a jade-green dress that had just arrived from the modiste. The dress was made to complete perfection in her opinion, accentuating her green eyes and skin so much that she shone. They'd all rushed to his family's home, and she had been bursting with excitement that was so obvious that everyone had commented that she was basically radiating with it.

She tried to distract herself by making conversations with her friends, but her whole body was giddy with anticipation for the moment when George would announce their engagement and announce to the whole world that he was officially off the marriage mart and that he was ready to begin his journey towards marriage with her by his side.

By the time the second dance was coming to an end, she could not stand still, her eyes searching the room frantically for signs of George, since it was time for him to make the announcement. She could not find him in the crowd, but she became aware of a disturbance in the crowd that began at the entrance of the ballroom and soon spread out to the people beside her as everyone craned their necks while moving towards the balcony to see for themselves the cause of the disturbance.

The increase in the noise level was starting to make Margaret feel uncomfortable, as she was getting a sick feeling in her gut. Something was definitely not right. She fought her way through the crowd till she got to the balcony, and there she received what proved to be the worst shock in her entire two decades of existence.

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George was standing in the garden, his hair disheveled like it was caught in something, or more likely someone had run their hand through it, pulling at it. His shirt sleeves were buttoned wrongly, and he had rouge on his lips. A lady she recognized to be Miss Veronica Martins, an American heiress his mother was sponsoring, whom he had claimed to detest severally, was hiding behind him, in a disheveled state as well.

The picture before Margaret was drawing her to a very terrible conclusion, and she shook her head vigorously. Someone was screaming the word “No” repeatedly, and it was some time before she recognized that that person was her.

She could not believe that George was frolicking with Miss Martins, and of all things, he had been caught in a scandal on the day that he was supposed to make one of the happiest days of her life. She screamed till her ears started ringing and darkness crawled into the edges of her vision.

When she woke up again, she was tucked in bed, with Helen holding her hand, a compassionate look in her eyes. Apparently, she had screamed until she swooned, and she was brought back home to rest. Margaret was aware that she was supposed to be mortified, since she had made a spectacle of herself and that she was now going to be fodder for the gossip mill of the ton.

But at that moment, she felt an overwhelming sense of betrayal and heartbreak. She had trusted George with every fiber of her being, and she never would have imagined that he could betray her in so callous a manner. She had loved George since she was old enough to know what love was and insisted that there had to be some other explanation for the situation she had encountered, and try as she might, she could not

shake the hope that he might be innocent and that everything that had happened the previous night was just that... a big misunderstanding.

By noon, Margaret had already dressed and had asked her maid, Jenny, to apply a little more powder to disguise the dark circles and bags under her eyes. Jenny was quite skilled with the use of cosmetics so that when she was done, there was little evidence that Margaret had spent most of the night and early morning crying.

Margaret arrived at George's house, and she was let in to wait for him in the receiving room. After quite some time, George came down to meet her. He looked remarkably fine compared to her, and she felt like she had been turned inside out.

"George," she greeted, rising from her seat to run to him.

"Margaret," he answered, holding her away from him and looking everywhere else but at her.

There was a long, uncomfortable pause until Margaret decided to break the silence.

"What really happened between you and Miss Martins?" she asked in a shaky voice.

At that, George's face turned red in embarrassment.

"Miss Martins approached me just when I was about to make our engagement public and insisted that she had something of great importance to tell me. I tried to inform her that we would have to reschedule. She burst into tears, so I took her outside, where she then proceeded to kiss me. I tried to push her away, but she held me tightly. We struggled till Mrs. Martins saw us and proceeded to alert her companions to the situation at hand."

Turning to her, he took both her hands and looked at her with so much remorse that

Margaret was in danger of forgiving him even without hearing the full story.

“You know I love you, and I would never do anything to hurt you,” he said, staring at her with pleading eyes.

She wanted to believe him at all costs

“So you were set up by Miss Martins?”

“I’m afraid I was.”

“If that is the case, it can be easily resolved. Make an announcement to the ton explaining that it was a mistake.”

George shook his head in amazement at her naïveté. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way. I was caught in a compromising position with Miss Martins. If I do not do the honorable thing and marry her, she will be ruined. Forever. Unable to secure a good match for herself. And I would prefer not to have that on my conscience.”

Margaret paled in horror.

“Besides,” he continued, looking away and staring at some point beyond her shoulder, “you know my family has been in dire financial straits, and Miss Martins’ fortune would definitely come in handy in solving that.”

It was at that moment that everything became clear to her. It was all too convenient that he was caught with an heiress who had the key to solving all his financial problems, and even if he was truly trapped, he was all too happy to remain in the trap.

Margaret turned on her heels and fled. Blinded by her tears, she found her way to her carriage. She spent her entire journey back to the manor in heart-wrenching tears, but

by the time she had arrived at the manor, a strange numbness enveloped her and continued for the several weeks following the incident. When they attended one of the ton's many balls, and George and Miss Martins, now Lady Wesley, were in attendance. She watched him pander to his wife's whims, and the wall that protected her heart melted like it was never there, and she fled.

That night, she broke down again in the privacy of her bedroom because she had attached herself to a man who abandoned her, and she developed an inability to move on, even though he had crafted a satisfactory life for himself.

She would love to be able to stop her heart from hurting, but she had come to realize that when the heart loved very deeply, it was not easy to just stop. But perhaps it was time she moved on despite the pain, and her father's scolding today had driven that home. She could not afford to allow her pain to turn her into a selfish and irresponsible person. Her sister didn't deserve that.

* * *

"You know I don't usually care about Father's scolding. I... I don't know why I am a watering pot now," Margaret said while wiping her tears with her hands.

Helen didn't bother asking what she was talking about, but she understood.

"Maggie dearest, nobody truly gets used to being scolded—we just ignore it. But you are human, and you cannot be strong all the time even if you want to. I can't tell you how sorry I am for my part in this whole mess. I don't know why Father insists on comparing you to me. You are amazing, Maggie, and I have always looked up to you, and I'm sorry if you have been made to feel less because of me," she said, hanging her head in guilt.

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There was a moment of silence, and then Helen felt Maggie's hand on her chin, tipping it so she looked into her eyes.

"Helen, this whole situation does not have anything to do with you." Helen made to protest, but Margaret raised a hand to stop her. "Let me finish. Father only scolds me because he is frustrated and worried about my unmarried state, and you shouldn't blame him. You know how society treats unmarried ladies. I do wish I could just marry any gentleman, but I don't fancy anyone of them, and the one I do fancy is not mine. I do believe I might have to settle for a marriage of convenience. After all, that is what members of the ton do all the time. No?" she said, smiling ruefully.

"Helen, I'm the one who is supposed to step up to honor the contract Father had with the late Duke, but I shirked my duties for a... delusion, leaving you, my younger sister, to bear the consequences of my choices. I am really sorry."

Helen smiled at her sister, Margaret opened her arms, and Helen embraced her.

"We are really quite a pair, aren't we?" Helen chuckled. "It is amusing how this society continues to deny women the right to choose their spouses with their ridiculous laws. That is our reality. But we will be fine"

"Yes, we will be," Margaret agreed softly, her eyes clouding in introspection.

Worried that her sister was retreating into her shell, Helen decided to change the topic.

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm going to make sure that the Duke regrets the

day he conceived the idea of marrying me.”

“How do you propose to that?” Margaret asked with a curious furrow on her brow.

Helen sat up, making herself comfortable on the bed as she continued, “We all know that our Duke is fastidious and a stickler for propriety.” She looked at Margaret in expectation. She only got a blank stare in return.

“Well, you tell me. I had never noticed the man prior to our meeting earlier today. Of course, I have heard of the Ruthless Duke, but I could never point him out in a room filled with people,” Margaret replied

“Well, he is,” Helen continued, “and I am counting on that one trait to save me from this marriage.”

She gave a triumphant smile.

“How do you intend to do that?”

“It is quite simple. I will simply embarrass the Duke with my atrocious manners so that he will have no choice but to end the marriage.”

Margaret sat up, shocked. “Helen, you’re not serious.”

“Oh, but I am. The Duke wants the perfect Society wife—graceful, hospitable, and at least average-looking. He seeks to marry me because he feels I fit those criteria. My aim, therefore, is to dissuade the Duke from marrying by becoming the polar opposite of his ideal wife,” Helen said in excitement.

But Margaret did not share her excitement. Her brow furrowed in concern “I think such a plan will severely damage your reputation, and remember, he is a duke. He

could weather any scandal that comes his way—he has been doing it for several Seasons, weathering scandals that would have crippled lesser men. I am afraid the same cannot be said for us.”

Trust Margaret to be sensible at all times. She had always been the more levelheaded of the pair of them. While Helen was more prone to making impulsive decisions, Margaret was the type to analyze a situation thoroughly before making decisions.

“Don’t worry, I will be careful,” Helen said with a reassuring tone

“Remember, if everything goes south, I could always step up and marry the Duke. He can’t be all that bad.”

“I am sure he is all that is said about him and more,” Helen replied.

* * *

Helen woke up that morning with a strange excitement within her to execute her mischievous plans. She had barely been able to sleep the night before as she plotted.

She was going to make sure that he regretted the day he stepped his Hessian-covered feet in her home to enforce that ancient betrothal contract. She had come up with new ways to torture the lofty and mighty Duke of Blackhill.

He was called the Ruthless Duke, and she was counting on that “ruthlessness” to get herself out of this situation. Her simple plan was to embarrass him so much that he would be forced to cut ties with her family for good, but she had to be careful so as not to ruin her family’s reputation.

From her observation of the Duke over the years, she was able to come to one conclusion—the Duke cared about appearances a lot. That was why he attended the

affairs of the ton even though he always looked like he was dying of boredom. He was a man who wanted to marry her because he thought she was the belle of the ton—hence the perfect hostess and partner to rule his dukedom. So her plan was to systematically dismantle that impression of her until he had no choice but to look for another gracious lady to accept the role of his Duchess.

Besides, he shouldn't even care if she happened not to be his bride, since he had made it clear he was marrying just for political reasons. Any well-bred gentlewoman could play that role as well as her.

Helen snuck out of the house before the Duke's carriage arrived to pick her up. She went on to visit her friends, who hadn't heard anything new about the Duke's bride.

“Am I terrible for wishing she was ugly?” Joana sighed.

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“I do not think so at all.” Ariadne frowned. “I would still hate her, though.”

Helen tried not to look guiltily at her friends. If they knew it was her, she wondered what they would say.

She bid them goodbye not long after and arrived at least thirty minutes after noon.

When trying to annoy a fastidious duke, why not start with unapologetic tardiness?

She walked into the tea shop, making a point to look around for the Duke. She caught the eye of the shop owner—the shocked look on her face was priceless and comical. It was a miracle that Helen did not burst into laughter.

She finally caught the Duke’s eye. His eyes narrowed, and his eyebrows knitted in confusion. She almost pitied the man. It was probably difficult for him to reconcile the woman walking towards him and the one he met at her father’s townhouse. But by the time she got to the table, his expression had turned enigmatic

“Your Grace,” she said with an exaggerated curtsy. It was a wonder she didn’t fall down flat on her face.

“Good day, Miss Helen,” he answered distractedly. His eyes were locked on her hair. “That is an interesting thing you did with your hair,” he said with a sarcastic curl to his lips.

Interesting was definitely one way to describe her appearance because she knew she looked deliciously... atrocious. She had styled her hair into a multitude of curls that

she hoped resembled something out of nightmares that, in combination with the puce-colored day dress she wore, she was sure anyone would call interestingly atrocious. And she thought she was having the desired effect because the store owner and other patrons of the shop kept looking at her with undisguised shock. The Duke, on the other hand, was handling it quite well—too well, in fact. She decided it was time to push the table a little bit.

She sat down and smiled innocently at him. “It’s a beautiful day we’re having, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he agreed. “Shall we order?”

She nodded and, already knowing what she intended to order, signaled to one of the staff, ordering the shop’s largest loaf of bread. Then she proceeded to consume it in large chunks while the Duke watched her with amused interest.

“You seem to love bread a lot,” he commented, buttering a perfect slice.

“I do actually,” she replied. “I hope you don’t mind my table manners. I have always been told that I never eat in a ladylike manner. It has always been a matter of concern to my father, but I never understood why I shouldn’t eat to my satisfaction simply to please Society.”

“Well, I agree. I had never liked ladies who eat barely enough to keep a bird alive. I believe a real woman should eat properly,” he replied.

She tried not to let her disappointment show but was secretly impressed that the Duke was proving to be more open-minded than she had thought, but then she was ready to explore another angle. Most men of her acquaintance rarely forgave a blow to their egos, so her next goal was to deliver a blow to his ego

“Your Grace, the note you sent me was signed A. O. I assume that the O is for Oswald, but what might the A be? Albertus, Albany?”

His lips just curled up in amusement.

“Americus? Asparagus?”

At that, he threw his head back and laughed heartily for several minutes. Helen was particularly startled by that picture. In all the years she had seen the Duke, she had never seen him laugh that heartily, and God did it do wonders for his face.

He was already lethally attractive, but something about his laughter tugged at her heartstrings. It was a deep baritone that sent vibrations through her body. She felt a deep sense of pride that she had been able to make him laugh but shook the thought out of her mind.

Gradually, his laughter subsided, and he wiped the corners of his eyes. A look around confirmed that she was not the only one who was surprised by the Duke's laughter.

“Asparagus? Really? Who would name their child after a vegetable?” he said while wiping some tears at the edge of his eyes. “I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I have a perfectly boring Christian name. Alexander. You could address me as Alex. My friends do, and we are going to get married, so we should dispense with all these formalities, don't you think?”

Helen was still too shocked to provide an answer. This whole situation was not going the way she had envisioned. She had started the maligning of his Christian name to annoy him, but instead, it amused him. But then she was nothing if not tenacious, and she was definitely going to get a rise out of him if it was the last thing she did. She had gone through a lot of trouble preparing for this charade to let it go to waste.

She signaled to the servers, and they brought the tea tray.

“Did I ever tell you that this was my favorite place in the whole of London, Your Grace?” she said, smiling cheerfully—maybe too cheerfully, since he was looking at her with narrowed eyes.

“This tea shop?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, waving off the server that tried to pour the tea. “They have the best tea in the whole of London.”

She made a show of pouring the tea for him and knocked over the glass of water, whose contents spilled on his trousers.

“Oh dear!” she said with feigned concern, coming over to his side of the table, and using the paper towels to mop the water off his clothes. The Duke just looked at her suspiciously and assured her that he could take care of himself.

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She returned to her seat, apologizing, then suggested they take their tea. The Duke agreed, for it would give his trousers time to dry a bit before he returned home.

Helen resumed sitting, cradling her tea cup with an innocent look on her face.

“Why do I believe that this was no accident at all?” he asked with a knowing smirk on his face.

Helen made a point of looking anywhere but at his face. “I don’t think I take your meaning, Your Grace.”

“I am sure you do,” he said with an indulgent smile.

Helen stood up. “While I enjoyed this outing, Your Grace, I fear I have to return home. My Father might be beside himself with worry.”

“I highly doubt that, but I am ready to go home. I don’t particularly fancy sitting here in my wet clothes. I could drop you off at your manor. It is just on my way.”

Helen nodded and went to pick up Rose, her lady’s maid, from where she sat conversing with the store owner. They headed outside to meet the Duke, who was already waiting. He helped her into the coach.

The ride was uneventful, with her preoccupying herself with studying the landscape while he read through the papers. When they got to the manor, she thanked him while he helped her down from the coach. When she had her feet firmly on the ground, she walked closer to the Duke and plastered on her best smile.

She said, “Thank you for this outing, Your Grace. I am sorry for how it played out, but it was nice coming here with you.”

“I enjoyed myself too. Since we both enjoyed ourselves, what do you say we meet tomorrow for a promenade along the serpentine at Hyde Park?” he asked with a knowing smile on his face.

Helen was so shocked by that unexpected response, she blurted out the first response that occurred to her

“No.”

At that, his smile disappeared, and the predatory gleam replaced it, and he approached her.

“Why?” he asked in the low timbre that always sent shivers down her spine.

Rose noticed her mild trembling. “Are you cold, Miss? I left your coat at home. Silly me,” she said, before rushing into the manor, leaving Helen alone with the Duke.

Helen turned to him, and he raised a single eyebrow in question

“I... I just...” she trailed off.

She noticed he was stalking her, and she initially moved backward until her back was pressed against the coach. She had noticed she was always ending up in this position with the Duke. It was fast becoming a habit.

That was her last coherent thought before her mind was scrambled up by his increased proximity. She just stared into his eyes. The hungry gleam in his eyes and the way he kept staring at her lips made her decide that he obviously wanted to kiss

her... badly.

His face kept coming closer till their breaths were mingling, and his scent surrounded her. She closed her eyes in anticipation for the kiss, but instead, she felt his breath on her ear.

“Helen,” he said in a husky tone, “I know what you want.”

Yes, a kiss, her body screamed.

“It won’t work,” he said, before turning to climb into the coach.

It took her time, after she had gotten her rioting body back to order, to understand that he wasn’t talking about a kiss but the fact that he understood her game.

Helen walked into the manor in a daze. It took Margaret calling her name several times to drag her out of it.

“I am sorry, Maggie. I was distracted. I didn’t hear you call me,” she apologized.

“Distracted? I am sure that is one way to describe it,” Margaret said, giving a detailed perusal of Helen’s outfit. “I am guessing the get-up was for the Duke’s benefit.” She chuckled. “How did he take it? I really hope you succeeded because you sure went to a lot of trouble to scare the Duke away.”

“That is the problem, he took it too well,” Helen huffed, dropping onto the sofa with a pout.

“Well, did he fall on his knees and profess his undying love for you and his partiality to orange-colored hair?” Margaret asked, laughing.

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Helen gave her a warning look. Margaret tried to stifle her laughter by placing a hand over her mouth, but she burst into laughter whenever she took a look at Helen—she could not help it.

“Sorry,” she said when she finally got herself under control. “Where did you find such bright-colored dye anyway?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” Helen replied, looking away.

Margaret snorted. Helen gave her a sideways look, and Margaret waved her hands in apology while trying to get her mirth under control.

“While I am happy to entertain you, I am not finding this situation particularly funny. The Duke is such a stubborn oaf. Even after I went to great lengths to make a spectacular fool of myself, he still insists on a promenade tomorrow morning,” Helen grumbled, with a sullen look on her face.

“I think it might not hurt to give him a chance—he might actually like you.”

Helen snorted in disbelief. “More likely he is planning to drown me in the serpentine.”

Margaret highly doubted that was the case. While Helen was trying very hard to deny it, even a blind person could sense the chemistry between them. She could detect the high flush on her sister’s face that confirmed the Duke affected her profoundly even though Helen would prefer to ignore it.

In Margaret's opinion, the Duke was not half bad. He looked responsible. If not for her feelings for another man, she would have been happy to let him court her, but she believed her sister and the Duke had the potential to be deliriously happy together if they could put their egos aside.

ChapterFour

"You did what?" James asked, spitting the drink he had been about to swallow everywhere.

Alexander gave him a reproachful look, wiping his waistcoat with the table napkins provided.

If he hadn't spent his three years at Oxford as a roommate with this man, he would have doubted his noble upbringing due to his brutish mannerisms.

"Sorry." James winced. "But you have to admit that was rather surprising. Why would you get a special license when you are not sure she will agree to marry you? And even then, why don't you just marry her properly? You're a downright cad."

His tone was full of disapproval but still held humor, so Alexander didn't take his words seriously.

"Why would I do that?" Alexander asked. "If I wanted to go through all of that, I'd have gone through the whole ordeal of courting her. Besides, I'm the Duke of Blackhill..."

"And you always get what you want. Yes, but I'm not sure that applies to your beautiful betrothed if I've been rightly informed. How was tea with her yesterday? Was she everything you wanted?"

Of course, James already knew all about Alexander's outing with Helen, even though Alexander hadn't told him. Truly, the man's network of spies scared Alexander sometimes, even though he frequently made use of his friend's network to get an advantage over other competitors.

"She was just perfect. The perfect gentlewoman," he answered, making a show of staring into his glass, swirling its contents.

Perfect was definitely not the word he would have used to describe his bride-to-be, but he would be damned if he said otherwise. James would have laughed at him, and there was only so much Alexander could take before he punched him.

The right word for her would have been a harridan because she had behaved so poorly that he would have been embarrassed if he hadn't seen through her attempts to get him to call off the wedding.

Her beauty, even while performing her theatrics, had stunned him so much that he found himself struggling to maintain a grasp on his self-control. He had never considered a woman's neck to be erotic, but since he met Helen, he had been consumed by a strange desire to kiss her thoroughly.

Her full pink lips were just begging for it, and her curves begged his hands to worship her body. When she had stood up to him in her father's house, red in the face and neck, he had wondered if she flushed with desire the way she did with anger.

She had somehow invaded both his dreams and his waking hours, and he had woken with his member harder than it had ever been before after a night when he had been haunted by thoughts of licking and nibbling his way down the length of her neck and curvy body. He had come very close to acting on that impulse once.

A snort from James made him look up.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Because you’re a cynic who doubts everything he hears?”

“True, but I also happen to know a lot of things about you,” James said with a smug grin. “So, tell me what happened. I know you are holding something back. I promise not to laugh too hard.”

“I don’t know why I keep you around.”

“You do because I help you make money.” James laughed, rolling his eyes. “And because you’re secretly in love with me.”

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“You wish,” Alexander scoffed. “But all right, I’ll tell you. She is unlike any other lady I’ve met.”

“In a good way or a bad way?”

“A little bit of both, actually,” he admitted, shaking his head. “She damn well stood up to me and told me to shove my marriage contract.”

“She really did that?” James asked between bouts of laughter.

“Yes, but not in such colorful terms.” Alexander laughed. “It was almost cute if I was in the mood, and then she attempted to embarrass me at the tea shop. I’ve never seen a woman eat so shamelessly.”

“Your lady is sure inventive. I withdraw my previous advice on how this is a bad idea because you’re a prick. I think she is way too good to be wasted on the likes of you. She might help break your stiff personality.”

Alexander gave him a warning look, but James was definitely not apologetic and was enjoying his laughter at his friend’s expense. It was not every day that he laughed heartily, courtesy of his stuffy friend.

“I am astonished that you still invited her to go on a promenade with you, knowing full well she’ll be looking for ways to embarrass you,” he commented, giving Alexander a teasing look. “I have always known you to be the fastidious sort and not one to spend time on such nonsensical frivolities. You claim you don’t want to court anyone, but you’re effectively courting her. A display like that would have been most

likely to have you scaring the poor girl silly. You must really like her company for you to want to keep it. Careful, Blackhill, she just might be the one to melt your cold heart.”

Alexander rolled his eyes at the absurdity of James’ words. Yes, he found himself wanting to be around Helen more than he cared to admit, but that was only because in some way, he wanted to see just how much temptation he could take before he finally gave in and not because he necessarily enjoyed her company.

“You are insinuating that I might have feelings of a softer nature towards the lady, and that is quite far from the truth,” he explained. “I just need to marry her because she will be the best aristocratic wife to impress the Earl and Countess. I will admit I find her resolve interesting, but that’s about it.”

The amused smile on his friend’s face confirmed that James didn’t believe him, but Alexander didn’t blame him. Even as he spoke those words, he found he didn’t completely believe himself either.

He knew he was supposed to keep his distance from her because most of his fantasies about her were not appropriate for polite company. But he quite craved her presence, even though it always had him debating whether to strangle or bed the minx.

His only consolation was the fact that Helen was just as affected as he was, and even if she might not have identified the feeling yet, her body revealed that she felt the heated attraction between them just as well.

He suspected her attempts at embarrassing him were her attempt to run from the intensity of her feelings, and he was not above using the mutual attraction between them to get her to agree to marry him.

“So, you don’t want to bed her?” James asked as he was about to swallow a sip of his

drink.

He coughed, trying to get rid of the drink that had lodged in his throat. When the coughing finally ended, he glared at his friend.

“You haven’t answered my question,” James pointed out with a wide, knowing grin.

“I don’t want to bed her?” Alexander answered, even though it sounded more like a question.

“What about me, Your Grace?” A beautiful blond woman stopped at the table. “Do you want to bed me?”

Alexander raised his eyebrow as he noticed that it was time for the courtesans to serve guests at the club. Usually, he left before the time came.

“Lady Fallon,” he greeted. “It’s a pleasure, as always.”

She smiled, coming to run a hand down his arm with a sultry smile.

“Indeed. I’m surprised you’re here,” Lady Fallon said, curving her lips seductively. “You usually leave before the festivities.”

He read the meaning behind her words, disgust filling him. Lady Fallon was a fashionable widow who’d turned to selling her body when her husband had died, and over the years, she had always expressed her interest in having Alexander as her lover. Alexander had always graciously declined, but her boldness in touching him now and something about her presence there grated on his nerves and tested his patience.

Oblivious to his mood, she placed a dainty hand on his shoulder.

“I heard tale that you were about to get shackled to some high-bred chit. Congratulations,” she said cheerfully. Then dropping her voice to a sultry whisper, she added, “You could come visit me later. I promise to give you the time of your life. Consider that my parting gift.”

She batted her eyelashes in a way that was supposed to be seductive but just served to inflame his annoyance.

Firmly holding her hand, he removed it from his person.

“I don’t appreciate people touching me without my permission, Lady Fallon, and I am not interested in your proposition. Please, in the future, refrain from touching me without my permission.”

A flush of embarrassment appeared on Lady Fallon’s face. “I only wanted to?—”

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“Yes, I know, and you can bestow your favors on a more willing customer.”

She shrank back in anger. “How dare you?” She sneered. “Do you know how many men would die for a night with me?”

“You should go meet them, then.”

She gasped, trying to hit him, but he gripped her hand in his and glared at her.

“There are a number of stupid things you could do, but hitting me should never be one of them.”

He threw her hands back, and she stumbled back. “Have I made myself clear?”

She nodded, before running off as fast as she could.

When he turned back to his friend, he saw a look of shock on his face.

“You should close your mouth, or the flies will go in,” he said with a sarcastic curl of his lips.

“Was that really necessary?” James asked, although his tone lacked heat.

“Was what necessary?”

“You just humiliated Lady Fallon. I know you never wanted her, but you were usually more gracious while handling it. What happened?”

“I just made my position clear. Seems to me that was the only way she was going to stay away from me.”

“I still think you could have handled it better than you did.”

The look on Alexander’s face warned him to drop that line of discussion.

“I handled it the only way I thought she would finally understand,” Alexander explained unapologetically. “If you want her for yourself, you can have her.”

“Damn you,” James said, shivering in disgust.

“I just thought you wanted her, since you want to defend her so much.”

James shook his head, obviously disappointed, but Alexander didn’t care. He wasn’t one to dally with women who made a hobby of selling their bodies, especially one who would so readily try and trap him with a pregnancy.

“Anyway, what’s your plan to tame your spitfire bride?” James asked, crossing his hands.

“I look forward to seeing what tricks she comes up with.”

They shared a laugh.

“Is she really as beautiful as they say?”

Alexander thought back to how she had come on their outing with an odd-looking hairstyle and quite possibly the ugliest dress he had ever seen, and yet she still outshone every other woman present.

He recalled how beautiful she had looked standing in front of him, even when he had backed her up against the coach and how he had wanted to kiss her.

The sound of James clearing his throat pulled him out of his train of thought.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” James smiled, rising from his seat. “I have a feeling that things are going to be very interesting from here on out.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ll let you know in due time.” He smiled. “Come, I’m in the mood to fence.”

“More like you’re prepared for me to beat you.”

“Oh, I’m more than ready to beat you.”

ChapterFive

Early the next morning, Alexander set out riding his horse, a handsome Arabian stallion aptly called Spitfire for his fiery nature, to meet up with his bride-to-be at Hyde Park for a stroll.

Much like Helen, the stallion had been a challenging one to break and had wounded a number of men before finally yielding. Nonetheless, every so often, he still threw powerful tantrums.

Alexander gave himself a mental shake as he realized he had been smiling and thinking of the stubborn girl. It was concerning how everything seemed to remind him of her and how she had made a comfortable home in his thoughts and dreams for herself more often these days.

He remembered the dream he had had the night before, and a cold sweat broke out on his back at the vision of her legs tangled with his, with his hands palming the soft curves of her hips that teased him whenever she walked. Her body was unbelievable, and he struggled to keep his hands to himself whenever he saw her.

He groaned as he felt himself throb with lust again this early in the day and broke into a fast trot across Hyde Park in hopes of restoring order to his rebellious mind and body. He found that it worked for the most part because by the time he stopped at the

bank of the Serpentine, he was calmer, and his raging lust had settled into a small flame.

“Alex! Your Grace!” a familiar voice called.

He looked up, and just like that, all the work he had done to keep his composure crumbled to dust as he spotted the figure responsible for his trouble.

Helen rode towards him, the very picture of beauty in a navy riding dress that accentuated the cobalt of her eyes and the very feminine curves of her body. Her dark hair was pinned securely under a small blue hat, yet some strands chose to escape, giving her a delicate windswept look.

Her pale skin shone in the soft glare of the sun, with a slight pink hue creeping into her cheeks as she neared, alerting him that he was not alone in his troubles. She too desired him even if she seemed hell-bent on denying it. He wondered briefly if she flushed just as beautifully everywhere.

His pants tightened again, and fearing she would notice, he turned his horse, willing himself to calm down.

When she neared him, he finally noticed she rode astride and shook his head with amusement at her continual attempts to get him to cancel the marriage. Of course, his fiery bride did nothing in half measures. He had wondered how long she would continue her attempts to get him to cancel the marriage.

When she finally stopped, she dismounted ungracefully before he could even help her down, and he caught a glimpse of... breeches?

The little minx was wearing breeches underneath her dress. His eyebrows rose to his hairline as he looked around, wondering if anyone else noticed. It took great effort

from him to school his expression.

The tiny woman was making him lose his carefully crafted composure, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she greeted with a sunny smile.

The brilliance of her smile confused him, effectively dousing the anger he had felt and knocking all rational thought out of his mind. Her cobalt-blue eyes lit up with mischief, and her body was literally vibrating with excitement.

"You wear breeches?" he blurted out, chiding himself when the words were out.

"Y-yes, I do," she stuttered, obviously taken aback by the question. She recovered quickly, though, smiling triumphantly. "They are quite comfortable for riding. Don't you think so? You men are so lucky."

She looked so proud of herself that he wanted to laugh, which caused him to choke when she faced him and lifted her skirts to show him.

He averted his eyes, but not before he caught how the tight-fitting pants hugged her figure. His pants tightened again as his hands itched to run over her body.

"Helen!" he scolded her.

"What is it, Alex?"

"Please drop your dress."

"Why? I'm showing you something," she said oh so innocently.

“I know, and I’ve seen enough of it,” he begged.

“All right.”

“But you see why I wear it. It is not particularly popular with the ton, but it is perfect for me,” she went on, unaware or rather not caring how she had nearly killed him. “I’m sure you would not approve of such behavior in your future duchess, but I’m telling you now that if you do insist on marrying me, I do not intend to stop.”

Helen smiled, obviously satisfied with herself.

Let's see if he'll still marry me.

She was sure this would be the final straw that gave her freedom. No self-respecting lord would appreciate his wife riding all over town astride a horse, wearing breeches of all things.

“That is very practical of you and safer too. That means if we do a race, you'll actually be able to compete,” he said finally, stunning her. “I never could understand how women steered horses down precarious slopes while riding sidesaddle. Plus, since you're wearing breeches, I won't have to be too worried about you being exposed.”

Helen's jaw dropped in shock. The Duke just gave her a knowing smirk.

She had really thought that would have been enough to keep him from marrying her. If anything, it made him want her even more, and he imagined her body on full display in those breeches.

When his mind started straying towards seeing her out of the breeches, he coughed, shaking the thought out of his mind.

Looking around, his brow furrowed in confusion at another thing he noticed.

“Where is your chaperone?” he asked with a frown.

“My maid was occupied when I left the house, so I decided to let her be.”

Of all the foolhardy, silly things she had done...

Alexander realized that talking to his bride or scolding her benefited him little except for more defiance, so he decided to try a new tactic.

A predatory gleam entered his eyes, and he advanced, closing the space between them. If she didn't think him dangerous enough to be alone with, he would help her see.

Dropping his voice to a low timbre that sent a becoming flush through her skin, he said, “Are you sure you didn't leave her behind on purpose?”

“And... and why would I do that?” Her voice shook as he crowded her against a tree.

The park was basically empty, so it wasn't hard to play such a risky game with her.

“I don't know,” he said, keeping his tone playful as he leaned forward to tease her earlobe. “Perhaps you have some other reason for coming to the park.”

“What other reason would I have to come here except for our ride?” she asked innocently, but her breathlessness showed him that his plan was working.

“Why, so you could be alone with me, of course.” He gave her a lopsided grin, effectively trapping her against the tree.

Her cheeks and neck were flaming red now, and the exposed strip of skin at the top of her breasts heaved as her breathing quickened.

“But I'm not alone with you,” she stated, finding her voice as he leaned closer to her.

“We are in a public park, so I don’t need a chaperone.”

“Are you certain about that?” he asked with an enigmatic smirk, placing a kiss on the side of her neck.

Her shiver made him smile. He knew he was going too far in his attempt to scare her, but he was having too much fun seducing her to care.

She looked around, realizing that even though they were standing in a public park, they were very much alone, as it was still quite early—far earlier than the fashionable hours that the ton kept. The park was so devoid of people that they might as well be standing in a secluded alcove.

When she looked back at Alexander, his smile had grown with amusement, seeing the realization in her eyes. He advanced closer.

No!Helen screamed inwardly, even though her body screamed,Yes!

She knew how this ended. This time she was in danger of begging him to kiss her if this advanced any further.

Just then, a blur of fur caught the side of her vision as a stray dog darted by, and in the next minute, a pained moan split the air. That stopped the Duke in his tracks, and they both turned towards the sound. An elderly woman was lying on the ground and trying and repeatedly failing to get back on her feet. They both hastened to the spot.

“Are you all right, Madam?” Helen asked in concern.

“I am quite fine. Help me up, will you?”

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Alexander caught up with them and offered his arm. The lady turned to him, and a brilliant smile split her face. Alexander could not help smiling back.

“My love, you’re back,” she said, clutching his hand tightly. Alexander’s smile died a natural death. “Where have you been?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t...”

“Thank goodness, you are back. Nobody will dare refer to me as a widow again, will they? Not when my husband is alive and well.”

Helen clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laugh. This was getting even better; the woman thought he was her dead husband. Since he wanted a wife so badly, the universe had provided him with one.

He looked torn between running for dear life or helping the confused woman. The woman, on the other hand, didn’t mind his lack of enthusiasm and proceeded to rub her cheek on his hand like a cat. Alexander let her while he figured out what to do.

The snort escaped Helen and made him turn to see her desperately fighting to suppress her laughter. He gave her a warning look. Instead of being apologetic, a mischievous gleam entered her eyes.

“Why, Sir, don’t you help your sweet wife up, so you can take her home and take proper care of her? She has clearly missed you,” Helen suggested, her eyes dancing in obvious enjoyment.

He narrowed his eyes in warning, but she ignored it and continued, “She must have been so lonely, waiting all this time for you to come home. You don’t want to keep her waiting anymore, do you?” she asked sweetly.

Alexander turned to the elderly lady to see her looking up at him with a rather hopeful look on his face. He smiled at her, heaved a long-suffering sigh, helped her up, and led her towards his coach, which was waiting at the edge of the park. He was going to use it to take Helen sightseeing, but he guessed it would have to serve a different purpose. Helen led both of their horses over to the coachman, who tied them to the back of the coach.

After settling the old lady and Helen in the coach, Alexander instructed the driver to take them to Stromborn Manor. He had recognized the lady when he first saw her face. She was the Dowager Countess of Stromborn, who was known for her love of morning strolls and stray dogs. With her display today, it seemed it was time that such excursions came to an end, as her mind seemed to be bending to the effects of old age.

Throughout the journey, the Dowager Countess kept a firm hold of his hands, and her grip only slackened when she drifted off to sleep. Helen had an amused look throughout the short journey to the Countess’s home, and Alexander gave her one in return that spelled retribution once they saw the woman well settled. Helen shot him a daring look that made him chuckle and shake his head. The damn girl was too troublesome for her own good.

When their party arrived at the manor, he and Helen introduced themselves to the butler, who rushed frantically towards the coach when Alexander explained the reason for their presence. Apparently, the Dowager Countess had somehow slipped away from the house without her companion knowing, and they’d already had almost all their staff out searching for her.

When they had successfully transported the sleeping Countess into the manor, Alexander expressed his concern to the butler and advised him to keep a better eye on her. He would have preferred to talk to the Dowager Countess's son himself, but the young Earl and his Countess were not in town for this Season. The Duke made a mental note to write a letter to the Earl when he returned home.

When the butler and the frantic companion went to see the Dowager Countess settled, Alexander turned back to see that Helen still had an amused look on her face.

"What is it?" he asked with a frown.

"You certainly handled that well. You were the very picture of a devoted and caring husband," she said, laughing at the exasperated look he threw her way.

When she finally got her laughter under control, she noticed that the Duke was not laughing.

"It's a good thing." She smiled at him.

"Did it convince you to marry me?" He smiled back. A full-toothed smile that made her stop and stare.

She had never seen him that way, and she admitted he was rather handsome when he smiled.

"No, but it was a good attempt," she answered.

"Huh? I guess I'll have to try harder." He pouted, making her laugh.

"How? You'll look for more elderly ladies to save?"

“No,” he said seriously. “I’ll look for more elderly ladies with a love for stray dogs to save.”

A loud peal of laughter escaped her before she could control it, and when she finally quieted, she found the Duke’s gaze was fixed on her lips with a rather hungry look on his face.

Her eyes widened, and her mouth went dry, her tongue subconsciously darting out to lick her lips. She felt hot as his pupils dilated, his green eyes darkening.

She wondered at all the strange sensations she was feeling, and even though she had read in novels that they were all symptoms of desire, she still found it hard to believe that she desired the Duke when she barely knew him and, even stranger, that he desired her.

He moved closer as if spellbound, and she could feel her body throbbing in anticipation. Her mind blanked till everything around them faded into the background.

She became increasingly aware of him, his sandalwood scent made her want to lean in closer, and his proximity let her feel the heat coming off him in soothing waves, reminding her of a warm furnace on a cold winter day. The matching increased rate of their breathing and the relentless throbbing in the lower parts of her body both scared her and made her want something she couldn’t name.

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In some faint part of her mind, she wondered what it would feel like to kiss him, and if she would finally get to experience what it felt like to be kissed.

He advanced even closer till her chest was pressed against his, and there was no space between them. It felt so improper because they were in someone's home, and anyone could come in at any time, but it only fueled a dark desire inside her.

Who was this wanton woman she had become?

His eyes asked the question she hoped he would, and she felt herself nod, her eyes closing in anticipation. She felt his breath on her lips, and he was oh so close to her that she felt she would die if he moved away now.

Finally, she felt his lips brush against hers, gently first and then firmly, and then nipping her bottom and upper lip in a rhythm that drove her insane. She tried to match his kisses, but the intensity of his desire was so strong that she let him have his way with her mouth.

She moaned into his mouth as she itched to get even closer to him, her hands burying themselves in the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling softly. His groan reverberated through him, and she absorbed the vibrations.

He finally slowed the kiss and then licked at her lips gently, urging her to open her mouth. She did, and his tongue touched hers, sending liquid heat through her.

He tasted like dark coffee and blueberries, a sweet and bitter combo that had her moaning into his mouth. Their tongues wrestled for dominance, and she felt him slide

his hand into her hair. He drew even closer and then proceeded to kiss her senseless till she was almost in his lap.

The loud sound of one of the doors in the manor being shut jolted Helen back to reality, and she forcefully broke away from the Duke, panting heavily. Her hands went to her hair, trying to restore order to her appearance, shaking as the reality of what had just happened between them sank in.

“It is fine,” he told her, but her hands still fussed over her hair. “Leave it,” he said more firmly, placing a hand on hers, but she pulled away.

She could not believe that she had kissed the Duke in someone else’s home in broad daylight like a wanton.

To think she had been making plans to avoid marrying the Duke. What use was it if one look from him could make her abandon all reason and jump into his arms?

Alexander must have noticed from her expression that something was wrong.

“Helen,” he asked, “what’s wrong?”

She looked away from him, clenching her fists. Anger filled her, trying to hide the shame she felt.

He placed a hand that was supposed to be soothing on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off, hating how her body responded to his.

“Don’t touch me!” she yelled, rising from her seat.

“Helen, what?—”

“Don’t.”

“Talk to me.” He sounded so concerned that tears pooled in her eyes.

“Stop. Leave me alone,” she cried. “I hate you. It seems you’re the type to do whatever it takes to get what you want, including stooping so low as to seduce an innocent. I have always made it known that I do not want to marry you, but you insist on forcing me into a marriage just for your own selfish reasons. You are truly despicable.”

She knew the moment her words had sunk in, as his face turned dark with suppressed rage. If she wanted the Duke gone, she had finally succeeded.

His expression was so stony, he could have been carved from granite. He had a cold look in his eyes that tore at something in her heart.

“It seems I misinterpreted our encounters as something cordial, but I have learned my lesson. I never intended to force you to marry me. I had hoped to show you how good things could be between us, but I was mistaken. I will never force a woman to marry me. Good day, Helen,” he spat with a stiff bow and then left her standing in the Dowager Countess’s drawing room.

It took her some time to calm herself and step out of the house. When she neared her horse, which the Duke had left tied out front, it felt like everything that had happened during the past hour was nothing more than a bad dream she had just woken from.

She rode back home in a haze, like she had her head underwater. She barely noticed anything around her, even though the streets of London were packed with towners shopping and networking and trading gossip.

She was greeted often by people she had been introduced to at previous balls, and she

spared them short greetings and continued till she was home. When she got home, she found her father standing at the door, beaming.

“It seems all is going well with the Duke,” he noted.

“Indeed, Papa,” she lied. “Good day.”

“Good day, my dear.” He was positively radiating excitement, which stoked flames of guilt within her. “I’m very glad you are getting along well with him. I’m proud of you. I’m sure your mother would have been too.”

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“I’m glad too, Papa,” she replied, with a forced smile.

“If I’m being honest, I didn’t want you to marry the Duke, but...” he trailed off with a sigh.

“What is it, Father?” she asked, squeezing his arms with concern.

“I didn’t want to tell you or your sister this, but I guess I can now,” he started. “You see, the estate is in dire financial straits, and I’d been worried that I wouldn’t be able to care for you and your sister, but since I’m getting the Duke as a son-in-law, I guess I won’t need to worry about that anymore.”

That was news to Helen, but she guessed she wasn’t supposed to be surprised. The reduced quality of the fare the cook served the past few months hinted at that, even if her father had always been keen to wave off observations to that effect.

“I guess not,” she answered, before realizing that she had in fact just ruined her father’s hope for happiness.

Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion swept over her. The ache in her heart for telling off the Duke and the added threat of poverty was proving quite too much for one day.

“May I be excused, Father? I have to go lie down.”

“Are you well, child?”

“Yes. I just need time to recuperate before the noon meal.”

“All right. Go and have some rest, my dear.” He smiled. “I’ll see you at the noon meal, then.”

She nodded and somehow found the strength to climb up the stairs to her chamber.

In the privacy of her bedroom, she slid to the floor, burying her head in her hands. Even if she didn’t want to get married to the Duke, she had to do so for her family’s sake, but she would have to find him and apologize first before it was too late.

ChapterSix

Alexander could not remember the last time he had felt rage. Of course, over the years he had felt annoyance when dealing with the incompetence of staff and of course the aggravating attitude of his stepmother and siblings, but he could not recall being consumed by a rage so encompassing that he was fairly vibrating with it.

He could not decide what was the root of his anger. Was it the fact that he had lost his head and kissed the lady senseless in someone else’s drawing room, where anyone could have come upon them, or was it the way she reacted after the kiss, painting him as the villain? Try as he might, he could not quite regret the kiss. He only wondered how he would survive without her now that he had a taste.

He didn’t delude himself by thinking he was honorable because if not for the sound that jolted them back to their senses, he would have been just a heartbeat away from lifting her skirts and ravishing her right there in the drawing room with no care for who might have seen.

He was that lost. The helpless lust he felt for her scared him. His lust for her, his fear, and his anger at her were a toxic mix of emotions that were making him very upset. Even while he was angry with her, he still had to adjust the crotch of his trousers to accommodate the erection that had not quite subsided since his encounter with her.

He had always known that kissing was her bad idea because then he would keep going back for more. That one night, hell a thousand nights, would not quench the fire in his blood. And as it always happened when he ignored his instincts, he was right, and oh, how good she felt in his arms.

The woman was a witch who inspired extreme emotions in him, and he definitely was not happy about it. It was amazing how he could be boiling with rage while his body remained aroused. The toxic mix of rage and lust in his blood was hardly ideal for rest, so he decided to stop at the Gentleman Jackson salon. Hopefully, physical exertion would grant him respite from his volatile emotions.

Walking into the salon, he spotted James kitting up for a match, so he approached him

“You look like hell,” James said when he got close to him.

Alexander shot him a dark look of warning, but of course, James would never back down from an opportunity to taunt him.

“You are usually in a sour mood, but you seem to be in a spectacular one at this moment. It has been quite a while since I have seen you this furious.”

“Who says I am furious?” Alexander growled.

“Animosity is streaming off you in waves—even a blind person could sense it. I wouldn’t recommend going for a match at the moment. Apart from the danger of you causing someone’s son permanent injury, matches fought in anger usually end up with a hand or fingers broken. If you need an activity to let off steam, I would recommend fencing instead.”

Alexander sat down in defeat.

“You know, since I have known you, I have never seen you this angry. You are basically vibrating with it. I would guess that your rage has something to do with the lovely Miss Helen.”

At that, Alexander gave him a dark look.

“I will take that to mean that I am right,” James said, chuckling. “I am starting to like this bride of yours. If she can manage to make you, the Ruthless Duke, this angry, she must really be a force of nature. I would love to make her acquaintance and maybe take some leaves from her playbook.”

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Snorting in annoyance, Alexander stood up and made to leave.

“Wait a while. Where are you going? Come sit down and let’s discuss.”

“You seem to enjoy taunting me. I am not quite in the mood to banter with you.”

“Calm yourself and let’s sit, shall we? You can tell me all about the beautiful lady who seems to have the baffling power to discomfit you.”

Alexander reluctantly sat down. After telling him the story, James burst into laughter.

“How the great have fallen!” Jame regained a sense of composure, but mirth danced in his eyes.

Alexander rarely did anything to prompt jests from his dear friend, and whenever he did, he went to great lengths to hide the faux pas from James. In moments, James’ eyes would twinkle, and the daft man would take to calling him ‘Alexander the Great’.

James’ lips quirked a bit at the glory of being right. “If you had been having women problems all the while, you should have come to me. I am quite the connoisseur.” He wiggled his eyebrows mischievously.

“Connoisseur of mistresses,” Alexander scoffed. The habit was beneath him. However, he was hardly an ignorant Puritan. “How many ladies with strong aspirations to propriety have you seduced?”

“Dearest Alexander, forgo the verbosity and ask me for help. I won’t even demand you get on your knees.” James widened his arms, relaxing into the plush leather chaise. Then, with great hauteur, he added, “Look at me being quite magnanimous! Wherever would you find another friend like me?”

On the streets of Saint Giles, scouting for their next partner.

Alex held his tongue. He did need his friend’s help, whatever it consisted of.

Helen didn’t believe in the political nature of a marriage. She wanted love, children, and a doting husband, and while he could not give them to her, a duchy was at her feet! He was to make her a duchess! What more could a lady want? He was the closest thing to royalty. A most fortunate catch. Why was she so myopic?

“Your help would entail what?”

“How to compromise your damsel, so she’s forced to marry you of course,” James monotoned, as if considering whether to attach tassels to his boots or not.

“Good day to you, friend.” Alexander made to rise. However, James was quicker.

“Don’t be so hasty, I only jest.”

“Don’t make such remarks concerning a woman’s virtue.”

James nodded.

Only when Alexander slumped back—though with ducal grace—did James repose.

“Here’s what you really should do.”

Listening to him, Alexander wondered what his friend thought of him to suggest such a preposterous idea.

“Helen is a woman. Women love lies, they love deceit, and what do they love more? Believing they could see through a man’s deceit and lies. If you were to make her believe this brooding mein is nothing but a façade which you unraveled for her, which she uncovered, I bet you she would beg you to marry her.”

Alexander considered his friend’s suggestion, though not with the intention to enact it. James was actually a madman.

“I will not be partaking in any ritual to humiliate myself. You expect me to act as a nincompoop dandy just to marry her.”

James grimaced but nodded.

“I am a duke, not a peacock. Women vie for my regard.”

“What women?”

“That was a low blow even for you,” Alexander retorted. “Even though they damn nearly faint at the sight of me, surely there’ll be one desperate enough to tie herself to me. Besides, I don’t intend to bed the girl. I just need her to put up a good appearance.”

“And do you intend to reveal your plan to her?”

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Alexander considered that question carefully. There were a few ladies in the ton he could consider mature enough to handle such a secret at best, and at worst faint at the suggestion. And those few were either already married or too old for him to consider marrying.

He sighed, taking a sip of his drink. Helen would have been a perfect fit if she wasn't so aggravating.

"What are you going to do about her then, Alexander?"

Truly, he didn't know, but he was good at pulling himself out of even more complex situations, so he was sure the answer would come to him in time.

"I am thinking about it."

* * *

When Alexander arrived back home, it was very late. He started considering that he should cancel the marriage license.

"Your Grace."

"I would like a bath then I will go straight to bed. I do not want to be disturbed."

"Your Grace?—"

"Make haste."

“There’s a woman.” Alexander’s hand stopped on a banister. He never required support to walk, but his entire person felt jaded. He turned to the butler. “She requires an audience with you.”

“Where is she?”

“In the parlor.”

Alexander took a tempting step down. “Who is she?”

“She requested my discretion.” The butler cowered. “But she’s also wearing a cape. I haven’t caught a glimpse of her face yet.”

A faceless woman at this hour, in his parlor?

If she was not begging to be compromised... but what if she was? His butler was loyal, but he had also served his family long before the former Duke died. He could be susceptible to the Dowager Duchess’s wiles.

Alexander barged into the parlor, his presence imposing in the dimly lit room.

“Your Grace?” She rose.

That voice.

She took off her hood and revealed those beautiful blue eyes to him. Even in the dark, she glowed. He stood there, like a smitten man, staring into her face unmovingly.

His first instinct was to grab her face and kiss her senselessly, but then he remembered what she said to him.

I hate you.

Her words began to kindle something inside him, and staring at her, he realized it. Need. He needed someone for the first time since he was a boy. He needed her to like him. He needed her to want him. Everyone wanted a duke, everyone wanted what the title could offer, but not her. She didn't care about the title or the power, and a part of him hoped that if she saw him as Alexander, she would like what she saw.

You're despicable.

He did what he did best, what he had learned to do all of his life—he masked his need with anger and pretended.

“An innocent girl visiting a bachelor's lodgings this late into the night—” He walked further into the room. “You never cease to surprise me,” he spat.

He realized when she flinched that he had been too harsh, but he wasn't going to apologize.

Hate was a strong word. No matter how superficial a relationship was, the word shouldn't pass through one's lips. Not that Alexander had cared until her.

“Did you know?”

He arched his eyebrows. He sat, but she remained standing. Her whole body seemed to quiver, but he assumed it was a trick of the dark.

“That you had come to me like a thief in the night? No. You convinced my butler to betray the servitude of his job. You are quite impertinent yourself, doing whatever you please.” He threw her words back at her and watched for her reaction, but it didn’t bring him joy. He made to rise. “It’s late, Miss Helen, and I will ask for a coach to take you home. I don’t want to compromise you any further.”

He inwardly cursed himself. Now his thoughts were drawn back to their kiss. Their mind-boggling kiss. He tried to stop it, but her scent permeated the air. The whole room was engulfed by her existence, and her soft lips were right there. Full and needing a friend.

“I see you’re angry.”

How insightful.

“But you have to understand...” She tilted up her head and regarded him, and her eyes were aflame. “You haven’t been the most agreeable.”

Confronting a duke impudently? He needed this woman, and no amount of pretense could mask it.

“I am a woman, and I expect gentleness—even from a duke. You are wealthy—you

could afford it.”

What was she talking about?

However, this was his second lesson on women in a day. Was he so clueless about the opposite gender?

“If you had tried to at least charm me?—”

“How do you suppose I should have done that?”

“Get to know me! My likes, my dislikes. Do I like milk with my tea? Do I have any flowers I am averse to?”

“Why would I care about your aversion to flowers? I don’t run a florist.”

“No, you don’t.”

Disappointment.

James was right. Women loved to unravel a man. They never believed their eyes but their heart. But the heart was very deceptive. His at the moment was beating—no, pounding in his chest.

“I didn’t mean anything I just said... No, I did.”

Women are such paradoxical creatures. He needed to keep a journal just to understand her.

“You’re a human, not a frigid pole.”

They were so close, and she jabbed her finger into his chest.

“If I charm you, would you come willingly to me?”

“I-I suppose.” Her emotions were fickle. One moment, heat was rising to her cheeks, and the next to her eyes. “Then I would not go to embarrassing lengths to make my person unappealing to you.” She clapped her hands over her mouth. “I didn’t mean that, Your Grace.”

The corners of his lips twitched, and he cocked his eyebrows.

“Did you know?”

He could not hide the amusement in his voice. “Know what?”

“That I was purposely trying to make myself unattractive to you?”

“What do you think?”

“I am sorry. My family had nothing to do with it. I decided entirely on my own.”

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It wasn't a crime. In fact, it was intuitive to attempt to break free of a forced marriage. And her plan was...

"That's a big offense, Helen."

"I would do anything for your forgiveness."

"Anything?" he breathed.

Her lips parted, and he knew she was affected by their distance, or lack thereof, as much as he was.

"Spend three nights with me."

No woman was as quick to anger as Helen was. "You might be a duke, but you have no right to?"

"You misunderstand me. I am not inviting you to my bed." Her eyes searched his face for some iota of sincerity. "First, let's sit down."

ChapterSeven

Helen had to make a conscious effort to close her mouth. She could not believe he just said that. Of course, she was not oblivious to the fact that in recent times, he had made advances towards her, but he had never been this brazen before. If he had been aiming to shock her, he had definitely succeeded, and the smirk on his face showed that he was satisfied with the effect his declaration had on her.

“I can sense the direction your mind has taken. You have a dirty one, do you?” he said, with a mocking smirk on his face.

Well, when he said he wanted her to spend three nights with him, what was she supposed to think? Virile young men definitely did not invite young ladies to spend three nights simply to make conversation with them. She would agree that she might be naive, but surely she was not that naive.

“While I can’t deny the appeal of such an arrangement. I have an entirely different plan for those nights.”

“Pray tell, Your Grace. What could you be planning when you invite a young lady to spend three nights with you?”

“The plans are quite harmless, and I will tell you if you would allow me to explain,” he said, raising his eyebrow.

“Well, go ahead. I am all ears.”

“I wonder if you have ever made the acquaintance of the Earl of Frampton and his lovely Countess?”

“Well, I was introduced to them during the last Season, but I fail to see what that elderly couple has to do with the issue at hand,” she said, raising an eyebrow in question.

He ignored the look and continued, “What impression did you have about the couple when you met them over the course of the Season?”

“I met them a few times during the Season. They are known to own a very profitable business enterprise, having invested in a lot of railways and construction both in

London and overseas. They are not quite popular with the ton, since we know members of the fashionable set look with disdain at people who make their money through trade, but they are invited to events because the ton need their money and are willing to do anything to stay on their good side. I won't say I am surprised that the ton is quite hypocritical that way."

"Careful there, kitten. Sheath your claws, will you. Do remember you are a part of this ton you castigate."

Helen snorted rather inelegantly and waved her hand in dismissal. "That is beside the point. What does this have to do with your invitation?"

"My darling, it appears that just like other members of the ton, I need a favor from the good Earl."

Helen had to restrain herself from pointing out the fact that he just used an endearment when referring to her. The word, spoken in the low timbre of his voice, did interesting things to her insides. She made a conscious effort to compose herself.

"I am sure that doesn't have to be very difficult. You could go talk to the man. You are quite eloquent, so I am sure you could convince him to see reason."

"While I am flattered by the compliment," he said with a crooked smile, "I am afraid I have done just that, and he turned down my offer."

"Why?" Helen asked, a furrow of concern forming on her brow. His hand itched to smooth it out.

"He cited several reasons—and they were all reasonable reasons, I might add. But I failed to take something into consideration when preparing to persuade such a shrewd businessman."

“And what, pray tell, is that?”

“Apart from his shrewd business sense, Frampton has been known to favor married men in his business dealings more than their unmarried counterparts. His reason is that he believes that married men are more financially responsible and that the presence of a woman usually calms a man’s spendthrift tendencies. I do not agree with the man, but he is a business genius, so I guess he is entitled to his idiosyncrasies. That is why I need to announce our engagement, and you will attend the theatre with me on the first night. Hopefully, the Earl will count me among the ranks of responsible men,” he said drily.

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“Am I to infer that your plan to marry me was born out of the need to impress the Earl?”

Alexander squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. “Well, that was just one of the reasons. There were others.”

There was a pregnant silence for a while.

“I fail to see why this business deal is so important to you. You are a duke, so why do you need this deal with this man so much that you are willing to get married to a lady you barely know just to secure it?” she asked in a curious tone.

Alexander’s expression changed from sarcastic to closed off. This was the cold Duke she had met at first.

“I fail to see how that is any business of yours. You came here seeking to make a deal with me. I gave you the terms. So are you willing to keep your end of the bargain or not?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I will accompany you to the theatre,” she said in defeat.

It was obvious he was not willing to explain why he needed the business arrangement with the Earl of Frampton.

“What about the second and third night? Are we to attend the theatre on those nights? I must warn you, I am not particularly fond of plays.”

“Fear not, kitten,” he said, his smirk returning. “The second night, you are going to accompany me to an engagement ball.”

“Well, that sounds exciting,” she said, a wise smile appearing on her face. “Who is getting engaged?”

“My half-sister,” he replied, looking away and busying himself with pouring a drink.

This was the first time he had mentioned anything about his stepfamily to her. The tension in his body and his facial expression warned her that prodding him about it would be unfruitful and dangerous, so she decided to take the path of self-preservation.

It was a well-known story among the ton that the Ruthless Duke had driven away his stepfamily and claimed the seat of the dukedom as his place of residence. The ton attributed this action to the Duke’s greed, but if there was anything Helen had learned in the years of sharing gossip with her friends, every story had more than one side. She would love to hear the Duke’s side of the story, but she was discerning enough to know that the present moment was not the appropriate one to find out.

Besides, the members of his stepfamily made believing that story a little difficult if anyone actually analyzed it, but unfortunately, members of the ton were not prone to doing such. Rather, they thrived on the satisfaction of being among the first to dole out fresh gossip, whether it made sense or not. Helen had to admit, they were shallow-minded.

If anyone went by the way the Duke carried himself in social gatherings, they would never guess he had a stepfamily. But then again, members of the said family made sure that members of the ton never forgot.

His half-sister had crowned herself the princess of the ton. Using the fact that she was

the daughter of a duke, she amassed for herself a dozen simpering girls who helped her bully the mild-tempered debutantes who made their debut every year. Any debutante who made the mistake of trying to shine by being different or refused to pander to her whims was promptly disgraced in the most humiliating way.

Even Helen, during the early days of her first Season, had to develop a meek relationship with the half-sister in order to enjoy a Season free from bullying while she pretended to agree with all the girl's airheaded ideas.

Sophia, the Duke's half-sister, prided herself on being a fashion trendsetter, hence the reason why she was never seen in the same gown twice. Helen sometimes wondered if Sophia made daily trips to the modiste for her to maintain her fashion sense. She concluded that Sophia had a lot of money to be that extravagant—too much money, in fact, for someone who claimed they were driven away from their home.

That idea was explained away by Sophia's claims that the late Duke had settled an allowance on all his children at their births. Helen noticed that there was recently a change in the trajectory of Sophia's persona. Over the last few weeks, Sophia had started to wear clothes from earlier in the Season, altering them in such a way as to keep anyone from noticing she had worn them previously, and she deceived everyone but Helen with her analytical mind and eye for fashion.

Something was going on, and Helen was sure of it.

Looking at the Duke's simple but tasteful attire and even the decor of his home, it was quite obvious and interesting how different his lifestyle was from that of his stepmother and siblings.

“And the third night, Your Grace?” she asked

“We will be attending my half-sister's wedding and the wedding breakfast, of course.

The couple expressed their wish to get married as soon as they were engaged. Apparently, they do not wish to have a long engagement. And I quite agree with their arrangement, since I am partial to a short engagement period myself.”

“Let’s say I agree to your proposition, what happens after we spend those three nights together?”

“Well, then you will be free.”

“I am not quite sure what you mean?”

“Why, you would be free to live your life as you wish. We can go our separate ways if you like—that is the beauty of a marriage of convenience. We get to lead separate lives. You can do whatever you want as long as you do nothing to tarnish the image of the dukedom.”

“That is anticlimactic, don’t you think? I get to do everything I want so long as I don’t tarnish the image of the dukedom. It is quite ironic, since most of the things I want to do have the potential of damaging the image of your precious dukedom. While we are at it, do you have any other rules you would like to add before I start planning my fabled independent life?” she asked sarcastically.

Helen was furious, and her anger stemmed from her disappointment that Alexander would write her off so easily, compressing her to fit the box that stored his business deals. She was not deluded enough to expect a grand expression of love from him, but she had thought that going by what had transpired between them yesterday, she would be getting more out of their marriage arrangement than just a business deal.

But it seemed the Duke was resolved to separate business from pleasure if he sought to also deny her the pleasures that came with marriage. She wondered briefly if he were entirely unaffected by what had transpired between them that he never wanted to broach the subject, but even though she wanted to ask, it would be entirely improper.

“I guess I should just prepare to spend the three nights, after which I get to live my life as a free woman—well, as free as a married woman can be,” she answered, beside herself.

“You would still be married to me regardless, so I would advise you to act with utmost discretion and decorum.” A dark smirk appeared on his face. He stood up and started stalking towards her with a predatory gleam in his eyes. “Besides, I think you want something more from this arrangement than you let on.”

He kept approaching her, forcing her to move backward until he had crowded her into a corner.

Coming even closer, he dropped his head to her neck, and then dropping his voice to a seductive timbre, he said, “Why else would you, a young innocent lady, be visiting a bachelor home alone without a chaperone, eh?”

His breath caressed the skin of her neck, exacerbating her acute awareness of him. It was quite some time before Helen gathered herself enough to formulate an answer.

Helen left the Duke's mansion in a daze. She had known that the Duke had approached her for marriage for political reasons. He had told her it was a marriage of convenience. But it was infinitely better to suspect that than have it confirmed to her in very clear terms.

She had just witnessed why he was nicknamed the Ruthless Duke because when it came to getting whatever he wanted, he went in ruthless pursuit, willing to do anything to get it. Apparently, she was the object of his pursuit, and she had deluded herself into thinking that she could have resisted.

The man was so intense and brooding that she wondered why he had not chosen the path most of the members of the ton had taken by raking their way through the ladies of the ton because, frankly, she didn't think that he would have had to put in a lot of work.

The man was a magnetic field of his own. Whenever he had turned the full force of his seductive wiles on her, she was always helpless to resist. Frankly, if she were being honest to herself, if not for the Duke's honor and his iron-clad self-control, she was sure she would have been ruined a long while ago, considering the number of times she had ended up in compromising positions with him.

Now that she thought about it, the Duke could be cold, calculating, vexing, and quite a lot of other things, but at his core, he was an honorable man because while she might be untried in the ways of the bedroom, she knew that a man who had such erotic power over a lady could use it as leverage to trap her into marriage. Many fortune hunters of the ton had used this to trap unsuspecting heiresses into marriage.

Considering the circumstances that surround the marriages of members of the ton, it was little wonder that they were bitter. The wives turned to barely concealed affairs, and the husbands amassed a string of mistresses they maintained with little money from their already failing estates.

The ton were prone to foolish behavior, in Helen's opinion, but they tried to cover for their faults by making new dresses, slathering their faces with paint, creating ridicule rules, gossiping, and humiliating people who had a small modicum of happiness.

In essence, the ton were sad people clothed in beautiful dresses, and Helen, having noticed all of this earlier, had sworn not to have a marriage of convenience. She had sworn to marry for love, like some of her friends. And even though she was given to flights of fancy, she had hoped that fate might help her find that treasure so few people got in their lifetime. If not, she was willing to settle for at least a good friendship with her spouse.

Unfortunately, she did not think she could describe the Duke as a friend. For one, her friends did not cause the heat and desire she felt around him. She also knew little about the Duke, now that she thought about it. Besides his name, his family title, and his house, she knew next to nothing about who the man, Alexander Osbourne, the fifth Duke of Blackhill, was.

Well, she guessed some brides of the ton had even less information about their grooms, as they sometimes met their grooms for the first time at the altar. At least, Helen had seen her Duke in person—every ridiculously handsome aspect of his features that was not covered by his clothes, of course. Even if she could not have his friendship, she could count on the heat between them to keep her warm during cold nights.

Of course, he cared about her in other ways too—maybe not in the ways of a man besotted with his wife, but he was surely attentive. At least he had sent the butler to bring his carriage to take her back to her family's townhouse under the cover of night since, apparently, he didn't trust that she would be safe taking a hackney at such a late hour of the night.

Ha!! Dark hour. It was barely eight o'clock. She would prefer to think that was out of

care rather than being a manifestation of the overbearing nature of his character.

When she got back home, she opened the door and tiptoed past a sleeping Mr. Biggins. The poor man was obviously snoring up a storm on a seat at the entrance. It wasn't easy working as a butler at his age—another servant was supposed to assist him, but her father had dismissed the other one when he was caught harassing maids in the house and had declined to hire another. He argued that they had very few guests, anyway.

Now that Helen thought about it, their financial problems must have started long before that time. Trust her father to keep all that secret because he didn't want his daughters to worry their 'pretty' heads.

Helen rolled her eyes at that thought. She would prefer to be informed about a situation that affected her and her future, thank you very much. She wouldn't blame her papa, since members of the ton thought money to be a vulgar topic and not fit for polite discussion. They preferred to sit with their spines ramrod straight, drinking tea while their households and estates collapsed into ruins behind their backs.

That picture was quite funny. Helen chuckled while ascending the stairs.

"You must have had an adventure for the ages this night, going by the way you are smiling from ear to ear." The sound of her sister's voice caused her to jump in surprise. She almost missed her step and had to hold on to the banister to avoid falling.

Placing her hand on her chest, Helen looked up in the direction of the voice. Margaret was standing at the landing of the staircase.

"Goodness, Maggie, you startled me," Helen whisper-screamed. Then, slowly making her way towards Margaret at the top of the stairs, she asked, "What are you still doing

awake? I had assumed you had retired earlier in the evening.”

“Yes, I did, but I was awoken by the sound of a carriage outside my window. I am guessing that was the carriage bringing you back home. Well, I could not go back to sleep, so I decided to come below stairs for some milk in the hope that it would help me go back to sleep faster.” Then pausing dramatically, Margaret continued, “Imagine my surprise to see my sister sneaking into the house with the biggest smile in the whole of Mayfair on her face. Well, I think I am up for some late-night story time, so start spilling.”

Drat, Helen had forgotten that her sister was a very light sleeper who woke up at the slightest provocation. Of course, if there was anyone in their household that would have caught her, it was her sister.

Helen hung her head in defeat and led the way to her bedroom. When they were inside, Margaret made a beeline for the bed, jumping up to sit on it while bouncing on it like an excited schoolgirl. Apparently, she was slowly returning to her normal self, and Helen admitted she was cute when she showed such excitement.

“So, how was your clandestine meeting with the Duke?”

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Well, Helen would take back the comment about her sister being cute. Margaret was a crafty one.

“Who said I met with the Duke tonight?” Helen asked, looking away and attempting to deflect.

But since she already felt her face heating up in embarrassment, Margaret had already come to a conclusion.

“That is quite easy. No other man in the whole of London could make you smile that way. It was a miracle your face didn’t split in two. I don’t blame you. The man is definitely handsome,” Margaret said, raising an eyebrow suggestively.

The Duke was definitely not the reason why Helen was smiling earlier, but that was not the point, and it didn’t make sense to argue.

“Has he kissed you yet?” Margaret asked, with a sly smirk on her face.

Helen looked away, flushing even brighter, and she prayed the semidarkness in the room would conceal her blush, but Margaret had wonderful eyesight.

“Ah, you did,” she crowed in obvious enjoyment.

Helen shook her head in amazement. Of course, she loved the journey her sister was taking towards recovering her true self, but Helen was not sure she loved this aspect of her sister’s personality. She was happy Margaret was enjoying herself, but not when it was at her own expense.

“Well, tell me, my dearest, how was it? Judging by your expression, it was one earthshaking kiss.” Margaret paused, and then her face dropped into an expression of concern.

Great. Sensible Maggie is back.

“But in all seriousness, what was so important that you decided to take a stroll all the way to the Duke’s house? He lives on the other side of Mayfair. That was quite dangerous, the risk of ruination being the least of the dangers. Highway thieves have been known to roam that road. I really hope that the reason you went there was achieved because that was one risky adventure, in my opinion.”

“Do not fret, Sister. I was quite careful. I know I can be impulsive, but trust me, I am not that careless.”

“All right, why did you need to meet with the Duke?” Margaret asked, a curious furrow forming on her brow.

At that, Helen looked away in embarrassment, wringing her hands. “The Duke and I had a falling out earlier today, and he called off the marriage. I went this evening to apologize, since I was the cause of the argument.”

“That had to be a very serious disagreement for the Duke to call of the marriage.” Then looking at her sister curiously, Margaret continued, “I thought that would be welcome news. You have been making earnest efforts to make the Duke call it off.”

At this, Helen was silent as she contemplated how to provide answers to that question. She saw when realization dawned on Margaret because her eyes widened in surprise.

“Don’t tell me this is because of our family’s financial problems!”

Now, it was Helen's turn to be surprised.

"How did you know?"

"Firstly, I am not blind, I can see the downsizing happening in our home, even though Papa does his best to be subtle about it. I also had a conversation with Papa earlier today, when I brought to his notice some lags in the household management. It took some prodding, but he finally admitted the truth."

Right, Helen had forgotten that Margaret was also a very observant lady, and in the absence of their mother, she ran the household accounts, so it stood to notice that she would notice any change in the running of the household.

"I don't want you to feel you have to marry the Duke to save our family. If anything, as the family's eldest daughter, I am the one meant to step up in this type of situation. It is settled. At first light, I am paying a visit to the Duke. If he must marry a Honeyfield girl, he can marry me," Margaret declared with a determined tilt of her chin.

Helen knew that look. Margaret hardly showed the stubborn side of her personality, since she was usually mild-tempered, but when she decided on something, she was like a dog with a bone it never gave up.

"There is no need for that, Sister."

"Don't worry, Sister, you don't have to deal with that beast anymore."

"But... I care for the Duke!" Helen blurted out in desperation.

The smug look on her sister's face confirmed that she had succeeded in making Helen admit to her affection for the Duke.

“That was quite passionate,” Margaret said, waving an imaginary fan, pretending to cool herself. “When is the wedding?” she continued.

“I never said the Duke had forgiven me!”

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“I know men like the Duke well. They like it when you stroke their egos a little. Besides, he is quite besotted with you, even though he probably has not realized it yet.”

“How are you so certain?”

“Because I have eyes, dearest, and he always looks at you like you are a meal he wants to devour in one gulp.”

At that, Helen blushed to the roots of her hair.

Looking at her sister closer, she asked, “Did you pilfer Father’s whiskey again?”

With all the bold and brazen things Margaret had said that night, she must have had some liquid courage. Their father hid his whiskey in his study very well, Helen might add, but there were very few things two inquisitive, adventurous girls could not find when they put their minds to it.

Margaret looked around and then smiled sheepishly. “Just a little,” she said, giggling. “Don’t worry, I am not that drunk if it took you this long to notice.”

“Did you read any yummy books while you were at it?”

“Yes, but...”

“Tell me.”

“Lord Alan Freud is deemed the rake of the Season with a record of having over ten debutantes go astray. What happens when he meets the quick-witted yet charming Lady Justine, deemed the belle of the Season, who was seemingly immune to his charms? An attraction so strong that he dares not admit it is ignited inside that has him questioning everything he thought he knew. Will he continue in his quest to conquer her at the risk of losing his heart, or will the deeper feelings he has for her send him running for dear life?”

“Didn’t we read that together before?”

“Don’t change the topic. When is the wedding?”

“Perhaps in a fortnight.”

“Hmmm. Why the rush? Don’t tell me you two have done the unthinkable,” Margaret said, wriggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Maggie! I think you need to go to bed!”

“Well, I won’t go until you tell me why your Duke is rushing the wedding proceedings.”

“He has a special license, and he wants to get married as soon as possible. He has his reasons.”

Helen was not comfortable talking about the three-night deal with the Duke. It was an intimate detail between her and the Duke, and she preferred to keep it that way.

“From the look on your face, it doesn’t look like I am getting answers to my questions today. Sweet dreams, dearest sister. I will retire now. I have a full day ahead tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? What is tomorrow?” Helen asked curiously.

“I have my secrets too,” Margaret said, winking at her before she left the room.

Helen shook her head in amazement. She was happy that Margaret was feeling better. She preferred this version of her sister, even though she was quite nosy and mischievous. Sadly, her sister would mostly return to normal Margaret by morning when the effect of the whiskey faded.

* * *

Over the course of the next week, preparations for the wedding began in earnest. Her engagement to the Duke was announced by Lady Amensbury, one of the leading ladies of the ton, and to say it sent a shockwave through the ton would be an understatement. After the announcement, the members of the ton expressed their surprise and offered their congratulations. Her friends dragged her off to interrogate her.

“You sly girl,” Denise, one of the dark-haired twins, said with much excitement. “You never showed any inkling that you were interested in the Ruthless Duke.”

“I guess your family was the one that had the contract with the previous Duke,” Diana, the much quieter twin, said with a smile.

“You just made an extraordinary match. You are not just getting hitched to any nobleman, but the Duke!” Denise practically screamed, her excitement so palpable that Helen could not help smiling widely.

“I take it this means you are not cross with me?”

“Why would I be cross with you?” Denise asked, her brow furrowing with confusion.

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“Why, I am marrying the Duke. You said he was your dream suitor,” Helen pointed out tentatively.

At that, the twins burst into laughter

“Oh, silly girl,” Denise responded, chuckling while wiping the tears at the corners of her eyes. “I say that about every good-looking male in the ton. That is perhaps the reason I am still unmarried. I can’t choose,” she said, and they all laughed

“You know my sister, she has a different suitor every week,” Diana said, a mischievous smile on her lips, and then added in a mock whisper, “Dream ones.”

“Wicked girl,” Denise said, rubbing her back good-naturedly.

Helen burst into laughter; she always thought Denise was the funny one, since she was the most outspoken of the two. It appeared Diana did possess a wicked sense of humor as well.

“We are so happy for you, dearest. Promise you will enjoy your marriage with that fine man on behalf of all of us. Be happy, dear,” Diana urged, pulling her into a tight embrace.

Denise repeated the same process when her sister released Helen, pulling her into an even tighter embrace.

Of all her friends, these were her closest ones, since they lived next door to their townhouse. And at this moment, Helen was grateful to have genuine friends.

But of course, not everyone would be happy, and some of the girls started spreading rumors that Helen was pregnant, hence the reason they were having such a hasty ceremony. Some said that the Ruthless Duke has struck again, forcing an innocent into marriage with him, and he wanted a hasty marriage to avoid giving the bride an opportunity to change her mind.

On one of their promenades together, Alexander explained to her that while he didn't usually care what the people of the ton thought, unfortunately, image was important in business, and he needed to maintain a good image in order to seal the deal with the Earl of Frampton. Hence, they hatched a plan to take rides in Hyde Park during the fashionable hours while holding hands and sharing impassioned looks with each other, enough to prove beyond reasonable doubt that they were a love match.

Alexander agreed that he first suggested maintaining a good image, but with every day, it became increasingly difficult to restrain himself from kissing her senseless in the middle of the park or whisking her to some convenient corner to have his wicked way with her delectable body.

The feel of her hands in his made him imagine what it would feel like to have his hands somewhere else on her body. He really could not wait for the wedding day to arrive because he was so sure that after an extra week of this self-imposed torture, he would spontaneously burst with desire.

It was thought by many rakes that familiarity dimmed desire, but he was finding that to be quite untrue, since every encounter with her seemed to ratchet up the need even higher in such a way that made him suspect that just claiming her was not going to assuage it. Theirs might not be a love match, but he was counting on their mutual physical attraction to light up their marriage bed.

Over the course of the week between their meetings. Helen had several fittings for her wedding trousseau, which included sheer undergarments that caused a fierce

blush whenever she thought of them. She had protested, but the modiste had insisted that the Duke had given her carte blanche to cater for all her clothing needs as a married lady. Hearing that, Helen had relented—since the Duke was paying, who was she to complain?

In her private moments, Helen wondered if the Duke would like the undergarments, and she imagined how he would show his appreciation. That just ended up getting her all hot and bothered. She made a conscious effort to not think of her handsome groom-to-be, but it seemed her mind wasn't hers in recent times.

It is said that time flies, but in her case, it seemed time slowed to a crawl, building anticipation and desire so much so that every day, she was at risk of throwing herself at the man in the middle of Hyde Park for everyone to see. The man not only looked good, but the sight of his bigger, darker hand dwarfing hers when they held hands did interesting things to her body.

The wedding night could not come soon enough, and she wouldn't be held responsible for any scandal that might ensue if she had to wait much longer.

Finally, the day arrived. Helen had a hard time sleeping the previous night; a strange feeling of nervous excitement had taken hold of her, making sleep fitful and difficult.

That morning, while she stood in her room and endured the primping of her maid and the professional hairdresser that the Duke had provided, she marveled at the fact that in a few hours, she would be married to the Duke, irrevocably tying herself to him. That fact caused mixed feelings that didn't resolve even while she set off down the aisle on the arm of her father.

When the doors of the church opened, she locked eyes with the Duke. She felt the admiration and hunger in his eyes. Now, she saw the look her sister was talking about. Seeing the mutual hunger they both felt reflected in his eyes went ways

towards quieting her thoughts.

“You look radiant, my darling,” he whispered to her when her father handed her over.

This was his first direct compliment, and it warmed her heart, sending the butterflies in her stomach into a frenzy.

Helen didn't remember much of the ceremony; she just knew she gave the right responses at the appropriate time. Her mind was fixated on what would happen after the ceremony.

After the exchange of vows, the blessings, and a brief sermon by the priest, the ceremony came to an end, and the newlywed couple emerged out of the church. On the steps of the church, they were congratulated. Most members of the ton were in attendance, making the church full to capacity, but strangely enough, she saw no signs of the Duke's stepfamily.

Neither his mother nor his sister nor his mysterious brother was in attendance. It appeared there was a very serious strain in the Duke's relationship with members of his stepfamily. She hoped, in the future, that he would trust her enough to tell her the reason for the tension.

Just then, a familiar blond man emerged and proceeded to pull Alexander into a tight embrace, slapping his back good-naturedly. With the easy camaraderie between the two, she guessed that this was the Duke's best friend, the Marquess of Montgomery

“My congratulations, old man,” he said with a chuckle. Then turning to Helen, he took her hand and kissed it. “You look amazing, Your Grace. I am sure if I were to have a goddess as bright as you, I wouldn't have any qualms about embracing matrimony,” he observed, a wide smile lighting up his face.

Helen blushed at the compliment. The man was definitely not lacking in charm, which was no surprise, since he had the conventional Adonis-like beauty that had been known to devastate a lot of unsuspecting women of the ton. She admitted she might have been one of those women if not for her unfortunate infatuation with the Duke. At the moment, she was partial to just one dark-haired brooding man.

“My thanks, My Lord. You flatter me.”

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“Anything I say to Your Grace is the absolute truth—no hint of flattery there,” he assured her, laying on the charm even thicker.

In her opinion, he was trying to get a rise out of Alexander, and it worked, since Alexander drew her even closer to himself.

“Careful, James. I suggest you go find your own bride. Hopefully, she will forgive your excesses.”

At that, James raised his hands in mock surrender. “All right, I am going. Enjoy your honeymoon,” he said with a good-natured smile.

Alexander watched as James left, shaking his head in exasperation with a smile on his face. It warmed Helen’s heart that James was able to make him smile. She could sense that the Marquess was a good friend.

Slowly, the long queue seeking to offer their congratulations dwindled, and her father and sister surfaced. Her sister proceeded to pull her into a tight embrace.

“You look amazing, my dear sister. Be happy.”

Pulling away, Margaret dabbed at the corners of her eyes, and Helen felt tears well up in her eyes. She was definitely going to miss living with her papa and Maggie, but they could always visit.

“My younger sister is now a married woman. I feel like a proud mama!” Margaret admitted, and they both laughed between their sobs. Then, in a rare gesture of

boldness, she turned to the Duke. "I would warn you to treat my sister well, and I would have you know that if you mistreat her in any way, you will have to contend with me."

The Duke smiled and then executed a slightly exaggerated bow. "I swear on my honor, Miss Ludlow, I will protect my wife. Never doubt it."

Helen had to admit that hearing him refer to her as his wife made her giddy, and she was definitely looking forward to the night ahead and having his undivided attention.

"My dear daughter," her father said, taking both of her hands in his, "I am really proud of the woman you have become, and I have no doubt you would build a lovely home with the Duke by your side." Then, turning to the Duke, he said, "Please take good care of her."

"I will, My Lord," Alexander answered, a good-natured smile on his face.

Dabbing his eyes with a kerchief, the Viscount set his jaw in a determined line. "May I borrow my daughter for a while, Your Grace?"

Alexander's brow furrowed in curiosity, but he relented. "Yes, you may."

The Viscount led Helen a few steps away and then stopped. He turned to her and said, "I am aware that you were never given adequate education on what to expect in the marriage bed. I aim to rectify that."

Helen was all for rectifying unfortunate situations, but the problem was that he was talking to her shoulder, since his gaze was fixed somewhere beyond her, and he was clearly fidgeting, and the way he tensed up showed he was clearly uncomfortable with the topic. The poor man was suffering, hence she decided to put an end to his misery.

“Papa,” she said, smiling gently at him, “I am already suitably informed. My maid explained it to me, and remember, I have married friends. I just might be the most informed bride in the whole of London, so do not worry.”

At that, the tension drained from his body, and he exhaled in relief. Poor man, it was definitely not easy playing the role of both parents for a child, but she admired him for doing the best he could. She was glad she was his daughter.

Embracing him, she placed a kiss on his weathered cheek “Stay well, Papa. I will try to visit.”

He just nodded in reply.

Just then, she felt the Duke’s arm on her shoulders.

“Honeyfield, I fear I must collect my wife. We have a long way to travel. I hope to cover as much ground as we can in the light of day.”

“Don’t let me keep you. I wish you the best of life together.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

He then proceeded to take her arm, tucking it under his arm he herded her into his carriage, which was probably brought around while she had that conversation with her father.

The whole wedding ceremony was short because of the absence of a wedding breakfast. Alexander had termed it an unnecessary expense, and besides, the ton interpreted the absence of the wedding breakfast to mean that he was impatient to bed his bride.

Alexander would agree that they were right, but that was not the only reason he had to save whatever funds he had on hold for the Framptons' business. He was not about to let the estate sink after all the work he had put into restoring it. He hoped to keep the estate afloat to provide a means of livelihood for the local villagers.

The ride all the way to his estate was peaceful while he went through the papers, familiarizing himself with the recent happenings around London. When he looked over at Helen, he found that she had fallen asleep, resting her head on the wall of the carriage. She must have been tired from all the preparations because she barely stirred while he repositioned her head on his shoulder and covered her with the blanket in her lap.

At that, she snuggled even closer, like a cat, sighing with contentment. That brought a smile to Alexander's face. She looked really adorable when she slept. He rested his head back, enjoying the feel of her warm weight beside him, and slowly, her lavender scent lulled him to sleep.

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He was jolted awake when the carriage stopped. A look outside the window of the carriage informed him that they had arrived at the castle. The jostling had apparently also caused Helen to wake up.

Rising slowly, she stretched and then rubbed her eyes in a way that was adorable, in Alexander's opinion.

"Have we arrived?" she asked, stretching.

It took Alexander some time to coordinate himself enough to offer a response, since he was riveted by the way that motion caused her breasts to press against her bodice in a really enticing way.

"Alex?"

"Sorry, my darling. Yes, we have arrived,"

He took care to drape his coat in a way to hide his arousal from onlookers and then he extended his hand to help her out of the carriage. He watched her look around in wonder. The smile that bloomed on her face caused an ache somewhere in his chest; she was just so beautiful, he was still finding it a little impossible to believe that this goddess was now his. His.

"Come on. Your castle awaits," he said with an exaggerated bow.

At that, Helen chuckled, smiling widely at him, and he could not help smiling back.

Taking his proffered arm, they walked towards the castle door. There, at the entrance, the servants lined up smartly, and as they walked down, Alexander introduced her to each one, ending with the housekeeper, Mrs. Adams, a handsome woman in her fifties who welcomed them both with a warm smile.

“Welcome, Your Graces. I must say, it has been ages since this castle had a mistress. I am happy we have you now, Your Grace,” she said, with a bow in Helen’s direction.

“I am sure you are doing a great job here, Mrs. Adams. I will be happy to work with you to keep this fine castle in good shape.”

Mrs. Adams tipped her head graciously in acceptance.

“Mrs. Adams, after my Duchess takes her rest, I would like you to give her a tour of the castle. It is her home now.”

“Consider it done, Your Grace,” Mrs. Adams replied.

“Since that is settled, it is time to get you settled, Your Grace,” Alexander said to Helen, with a boyish smile on his lips

“Of course.” She made to go in, but he stopped her with a hand.

“Wait a while. We have a very important Blackhill tradition, and I will be remiss in my duties if I were to ignore it.”

Helen looked at him in confusion, and he smiled mischievously. He was so going to enjoy this. With one movement, he lifted her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

“Why, I would think it is obvious. I am carrying my lovely bride over the threshold of the castle.”

“Well, put me down. The staff are watching,” she urged, blushing.

He lowered her to her feet, making sure that her body slid down his front, ensuring she felt every contour of his body.

By the time she was standing on her feet, she was blushing fiercely. Alexander smiled in satisfaction. He really enjoyed that exercise maybe more than he was supposed to, but it felt nice to discomfit Helen.

“Your Grace,” the butler called.

Alexander turned to see the man standing beside him with a salver, a single letter on it.

“You have a letter from Lord Frampton.”

At that, Alexander collected the letter then he called out to the butler, “Ben, ensure the Duchess is comfortable, will you?”

“Right away, Your Grace,” the butler replied, but Alexander didn’t hear him, as he was consumed with the thoughts of what the letter might contain.

* * *

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Helen stood in the foyer of the castle feeling quite... abandoned.

The butler gave a discreet cough to get her attention, and she realized that she was standing in the middle of the foyer, looking at the door Alexander had disappeared through like a lost puppy.

“Your Grace, may I show you to your suite?”

“Yes, I would like that, but first, I would prefer to have a tour of the castle. If you could let Mrs. Adams know, I would be most grateful.”

“Right away, Your Grace,” he said, pivoting on his heel.

He marched back towards the entrance, most likely with the intention of fetching Mrs. Adams.

Helen might have retired upstairs, but she was filled with nervous energy, and sitting alone in her room was only going to drive her nuts, hence her decision to take the tour.

In a few minutes, she heard the sounds of footsteps and turned to see the housekeeper approaching.

“You sent for me, Your Grace?” she asked when she reached Helen.

“I decided to take the tour of the house. Perhaps you could act as my guide?” Helen requested, with a smile.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Adams replied.

And thus, Helen spent the next two hours getting acquainted with every corner of the castle. When they finished, Mrs. Adams ordered for a bath to be drawn for Helen. Helen returned to her room and found her maid had arrived with her belongings, having followed in a cart at a slower pace behind the Duke’s carriage.

Soon, they set about the task of bathing Helen and brushing her hair till it gleamed in the candlelight. Her maid helped her dress in the very sheer garment that was provided for her as a wedding nightie, and Helen blushed fiercely while donning it. The garment hid nothing, and if she stood in front of a candle, every curve and crevice of her body would be exposed.

Helen donned the matching robe, but it did very little to improve the modesty of the garment, since it was made of the same material.

She gave up and sat on one of the chairs before the fireplace. She decided to read a book while waiting for her husband to come. Dinner arrived, and she tried to wait for him, but the food was getting colder, and her stomach was grumbling, so she gave up and ate.

Several hours later, there was still no sign of the Duke, and she was finding it difficult to stay awake. It seemed the Duke had gotten married to his trophy wife and now proceeded to ignore her.

She took the time to think back on all the events leading to that moment. She wondered what would have happened if her mother were alive. She did not really remember her mother, but she had always thought her father was trying more than enough to care for her and her sister, and that was enough for her. But she grew up thinking she should do something for her father in return, and that was to grow up to be the ideal lady.

So, she tried to excel at everything. And she did. That did not exclude her social life, which she greatly valued. She was a socialite and thrived in the ton. She knew many people and all the latest gossip. She was widely loved, and that led her to feel undefeated. The only thing she worried about was her sister, who had closed off herself. This has made their father worry and compare the two sisters constantly. So, Helen vowed to never marry before her sister, yet here she was. Now, she had gotten herself a match that she wasn't sure how to feel about yet.

She sighed, as one who hated to cry over spilled milk, and was about to retire to her bed when she heard a knock at the door to her chambers. Well, it seemed the Duke had decided to grace her with his presence.

She walked to the door and opened it to see the Duke standing there, and he smiled widely at her. It appeared the Duke was excited about something. He had a bottle of wine and two wine glasses in his hand.

“Celebrating?” she asked drily.

“It appears, my darling, that the Framptons have accepted my request for a business deal. If all goes as planned, we will be even richer by the end of the year. We only have one challenge. The Countess.”

“How so?”

“She has been known to be the actual brain behind the business. She might appear mild-tempered, but that one is a very shrewd woman and quite picky sometimes. I just hope that our outing with them goes well because any mistake might jeopardize this deal. The woman's word is law when it comes to the Framptons' business, and while it is good to impress the Earl, it is she who holds the purse strings. I trust that you will be on your best behavior during this outing, won't you?”

There was a deafening silence that caused Alexander to turn and look at his wife...really look at her. She was absolutely radiant, and he lost his line of thought looking at her. Her hair had been brushed to a shine and cascaded down her shoulder, caressing her skin. Her night rail, if one could even call it that, was a dark blue color that enhanced the rich hue of her skin.

The garment wreaked havoc on his mind because it barely concealed anything. Even with the semidarkness, he could make out all the contours of her body, and he swore he could see the peak of one of her perfect breasts. Sitting there with her hands primly placed on her hips, she looked the perfect siren sent to unleash all his dark desires.

ChapterNine

“Is this all we are to discuss tonight?” Helen asked, despite herself.

She had watched him talk about his business dealings, wondering if he had somehow forgotten it was their wedding night.

“What else shall we discuss?”

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“It is our wedding night,” she stated, feeling a hot blush spread across her face.

“I am aware,” he noted. “And that is why I informed you of all you need to know.”

“But it is expected of us to...”

“To?”

Damn this bastard.

He knew what she was referring to, and she could tell because he had a supremely smug look in his eyes, but he just wanted her to say it if only to get some sick sense of satisfaction.

“To consummate our marriage.”

“Oh,” he said, his voice full of surprise. “Indeed, but as it is only a contract marriage, there’s no need.”

“But if we don’t... is there really a marriage?”

“Yes, there is,” he deadpanned. “We have the license to prove it.”

“The servants will talk.”

“If it helps, I could sleep here, and we’ll put up a good act.”

“Your Grace,” she huffed, exasperated.

Why would he be so stubborn about this?

“Helen,” he sighed, “you do not even want this.”

“I... I...”

“I will never force a woman into my bed, Helen.” He laughed darkly. “No matter how much I want her, and no matter the dark rumors circulating about my character, I am not a beast.”

“I...” Helen started but found herself at a loss for words.

“What is it you wish to say, Helen?” he asked all too calmly, staring at her while he leaned against the wall.

His green eyes had gone impossibly dark in the dim light of the candles and the fireplace, and his body was tense as though primed for a fight, but the impossible man did nothing.

She didn’t want to seem desperate, admitting that she desired him beyond what duty demanded of her, but it seemed if she said nothing, the damned man would walk away even if it killed him.

“I... didn’t think you forced me,” she stated with a shaky voice.

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“But that doesn’t negate the fact that you didn’t come willingly into my arms but only did so to perform your duty,” he replied, pushing off the wall as if he were leaving. “I

don't take a woman to bed for duty's sake. When I take a woman to bed, it is to make love."

At his words, her cheeks reddened, and she looked away, unable to meet his gaze. She had not expected him to put it so plainly. She wasn't unaware what the word meant, as her handmaid had explained in detail to her, but the intimacy of the act had stunned her.

She had never been fully undressed by anyone except her maid, and to even imagine a man fully in the nude was near blasphemous.

She shook her head as thoughts of Alexander naked tried to creep in, looking up to see him standing in front of her.

When had he even moved?

"You seem shocked by my words," he stated, staring down at her.

She stared back, feeling her cheeks redden again.

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“Y-yes, but it’s fine,” she answered, swallowing past the lump that had formed in her throat.

He gave a lopsided smile, leaning so close that she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“So, you do not mind me having a dirty mouth?” he teased.

“I do not mind,” she answered boldly, squaring her shoulders. “It’s your mouth, and you can use it any way you wish.”

“Any way I wish?” he mused, his eyes roaming up and down her body.

She followed his eyes and saw that the light behind her outlined her body in the thin material of her nightgown.

“You do not know the things I wish to do with this mouth of mine,” he told her, surprising her. His voice was gravelly and almost strained.

“You can do them,” she answered. “I do not mind.”

His eyebrows rose to his hairline, but the look of surprise was gone in seconds.

“I don’t want you just to not mind, Helen.” He laughed darkly.

“Then what do you want?” she asked.

“I want to know if you want me to pleasure you.”

His raw honesty sparked the same from her, and she knew her reply shocked him when he stepped even closer to her.

“I want you to pleasure me, husband,” she answered, feeling empowered by the unrestrained desire she saw in his gaze.

His eyes roamed over her face and stopped at her lips, his nostrils flaring when her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

They’d kissed before, but her lips itched to have his cover hers and remind her just how well he kissed. She frowned, confused when she noticed him watching her.

Why didn’t he just kiss her already?

I will never force a woman into my bed.

His eyes seemed to be questioning, as he was giving her another opportunity to admit her desire.

She nodded and nearly lost balance when he pulled her to him, taking her lips in a kiss that coaxed deep groans out of them both.

He kissed her like a man who’d been long starved of food—messy, fast, and unstoppable. Her lips stung from how hard he nipped them, but rather than pain, she felt intense pleasure that sent shudders through her.

Her body was a mess of different emotions as her body made her crave things she had not even known were possible.

Her breasts felt heavy, and her nipples were painfully hard so that even the fabric of her nightgown rubbing against them caused her to hiss. A pulse between her legs was so furious that she struggled to keep still. There was a wetness in her sex that she had only ever felt with him that stunned and scared her.

When his hands trailed downward to palm her buttocks and pull her against him, she wrapped her legs instinctively around him.

She stiffened when he led them to the bed and placed her gently on it, his weight on her gentle and soothing.

He kissed her again, this time deep and slow, one hand moving from her face to run down her neck and then to palm her breast and lower to run up her calf to her thigh.

She gasped at the trail of heat his hands left in their wake. She squirmed, feeling shy with his hands on her, but he stilled her by kissing her slowly again. His kisses were like warm biscuits fresh from the oven, which she loved to indulge in whenever it rained.

His hands moved up her body again this time, and she felt him groan when he palmed her breast. He pinched in one nipple, and if he hadn't been on top of her, she was sure she would have flown off the bed.

Her back arched as a moan escaped her lips.

How had she never known such spots existed in her body? she wondered as his hands and lips found new ways to drive her insane.

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“Helen,” he groaned, kissing her neck. “I need to see you.”

“All right,” she answered, not knowing what he meant until his hands ripped her nightgown in two.

Cold wind kissed her skin as she was exposed to him. She tried to cover herself, but his hands stilled her.

“Don’t,” he warned.

Her hands fell away, even though she still felt uneasy being exposed to him. His eyes held adoration as he leaned back to watch her, and he looked torn, like he was struggling to make a decision.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, feeling even more self-conscious.

“I am trying to decide where to taste you first,” he declared, biting his lip, and she decided that she had never seen a more devastating look on him.

She felt the blush all over her body that brought a smile to his lips.

“You do blush beautifully everywhere,” he observed. “Now, I am tempted to see how red you can get.”

He gave her no warning and took a nipple in his mouth, nipping it. A scream tore out of her as pleasure rippled through her.

“Careful, wife, we don’t want the maids to think I am being a beast,” he chided, nipping her nipple again playfully.

“You... you are being a beast,” she groaned.

He laughed against her breast as he took her nipple into his mouth again, his other hand going to palm the other breast.

He added suction that had her bucking off the bed, which stilled when his hand started to travel lower down her body.

“Wait...” she whispered as she stiffened when his fingers brushed the intimate curls between her legs.

“Relax, wife,” he soothed. “Let me pleasure you.”

His fingers brushed her sex again, a groan escaping his lips.

“You’re so wet.”

She bit her lip and tried to close her legs, but he held them apart.

“Does this make you shy?” he asked, sliding his fingers through her curls again, applying pressure to the nub that begged for attention.

She could not answer as a spark shot through her that caused her legs to quiver.

“Answer me, wife,” he teased, delivering deliciously maddening pressure to the knot of pleasure that pulsed painfully.

“Y-yes.”

He grinned against her stomach, placing open-mouthed kisses as he moved lower down her body.

When his tongue grazed her curls, she tried to close her legs again, but his hands held them firmly apart.

He groaned against her sex as his tongue lapped at her, and her hips bucked wildly against his face. She tried to hold back her cries, but her body seemed unwilling to cooperate with her.

A moment hit her when her body shook violently as a bliss she had never experienced before flooded her, and he used his tongue to mimic the vibrations that rippled through her.

“Thank you,” she said when she finally regained her ability to speak.

He grinned at her and kissed her.

“It is I who should thank you.” He licked his lips. “You taste better than any meal I’ve ever had.”

She reddened at his praise.

“Come, wife.” He grinned. “You should sleep.”

“But...”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“Don’t I need to do anything for you?”

He kissed her forehead and pulled her into his chest. “The time for you to reward me will come soon enough,” he promised darkly. “Sleep now.”

And so, with those ominous words, she fell asleep to the rhythm of his heartbeat.

ChapterTen

“Do you think this dress is all right?” Helen asked her handmaid, her hands fussing with one of the small floral embroidery on the bodice of her favorite day dress—the one she had had made for occasions when she wanted to make a statement.

It had been an expensive item that had cost her father a fortune, and he had scolded her endlessly about it, but now it’d serve its purpose.

“You look wonderful, Your Grace,” her maid affirmed. “The Duke is going to be positively breathless when he sees you.”

And breathless he was when Helen descended the stairs. Indeed, he had installed the perfect stairs for a moment such as this.

“You are... exquisite.” He looked up at her, giving her a wide smile.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. He looked so honest that she felt her earlier anxiety dissipate.

“I thank you for the compliment,” she replied. “Shall we go?”

He helped her into the carriage, and she noticed out of the corner of her eye that he kept stealing glances at her.

Her heart swelled, as they hadn’t been in such close proximity since their wedding night, and when she remembered their wedding night, a hot blush warmed her skin.

He had done things to her with his tongue and fingers that had haunted her dreams since then, but since he had been too busy, she had not seen him to suggest he do it again.

When they arrived at the Framptons’ townhouse, they were immediately welcomed into a beautifully furnished drawing room and didn’t have to wait long for their hosts to arrive.

The Earl and Countess of Frampton were a middle-aged couple that welcomed them warmly, although Helen could sense the Countess would rather be anywhere but there at that moment.

The woman stayed mostly silent during the discourse.

Helen saw for the first time why Alexander was called ruthless and was notoriously

known to be a cut-throat businessman, and she was impressed.

“You have to admit that your terms are rather expensive,” Cecil Allen, the Earl of Frampton, stated. “What guarantee do I have that I’ll get the percentage of profit you mentioned?”

“You’ve heard about my previous investments. I’ve yet to make a bad one,” Alexander answered. “Plus, imagine being the first owner of a private railway service. That would cut product delivery time by half, and we’d definitely have more than a few companies willing to use our service.”

Cecil nodded. “How can I be sure then that you won’t try to buy me out of the deal?”

“I can’t assure you of that, My Lord.”

The Earl laughed, sipping his tea. “You are an honest man.”

“I find no reason to be otherwise,” Alexander admitted. “Do you agree to the sixty-fourty deal?”

“I haven’t agreed to that yet,” the Earl retorted. “I am a major investor and your only one, so I should get a bigger share.”

Alexander gave a cold smile that made the temperature of the room drop.

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“You are not my only investor, or rather not the only investor I’ve considered,” he answered with a dismissive wave of his hand. “The Dukes of Riverdon and Shampton were more than willing to invest.”

Cecil smiled coldly as well. “But you came to me,” he stated. “Why?”

“Because,” Alexander replied, “I like your business sense more. If I wanted more money, I could have had them invest and robbed them blind.”

The Earl laughed and rose from his seat. “Come,” he said. “We have much to discuss. Let’s not bore the women with our talk.”

Inspired by Alexander, Helen tried to engage Letitia in conversation, but the woman did not seem at all interested. That did not deter Helen, though. She finally won the Countess over and made her laugh.

“Wait... you mean you didn’t want to marry the Duke?” Letitia laughed.

“Not at all,” Helen confirmed. “But he managed to win me over as the Earl did you.”

“Indeed?”

“Indeed.” She laughed. “And I gave my father hell for it. You wouldn’t want to know about the tantrums I threw.”

“Oh my, Helen.” Leticia laughed again. “However did you escape your father’s wrath?”

The men stepped into the room, and Helen met Alexander's eyes. He gave her an approving nod that turned her insides to mush.

"I didn't," Helen replied.

"What are you two beautiful ladies talking about?" Cecil asked.

"Oh, about her attempts to convince her father she didn't want to marry the Duke."

Alexander's eyebrows shot up to his hairline as he looked at her. Helen sensed his concern that she had given their ruse up, but she shook her head.

"Pray tell, how did you two finally agree to wed?"

Helen smiled. "The Duke was positively charming in his attempts to woo me. He took me on lovely picnics and walks and endured my pranks."

"And she was a downright harridan. Beautiful but stubborn."

The older couple laughed.

"But I pursued her even more when she attempted to resist me because I saw her personality. I had initially offered for her sister..."

"No?" Letitia gasped.

"I did. But she thought I would mistreat her sister and offered herself instead."

"That is very noble of you, Helen."

"It's one of the many things I love about her."

The night progressed as they headed to the theatre, where they all had a great time, laughing and getting to know each other.

The plot of the opera was interesting, and Helen read it over and again just because it deserved it.

When Prince Rowan's father was killed in an attack on a ride into the town, a special army comprising of the older generation of guards that had served his father before him was put together to fight the growing rebel army.

What Rowan expected was a band of men strong enough to bring down the towers of Einheim and not a bunch of green boys and the fiery-haired lad with insane archery skills who hated his best friend with all his guts.

What happens when he discovers the scandalous secret the young man is hiding? And his fear, not only because of the scandal it would bring but also because they would face a danger that they most likely wouldn't survive.

What will he do when he has to choose between saving the girl and letting his father's killer go?

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As they started to leave the opera, ready to call it a night, Alexander's face turned sour when he saw a man who looked oddly similar to him.

Helen tried to ignore it, but she could not help but notice how tense he looked during their conversation. Cecil and Letitia introduced her to a few people in their age group, and she made small talk.

She could not help but wonder if this was the elusive half-brother he had hinted at before.

"I am afraid I must bid you good night now," he said, coming up to their party.

"All right," Letitia replied. "It was truly a pleasure getting to know the two of you."

"Likewise, My Lady," Helen returned.

"You should come visit again soon."

"I will."

On the way back home, Alexander did not speak even when Helen tried to inquire about the success of the deal. He was positively stoic, and she wondered what could have caused it. Helen tried to lighten the mood, and she achieved this when she made him laugh. Back at their home, her banter lightened the mood.

"You were absolutely perfect today," Alexander told her as they stepped into their home.

“I am glad I was able to help,” she admitted shyly. “Although, I was really nervous.”

“I could tell.” He laughed. “Do you want some dessert?”

“I would love to have some, but I fear I’ve put on so much weight since I married you.” She pouted. “Cook’s treats are unlike any other.”

“I know. It’s why I hired her,” he agreed. “And I love your curves. They’re very... enticing.”

“Did you just say I’m fat?”

“No,” he argued. “I said you’re curvaceous. Isn’t that more politically appropriate?”

“You’re a downright harridan.” She laughed, slapping his arm.

“I do try my best.”

They stopped in front of her chamber doors, and suddenly, it looked like neither of them knew what to do next.

“I...” they said simultaneously and laughed again

“You go first,” he suggested.

“All right,” she agreed but was unable to meet his eyes. “I would like for you to join me tonight.”

His eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“Not for anything untoward...” she tried explaining, but his laugh stopped her.

“Stop laughing,” she complained. “It took a lot for me to say that.”

“I know, and I don’t take it lightly,” he assured her. “I only laughed because I was going to ask the same thing.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You want to...”

“Yes, I want to spend the night with you,” he answered. “And not for anything untoward.”

“Can I hold you to that promise?”

He stepped closer till there was barely any space between them. “Haven’t I proven myself to be a man of my word?”

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She nodded, swallowing as his nearness brought his seductive sandalwood and spicy scent to her.

“Good, so I will do nothing untoward to you,” he asserted, “unless you want me to.”

“I want you to,” she admitted as liquid heat pooled in her core.

His eyes darkened, and she barely had any warning before he kissed her, groaning into her mouth.

His kiss was feral, betraying his desire for her. His hands roamed up and down her body, caressing and squeezing and sparking up her lust.

Her hands buried themselves in his hair, and she gripped tighter, earning a groan from him.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to do this today,” he growled into her mouth.

She whimpered when he nipped her bottom lip painfully.

“I want you naked beneath me.”

She nodded and moved her hands behind to open her door, and they went into her room, a flurry of eager hands undressing each other till they were fully naked, with him atop her.

“I don’t think I can stop,” he groaned, grinding against her.

She felt him shudder above her and smiled at how untamed he was.

“Then don’t.”

* * *

“Good morning, wife,” Alexander greeted when Helen entered the dining room.

“How did you sleep?”

A hot blush climbed up her body as she saw the teasing look in his eyes.

“I slept well, husband,” she answered, playing along with his ruse. “And you?”

He gave a full-toothed smile, stealing her breath with how handsome he looked when he did so.

“I slept better than I have in years.”

She shook her head at his antics, pouring herself a cup of coffee because she was exhausted, as they hadn’t gotten much sleep the previous night.

“What are your plans for the day?” she asked him, hoping he had work in his study, so she could spend a little time with him.

She had enjoyed the little bits of conversation they shared in the hours before they’d finally fallen asleep and most especially the lectures he had given her on the art of loving when they finally awoke.

She caught his gaze and saw a knowing twinkle in his eyes which made her redden. He always seemed to know what she was thinking, and it seemed he had a superior talent for knowing when her thoughts drifted to improper things.

“Dear wife, why do you ask?” he asked, smiling as he sipped his coffee.

She had finally won him over when she had made him a particularly sweet cup. It turned out the Ruthless Duke had a sweet tooth.

“Oh, nothing,” she answered. “I was hoping we could go on a picnic later.”

He nodded, but his look turned serious.

“I am afraid we’ll have to hold off,” he explained. “My sister’s engagement party is only two nights away. There’s much to prepare before then.”

“Oh.”

At the mention of his family, gone was the playful man she knew, and sitting before her was the Duke of Blackhill, whose stare sent many people fleeing for safety.

“What would you require of me?” she asked.

This was one of the requirements he had given at the start of their marriage, and she wanted in some small way to help ease this dark cloud he seemed to perpetually walk under.

He smiled softly at her. “Only that you be the proper Duchess of Blackhill,” he answered, rising from his seat. “Walk with me?”

She nodded, and he helped her out of her seat, intertwining their hands. She tried not to shrink back from the intimacy of holding hands, but it was hard, considering how her body came alive instantly.

She had never experienced such easy intimacy with a man, and she had not known one could be so outside the bedroom. It was a welcome change from the dominant man he usually was.

“I know you’ve wondered about my family’s absence, and I am not a fool to think you’re ignorant of the rumors surrounding me,” he started as they stepped out into the warm sunshine.

She nodded. “I tried not to pry. That’s why I’ve never really asked.”

“I was thankful, but it’s better I educate you before time.” He smiled ruefully at her. “My family is wont to try to besmirch my credibility by attempting to trap me in scandals that in times past I’ve escaped, but the last was a little more challenging, and although I could choose not to go, I do not want any more stains on my reputation.”

“And my presence there would...”

“Help dissuade them from making such attempts at best.”

“And at worst?”

“Well, I’ll be putting a target on your head too.”

“Wonderful.”

“Indeed.”

They took a turn about the garden in uneasy silence, but she didn’t hurry to fill it as she gathered her thoughts.

A part of her pitied him and understood why he had been the way he had been. He was only a man trying to protect himself and his name.

Another part of her wondered at his family’s actions and didn’t fear them. She had dealt with a fair share of poorly mannered members of the ton and had always come out on top. She was almost excited to help him avoid the traps he felt his family would have set for him.

“Do you require anything else?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I just need you by my side.”

“Then that’s where I will be for as long as you need me.”

He stopped in his tracks and stared at her, his gaze searching. He opened his mouth to say something, but as though deciding against it, he shook his head.

He resumed their silent stroll, a cloud of emotions passing over his features. He was obviously conflicted, but it would be a while before he would open up to her.

She tried not to feel hurt, considering his own family had betrayed him severely, which caused and reinforced his inability to trust people. Besides, she understood it was still too early and would be a damn near impossible feat for him to trust her, considering that what they had was only a contractual marriage. Once she attended their agreed-upon events, they'd separate, so there was no need to complicate their lives.

She tried to ignore the bitter taste that piece of truth left in her mouth, but it was difficult because she had hoped the newfound intimacy they shared would have at least made him warm up to her.

"Your Graces," they heard a footman call.

"Yes?"

"Your delivery is here."

"Oh, perfect." Alexander smiled. "Come, Helen, it is for you."

She followed him with excited steps into the manor, where he showed her the gown he had bought for her for the engagement party.

It was a beautiful number in a dark blue and silver damask that glittered in the light, with fabulous stonework that made her sure the dress would be heavier than anything she had ever worn.

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Without thinking, she embraced him, thanking him, and felt him stiffen against her.

“You like it?” he asked, concerned.

“I absolutely adore it,” she gushed. “Thank you.”

He smiled down at her and ended up kissing her. But this one felt too tender, and she wondered if perhaps he, too, was warming up to her.

ChapterEleven

The night of the engagement party drew close so quickly, but this time, Helen was more than confident and ready to handle whatever came her way, especially in the beautiful dress she was now in.

Alexander had also given her a sapphire necklace that was sure to turn heads, and his head had indeed turned when she approached him where he stood outside, waiting.

“You, my wife, are a sight for sore eyes.” He smiled, kissing her cheek. “Are you ready?”

“I am,” she affirmed. “Let’s go meet your family.”

They stepped into the carriage and rode in conversation, discussing everything and nothing in equal measures. She mentioned a novel she had read that he apparently enjoyed too.

He gave her a brief overview of his life and how he had come to be the man he was now, but before he could warn her sufficiently about his family, they arrived.

He helped her down from the carriage, and she took in the small house with its well-kept lawn and gardens.

There were already a number of guests around, and it would be a crush, judging by the number of carriages he saw.

“We’ll be fine,” she told him.

He nodded, and they stepped through the double doors of the house.

* * *

“The Duke and Duchess of Blackwell!” the master of ceremonies announced as the doors were opened to admit them.

Whispers arose around the room as all eyes turned to watch them step into the ballroom. Alexander’s body immediately tensed up as he prepared to swim in the shark-infested waters he knew English ballrooms to be.

Helen squeezed his arm, and he appreciated her attempt to comfort him. He had given only sparse details of his strained relationship with his family, nothing much different from what Society knew, so he knew she had been mildly prepared to deal with them if there was any need to.

He secretly hoped their attempts to trap him in scandal would end with his marriage, but knowing his half-brother’s determination to get more money out of him and his stepmother’s zeal in protecting her children’s interests, he could not afford to let down his guard.

He surveyed the party guests with a look of disinterest, hiding his surprise at the crowd his family had managed to pull, but he guessed Society was all too curious to visit the manor of the family he had apparently, oh so wickedly, cast out of his estate.

“How,” Helen started, clinging to his arm as they strolled further into the room, “bright.”

He wanted to laugh. He knew he had been unfair, but her observation was correct, as the ballroom was glaringly bright with so many candles lit that he feared the slightest accident would set the place on fire.

As if the candles weren’t enough, they had opted for gold decorations, which further reflected the light and were near blinding.

“That’s rather impolite, wife,” he chided, smiling down at her. “What would my dear family say if they overheard us?”

“Will you tell them?”

“No.” He smiled brightly.

She gave a full-toothed smile that made him stop. She was so beautiful, she outshone even the jewels adorning her neck.

“What is it?” she asked, growing uncomfortable with his stare.

“You’re so beautiful, it astounds me,” he observed.

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She stared in surprise, placing a hand on her chest, then smiled softly at him. “Thank you,” she said with a nod of her head.

“There’s no need for thanks between us,” he told her. “It is my pleasure to?—”

“Your Grace,” a masculine voice interrupted, coming up to them.

Alexander looked down to see an unfamiliar man in an absurd costume of colors, albeit well-tailored.

The man took Helen’s hand in his, placing a kiss on it that lasted longer than necessary. “When I learned of your marriage to the Duke and your presence at tonight’s party, I just had to come. Marriage becomes you.”

Oh...

The strange man had been greeting Helen, who beamed positively at him. And he still had her hand in his.

“Lord Everard,” she greeted. “It’s a delight as always. How are you?”

Alexander felt anger rise inside him as he watched the man visibly caress his wife’s hand, despite him being there, but when Helen shot him a questioning look, he shook his head. As if he would ever admit that something was actually wrong.

“I am quite well, Your Grace,” Lord Everard answered, grinning back. “And, Your Grace, you must be excited. Two weddings in the span of less than a year. Yours and

your sister's, but it is a shame we couldn't attend yours."

Alexander nodded, barely sparing him a look. He could feel Helen's hot glare on the side of his face but didn't glance at her either.

"I have yet to see the?—"

"If you will excuse us."

That was all the warning Alexander gave the man, before pulling Helen along with him.

He felt her stop in her tracks, but she didn't pull her hand out of his. He met her hot glare with raised eyebrows.

"What is it?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"Don't do that again," she hissed, looking around in case any eyes were on them.

"Do what?"

She attempted to loosen his hold on her, but he wasn't letting her go. He gripped her gloved hand and fixed the weight higher up his bicep, holding it in place, his eyes meeting hers with a dare. She didn't want to back down, but he was much stronger than her.

"What you just did to my good friend, Lord Everard," she scolded. "That was rude."

"I assumed he was done speaking. His rhetoric was dragging on, and as a duke, a show of hubris is expected of me. It has been bred in me since I was fourteen. You would do well to learn this requisite, now that I have made you a duchess."

Helen shrank back in shock and hurt at the insult. A sharp stab of pain shot through him as he noticed her look. He sighed, shaking his head. He was taking out his uneasiness on her, when she did not deserve his ire.

“I am sorry,” he apologized. “I am taking out my uneasiness on you, and it’s not fair. Forgive my foolish words.”

She sighed, squeezing his arms, and he knew he had been forgiven. They realized they had stopped in the middle of the room and continued walking.

“I can feel how tense you are.” She smiled up at him. “Your eyes keep darting about, searching for danger.”

Which he knew was imminent, considering his stepfamily hadn’t even been at the door to welcome him, as was customary.

“They could not possibly be that bad now, could they?” she asked.

Alexander laughed darkly, a small laugh that he hoped conveyed the severity of the situation. He didn’t fault her hope in the decency of humans. After all, she had grown up in a loving household with a caring father, a reliable sister, conversations that weren’t laced with poison, and meetings that weren’t all about money.

Alexander had grown up barely knowing his family, and once he was old enough to have full control of the estate and the finances of his estate, he had seen just who they were.

He remembered the first letter from his stepmother, which had been an attempt to restore contact with him. It had been a toneless and blatant command that he set them up with a monthly allowance, as she had run through what his father had left to her. He hadn’t even had the heart to be disappointed, as he had been kept aware of their

dealings by his man of affairs.

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His family was the exact opposite of Helen's—formal, cold and disorganized. The Dowager Duchess and his half-siblings only saw him for what he could offer: a key to a life of affluence.

“I would like to apologize again.”

“Whatever for?” Helen asked with a smile.

“I fear I may have grossly underprepared you to deal with?—”

“Brother dearest!” a feminine voice cried from behind him.

His sister, Sophia Osborne, the soon-to-be Countess of Wolverton and the reason for the ball, had finally found them.

“Oh, I could tell it was you from that aristocratic stance.” She smiled widely, gliding over to them in a golden evening dress that shimmered in the candlelight and brought out the tone of her skin.

Alexander had to admit, she looked beautiful. At nineteen, even with her rather unattractive family, she had turned down many suitors before finally choosing to court the Earl of Wolverton.

“You’re looking rather... well fed, Brother.” She wrinkled her nose. “You should be more physically active. Perhaps go fencing sometime.”

“How insightful of you to offer such wonderful advice, Sister,” he said calmly, even

though he wanted to bare his teeth. “You are looking fashionably... prickly.”

Helen stiffened by his side, and he instantly regretted his comment. When Sophia’s gaze, however, fixed on his bride, his resolve hardened as his body prepared for a fight.

His stepmother and brother hadn’t appeared yet, so he wasn’t all too bothered. Sophia was relatively placid, as far as his family was concerned. She would bare her claws, but when she met resistance, they were easily retracted.

“You must be Helen,” she said, her eyes running distastefully over his wife.

Alexander frowned at the obvious disrespect and impropriety of Sophia’s manner. She had not been introduced to Helen and hadn’t addressed her with her appropriate title.

He usually overlooked it when Sophia refused to address him by his title and even when she was blatantly disrespectful to him, despite him having full control of her life.

He had justified her actions even. After all, she had been raised by the bitter Dowager Duchess and had a reprobate brother, Nathaniel. It was almost entirely unavoidable for an impressionable girl to adopt terrible manners, but she had taken to them beyond the point of correction. He could only pity her husband-to-be.

“It’s lovely to meet you.” Helen smiled almost hesitantly.

Alexander gave her hand a squeeze, but her tension hadn’t abated. Perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t given her such a terrible rundown on his family. Then, perhaps she would be more comfortable.

“Don’t be so frigid with me. I am your sister, after all,” Sophia said, rolling her eyes. “Save the politeness for your farm hands.”

“I apologize, Sophia,” Helen replied, looking every bit remorseful. “Perhaps we’ll find the time to get used to each other after the wedding.”

Alexander’s eyebrows rose, marking his surprise, but he immediately schooled his features.

“I guess so,” Sophia answered, losing her voice.

He felt the fear he had had for Helen leave him at the easy defeat of his sister, and even though she was a more placid member of his family, he was impressed. Helen had not quivered.

They settled into an uneasy silence which was broken when Sophia’s fiancé, the Earl of Wolverton, cleared his throat.

“Oh, dearest!” Sophie intertwined their hands, pulling him to their side. “This is my fiancé, Timothy, the Earl of Wolverton.”

“Your Grace.” He bowed.

He looked well enough with dark brown hair and plain brown eyes in a small face. He was dressed in garish evening wear, with an evening coat of gold that matched his wife-to-be’s gown.

Lord Wolverton was rumored to be a simple-minded fool, and Alexander had wondered if the sentiment was true, considering he had agreed to marry his sister, but looking at the man’s outfit, he realized the accuracy of the description.

“Don’t be so formal, darling,” Sophia scolded. “He is to be your brother, after all. You can call him Alexander.”

Alexander raised an eyebrow, daring him to try. The man looked away.

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He might be a fool, but he was not so foolish as to make such a mistake. Sophia gritted her teeth and stormed off, her fiancé hurrying after her.

“If it isn’t the Duke of Blackhill,” Nathaniel, his half-brother, said, walking over to them.

The stench of alcohol was heavy on his breath, and one look at his skewed cravat and jacket told the truth of that assessment.

“Nathaniel,” Alexander answered icily.

His brother shared the Blackhill genes, with his dark hair and dark green eyes, but rather than a broad build, he had his mother’s slender frame. He was handsome, that Alexander could admit, but his reprobate ways made him look haggard.

He had taken to gambling even as a student at Oxford and had been expelled midway because of the same habit. The only thing he seemed to be skilled at was losing money and planning to entrap Alexander in scandals several of which he had nearly fallen into.

The last attempt that had set Alexander on his toes was when Nathaniel had convinced Lady Statham’s daughter that he was in love with her and invited her to his chambers, pointing her to Alexander’s instead, at the last event they’d been at together. It was sheer luck Alexander wasn’t in his chamber when the girl’s mother barged in to find her daughter naked and wrapped in his bed sheets, waiting for him.

Since then, he had specifically avoided events that would have them all together.

“That’s no way to greet your brother now, is it, Your Grace?” Nathaniel sneered. When he caught sight of Helen, his smile turned lopsided, and he gave a mock bow. “I must say, Brother, you’ve always had a good eye for women. She’s, by far, your prettiest paramour yet.”

Helen gasped and took a step back.

“Helen is my wife and by all rights, the Duchess of Blackhill, and you will show her the respect she’s due.” Alexander glared, somehow restraining himself from punching the smug smile off his brother’s face. “Apologize.”

He was well aware there were a number of eyes on them, and he didn’t want to bring any more scandal to their family name, even though it was all too tempting to do so.

“I apologize, Your Grace,” Nathaniel said with a mock bow. “I did not mean to mistake you for a paramour, but knowing my brother’s reputation with women, I thought you were one of them.”

“How—”

“It is all right, Alex.” Helen smiled up at her husband, squeezing his arm. “I thank you for considering me beautiful, Lord Nathaniel. It shows you, too, have excellent taste in women, but it is apparent that is where it ends.”

Alexander felt supremely satisfied to see his brother shrink back in shock. He had hoped Helen would be able to hold her own, but he didn’t think she would be able to hold her own so well.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I am just stating the obvious from the little I have seen of you.” She wrinkled

her nose. “You do not seem to have a good taste in alcohol, since you so obviously love to imbibe. Neither do you seem to know the difference between a paramour or a noblewoman. It’s honestly something pitiable.”

Nathaniel spluttered like a fish and then glared hotly at her. “If you would excuse me.”

His last look was pointed at Helen.

The Duke didn’t hesitate to step in front of his wife until his brother had gone further away.

“What just happened, Alexander? I wasn’t prepared for that.” Helen backed away from him, staring frantically at her hands as if trying to grasp her sensibilities.

She was obviously scared, even though she had looked so confident.

After dealing with his siblings, Alexander needed to avoid the Dowager Duchess at all costs. It seemed that she too wanted to avoid him, since she was yet to make her presence known to him.

“Allow me to apologize again.” Alexander would have embraced Helen if not for the flitting eyes around.

“Did you grow up in such surroundings?” Her voice turned from distraught to concerned.

He hated the feeling. She was caring for him and shouldering the weight of his trauma. He was failing her.

“No. Once my father died, I was all alone.”

He tried to assuage her concern, but his words only seemed to heighten it. When she looked at him, she was almost teary-eyed.

“But you were just fourteen!”

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He explained further how growing up alone, he had been forced to mature early and started excelling at his studies and duties.

Everyone admired him and secretly pitied him because he was all alone, and they sometimes meant well but failed to hide their emotions around him.

Soon the pity that had once made him sad made him angry, and so, to show them how well he truly was, he started dabbling into investments and business ventures. Everyone started recognizing him as a cut-throat businessman, and everyone wanted advice from him.

All was well until his stepmother approached him for money to repay one of his brother's gambling debts. Not feeling like he owed them anything, he said no. So, his brother started planning schemes, trying to trap him in scandals, so he could blackmail him.

"I am so sorry. Do you wish to leave?"

"Do you wish to? I will survive. As a duke, I?—"

"But as Alexander Osborne, what do you want?" Her emphasis made it seem as though he was subdued by the proprieties of his title. He was.

She saw him and what duty did to him. The title changed him, created a two-faceted man. But he has become so accustomed to being the Ruthless Duke that he had forgotten there was a man underneath. Behind the title, there was a fourteen-year-old boy who wanted a normal childhood. But then, he had never had a childhood, not

since the day he was born to the father that he had.

He had only learned to stop wishing the day he accepted the duchy.

He almost let his vulnerability show.

“Alexander Osborne is a duke and has been all his life.” Her concern was unwavering.

“I am fine, Helen,” he assured her. “As long as you stand by my side.”

He surprised himself by admitting that fact. He had been given to panicking when being around his family, as the trauma of being abandoned in childhood resurfaced, but having her holding onto him and squeezing his arm for comfort had eased his discomfort.

“I will be by your side then,” she assured, “as long as you need me to.”

Then she did something utterly uncharacteristic of a duchess but peculiar to Helen Osborne—she stood on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Come now, husband.” She pulled him softly. “All this talking has set me in the mood for punch.”

Alexander let her lead him to the refreshments table but soon came to realize that he and his wife were nothing alike.

For one, Helen was bold, unlike he had been, in handling his family. She kissed him when he could not even manage to give her a hug.

Another difference, she was dancing.

Admirers had neared them at the refreshments table and asked her for a dance and had nearly filled her card, but he snagged it and filled two slots for himself.

She had been dancing the whole evening, spinning around the dance floor in a hue of blue and silver. If not for the shimmering diamonds around her neck, he would have lost her in the crush.

Alexander stood by idly, like an abandoned man, as man after man came to claim his wife for one dance after the other. It's not an idyllic sight, watching his lover grin up at another man as he held onto her waist and twirled her around. Alexander rushed to her side to claim her for their second dance that evening at the inception of the polka.

"I find it disconcerting..."

"What?"

She was beaming, as opposed to how she had been during their encounter with his siblings. The encounter had obviously been forgotten.

"My wife is quite popular, and I don't know how to feel about it. You seem to know everyone by name, and they seem to know you as well. The most annoying thing is, it's mostly the men. Mostly the attractivemen."

Alexander looked away as Helen's eyebrows rose with a playful smile. He hadn't intended for the latter to come out, but now that it was out, he felt foolish.

But what was the response of his beautiful goddess of a wife? She giggled. Helen Osborne, Duchess of Blackwell, giggled, and the sound was a melody to Alexander's ears.

"My, my, darling husband," she teased. "You seem to notice an awful lot."

His ears reddened at her teasing voice. Helen hadn't been this comfortable with banter between them before now, and he hadn't realized he could relish someone finding him amusing.

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“You can’t rule a duchy without being observant,” he said obstinately.

“But we’re not speaking of a duchy here.”

He spun her around, and the conversation paused. Then, she rammed into him, pressing her full weight against him.

“We’re speaking of your wife.”

“Which is precisely why I should be more observant.”

“Many men could care less about their wives’... proclivities.” She slurred the latter, or so he assumed as he spun her again.

This damned dance. He needed her body pressed unmovingly to his. Or maybe a slight movement...

“You should know that I am not like most men,” he growled in her ear before she spun again. “I have to spin you one more time.” His tone was low but laden with dark promise.

She laughed.

“And I really do hope you were joking about having proclivities.”

She gave a lopsided smile that sent a heady spark of lust through him as he remembered the last time he’d seen the look on her.

“I guess you’ll know soon.” She winked.

He growled and pulled her closer to him. “I’ll punish you for your teasing later,” he growled in her ear.

“I look forward to it, Your Grace.” She kissed his cheek. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go to the powder room.”

He nodded. “Should I come with you?” he asked, spotting his siblings whispering between themselves with dark smiles.

Helen smiled, thinking he was flirting, but his serious look wiped the smile off her face.

“I’ll be fine,” she told him, patting his cheek. “They won’t try anything with so many people around.”

He nodded and watched her walk away. He was immediately pulled into a conversation by some lords who’d caught wind of how he’d secured the deal with Cecil.

“Where is your lovely wife?” one of them asked.

His body tensed up as he realized he hadn’t seen her in a while, and as he looked around, he couldn’t spot his siblings either.

Fearing for her, he excused himself and went towards the powder room, his heart pounding in his chest.

Oh God, let her be safe, he prayed for the first time in a while.

He saw Helen walking around, looking confused, and a bright smile lit up her face when she saw him. A man dressed in dark simple clothes some distance behind her paused and turned to hurry away. Alexander wanted to go after the man, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“I got lost.” She laughed. “Were you worried?”

Anger filled him as the strange emotion that had been pushing him to go look for her abated. He never should have brought her here. He’d made a big mistake exposing her to his family, and it was time he fixed that mistake.

“Why didn’t you ask anyone to guide you back?” he asked coldly.

She stared back at him in surprise. “I didn’t see any...”

“Let’s get back to the party,” he said coldly, turning away so he would not see her sad expression.

He’d taken a few steps when he realized he didn’t hear her follow him. He turned back to see her standing with her fists squeezed tightly at her sides.

“Helen, what?—”

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“Don’t,” she spat. “Don’t ever speak to me like that again. I won’t have it.”

He glared at her. “I am not in the mood for your theatrics,” he scolded. “Let’s go.”

“You go on ahead,” she snapped. “I will find my way back.”

“Because that worked out well the first time.”

“You’re the most annoying man I have ever met.”

“You would do well to remember that,” he shot back, already tired of the argument and wondering why she couldn’t understand his anger.

She’d been walking carelessly in the lion’s den and could have been hurt if he didn’t get to her in time.

“Why are you being like this?” she cried. “We were having a good night.”

“Even good things must come to an end.”

She nodded, as though she understood. “Indeed.”

“Get your coat,” he ordered. “We’re leaving now.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” She curtsied, before walking past him in a cloud of lavender and rose.

Shite.

He hurried after her because he... he feared she would get hurt.

He paused in his tracks as it finally came clear to him why he had behaved the way he had. He had been worried about her, and it scared him how much he had worried.

Shite.

ChapterTwelve

Over the last fortnight, Helen would have loved to believe she had forged deep connections with Alexander that would require him to treat her with a little more respect than he had.

Even if he didn't love her, she believed he desired her, she thought he respected her, and she would love to think they shared a beautiful friendship and chemistry both in their matrimonial bed and outside of it, but it seemed to her that those connections didn't extend to trust.

She had known that he had a cynical and suspicious personality courtesy of the demons that thrived in the dark corners of his mysterious past. She had always known he had a strong distrust of people, but for the first time, she was getting firsthand experience of what it felt like to be an object of his distrust.

Now that she knew what it felt like having him watch her with a look of distrust and anger for some perceived crime she had no idea about, she had never considered it before, but living with the constant weight would fast become exhausting.

She knew her marriage was not a love match, but she also knew that a partnership of any kind could not survive if there was no good communication and trust between

parties. She couldn't continue being open with him while he clammed up and kept all his secrets. If this marriage was going to work, he had to give her something to work with.

At this moment, she already felt her anger giving way to exhaustion, and she needed space and fresh air to regain clarity in her thoughts.

"Excuse me, Your Grace, I would like to step outside to get some air," she said, gathering her skirts and hurrying past him towards the corridor without waiting for his permission.

Dimly, she could hear him calling her name, but she was not in the right state of mind to have a conversation with him, so she needed to get away from him. She walked at a brisk pace until she got to the corridor. Gently she released her tight grip on her skirts and took several deep, calming breaths until the feeling of suffocation abated and the chaos in her mind quietened.

* * *

Alexander had never felt the kind of panic before that he had experienced within those few minutes when he had searched for her. So many thoughts ran through his mind. His overactive imagination provided him with several scenarios, all of which showed Helen in danger. It did not help matters that he had caught a glimpse of his malevolent siblings plotting something, with their gazes glancing in the direction that Helen had left.

He should have known that he should not let down his guard so easily, not when he was within the same space as his siblings. They were creatures who thrived on his discomfort. It seemed they had decided to change tactics, choosing to attack his wife rather than go straight for him.

Over the years, he had built his cold demeanor as armor to ward off their attacks. Not that it worked, but at the very least, it made them wary of him and far less likely to attack him.

It seemed they thought Helen an easy target, the fastest way to create chinks in his armor, and he hated the fact that they were right and that Helen made him vulnerable. She had fast become his weak point, and that made him angry and afraid.

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He had just made Helen a potential pawn in his never-ending family drama simply by marrying her. Of course, he didn't regret marrying her. In fact, that was probably the best decision he'd made in a while, considering what he'd gained, but he deeply regretted that he was unable to protect her from his family.

The sight of her in that hallway did several things to him that he had a hard time believing. In that short period of time, he went through a whole spectrum of emotions, from his initial relief to his anger at her for leaving the ball and walking around unescorted in secluded hallways, where a lot of unsavory males could do unthinkable things to her.

The sight of the man behind her added an even more potent point to the toxic swirl of emotions. The thought of the man hurting her in any way sent a wave of possessive rage through his entire being. Some rational part of his mind kept on reminding him that it was probably better to calm down and apologize for the beastly way he'd behaved, but he was too fired up with the jealousy and rage swirling in his system.

He was not given to making apologies, since he made a point of avoiding situations that warranted apologies, but it seemed he was learning every day. He had to learn to apologize and hope she forgave him.

The way she left led him to believe that he wouldn't get through to her at the moment. She was really hurt, and it was probably best that he gave her space to be angry at him. It was what she deserved, and he'd be even more beastly to take that away from her.

He made his way towards the corridor she had fled to and sighed when he spotted

her. She stood silently with her arms wrapped around herself, silhouetted with the light of the candles illuminating part of her face while the other part remained in shadow. She was the portrait of a beautiful creature in pain. It saddened him to know he was the cause of her pain.

“Helen,” he said, moving towards her. He noticed her flinch and then turn away from him.

Removing his coat, he placed it around her shoulders.

“You will catch your death if you stay out too long,” he pointed out, holding the coat more firmly around her. “Let’s go inside.”

“I would rather not,” she said in a stiff voice.

“Please,” he tried again. “It is late. If you want some air, you can use the balcony in my chambers.”

“I’d rather return home as you insisted, Your Grace.” She curtsied.

She’d gone back to using his title, letting him know she was incensed beyond measure, but he felt a kindling of something in his chest as he heard her refer to his castle as her home.

“All right. I will have a footman bring the carriage around,” he agreed quietly.

“All right.” She nodded and proceeded to walk towards the entrance, her head held high and her spine ramrod straight.

He had to agree that she was quite regal in her anger, and strangely enough, it aroused the hell out of him even as it terrified him.

He watched her go and then returned to the ballroom, calling for a footman, but before he could step out again, he was waylaid by Sophia.

“Well, Brother, it seemed you have managed to locate your Duchess,” she said with a smug smirk, “but she is in quite a foul mood. I wonder where you found her? Or maybe I interrupted something interesting.”

At that, Alexander gave her a cold look of warning, but she giggled, the sound grating on his nerves.

“You see, I hate being interrupted rudely, so I understand the sentiment,” she continued, ignoring his silent warning.

“I would think you would have better things to do with your time, like pandering to the whims of the young Earl,” he replied, matching her smug smirk “We wouldn’t want him to stray, this close to the wedding.”

“He wouldn’t dare. The man worships the ground I walk on. He would jump if I asked him to.”

Alexander was sure the simple-minded man would do just that. He had an inkling that if Sophia should request that he jump, the man would probably stop only to inquire how high.

“I am sure that is quite true, but I wonder what he would think if he knew what his bride prefers to do with her free time,” Alexander said, tapping his chin in mock thought.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she spluttered, an element of fear appearing in her eyes. “Besides, he won’t believe you.”

“You do know I can be very convincing,” he said, widening his grin. “I might even share my stories with the Dowager Countess. I wager she might find them quite interesting. And she wouldn’t dare doubt the sincerity of my words, seeing as I’m a duke.”

At that, Sophia became quiet, vibrating with rage. If there was one thing everyone in the ton knew, it was the fact that even though the Earl was simple-minded, his mother was quite shrewd, and Sophia was aware of what it would mean for unflattering stories of her to reach the ears of her shrewd future mother-in-law. The gates to her extravagant lifestyle will be quite likely shut, with her on the wrong side of it.

Realizing this, Sophia stomped angrily away, leaving him the space to find his wife. He got to the exit to find her already being helped into the carriage by a footman. He quickly joined her.

When he was sitting comfortably, he looked up to see her looking at him askance.

“I am sorry I was late. I was temporarily delayed,” he said in answer to the unspoken question.

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She seemed satisfied with the answer as she turned her head towards the window, effectively ignoring him. It seemed he was going to have to do a lot of groveling before he could get back into her good graces, and frankly, he was not looking forward to it, but if it was what it took to get her to forgive him, he was willing to try.

The journey back to the manor was uncomfortable, to say the least, as they sat in silence. All efforts by Alexander to draw Helen into conversation were met with cold, stony silence. She didn't even turn her head to acknowledge him when he spoke.

When the carriage stopped in front of their castle, he stepped down first and then extended his hand to help his wife down, but she ignored his offered arm and jumped down herself—rather unladylike he might add, but it seemed Helen was happy to do anything to avoid interacting with him.

Inside the manor, she walked before him and proceeded to climb up the stairs. Considering the state of their relationship at the moment, Alexander should not have enjoyed watching her swaying hips as she climbed up the stairs before him, but he couldn't help himself any more than he would gouge his eyes out.

When they got to her bedroom, she walked in, slammed the door in his face, and proceeded to latch the door in an unspoken command not to trespass.

Damn.

He had married one firecracker, and it was quite inflaming to watch her in a rage—she was simply glorious. And he was probably out of his mind, since he was having erotic fantasies about a woman who was furious with him, but he had already

accepted that he was addicted to her, and he was tired of fighting his addiction.

The problem was that he had succeeded in getting himself highly aroused with no hope of relief in sight. It appeared he had an appointment with a cold bath if he hoped to achieve some modicum of peaceful slumber that night.

Hopefully, by the next morning, she would be a little less angry with him. A few nights of this kind of denial, and he might spontaneously combust. His desire for his firecracker of a wife never ceased to amaze him, and he had given up hope of making sense of it.

It helped that he was not the only one consumed by that desire; his wife desired him just as much, and under his hands, she became a hot flame.

Together, they created an inferno that turned their world on its axis. Their joining was always ballistic, and he couldn't wait to have her in his arms again, begging him, screaming his name in ecstasy.

Yes, he definitely needed a cold bath, especially as his erection was threatening to split the seams of his breeches. He was always painfully aroused around Helen. It appeared to have become the norm. It was very unusual for any man of the ton to desire his wife the way he desired Helen, but he had come to realize that there was nothing normal about what lay between him and his delectable wife.

The next morning, Alexander went downstairs to meet his wife, who was already seated at one end of the massive dining table, sipping her tea daintily.

She made no move to acknowledge his presence, but he knew she was aware of him due to the slight tension in her shoulders.

They might be at odds at the moment, but her body was attuned to his at an elemental

level just as he was attuned to hers. Alexander made his way towards her, making sure to stomp his feet a little to make his footsteps more audible. Childish maybe, but he didn't particularly care at the moment.

When he stood behind her seat, he placed his hands on her shoulders and then leaned forward slightly to speak in her ear.

“Good morning, darling. I trust you had a splendid night?” He was satisfied with the slight shiver she tried to suppress.

It definitely was a big stroke to his trophy ego to see her react strongly to his proximity, but it appeared he was torturing himself as well, since his position brought him close to the skin of her neck and her intoxicating scent.

It was all he could do not to lick her skin. He forced himself to move away.

“I slept very well, Your Grace,” Helen replied stiffly.

It took him a while to realize that she was answering his previous question. Rather coldly, if he might add. It appeared the hours had not mitigated her anger towards him.

“Ah, love, are you still angry with me? I am really sorry for speaking to you that way. That was uncalled for, and you didn't deserve such. Forgive me? Hmm?” he apologized finally, still standing behind her.

She kept her face in profile, and her next words told him he had just failed at conveying his apologies correctly.

“Apparently, it seems I'm supposed to forgive your outburst of anger every now and then without any explanations as to the reason until the next time you lose your

temper,” she stated calmly. “How long do you expect us to keep repeating that cycle?”

Alexander released her as her words hit him. He thought he knew the worst of her anger, but this cold side to her alerted him that there were more sides to this woman than he knew. He walked to the opposite side of the table, so he could see her face fully.

Helen waited till he was standing in front of her before continuing, “Don’t get me wrong, Your Grace. You are entitled to your secrets, but I hardly think it is right that I suffer from your periodic outbursts of anger without knowing their source. To make this marriage work, even if just for the duration we agreed on, I think we have to at least make an effort to be transparent with each other. I was under the impression that we had come a long way from us not trusting each other, but if that is the type of marriage you would prefer, then you can hold on to your secrets as tightly as you like.”

Then, dropping her cutlery, she continued, “I no longer have an appetite. I think I would retire above stairs. Enjoy your meal, Your Grace.”

She rose from the table and disappeared upstairs.

Alexander highly doubted he could enjoy his breakfast, now that he had seen how upset Helen really was. He had built his secret and remote personality to keep away members of the ton, primarily his stepfamily, and to protect himself, but it appeared the walls he had built around himself were putting a strain on the nearly peaceable relationship he had with Helen, preventing him from reaching her and enjoying what they had together.

He had to make a choice to either drop his walls and enjoy the company and care of his lovely wife while accepting the vulnerability that came with it, or hold on to his

walls and wallow in the misery and self-pity that had been his companions for the past decades. The answer was quite clear, but then old habits died hard, and it would take quite some effort.

* * *

Helen rushed up the stairs, and getting to her room, she threw herself on her bed before proceeding to scream out her frustration into her pillow.

She couldn't believe she had said all that to Alexander. Everybody knew the man had his secrets, which he had every right to, and she hardly thought that calling him out in that way would cause him to be more open. It seemed rather likely that she might lose the little intimacy that they had achieved.

It was hard though to remain content with the little they shared, but she hoped she had not just demanded too much too soon. The man had a wealth of pain hiding behind a wall inside his heart, and every now and then she got a glimpse during his occasional outbursts.

She realized as she lay down that her problem was that she was not content with just glimpses of his pain. She wanted the full story, as that was the only way that she could understand who the magnificent man that her husband really was, and she wanted to know about the experiences that had molded him into the man he was at present.

But she knew better. She knew that picking at a person's pain was hardly the way to endear yourself to them, and she truly hoped he didn't completely shut her out. Her impulsive personality was at fault, and she just hoped she had not destroyed everything.

She was wallowing in her self-recriminating thoughts when she heard a knock at the

door.

“Don’t bother, Rose. I will not be going on my walk anymore. You can take the day off,” she called out from her place on the bed.

She was definitely not going to enjoy a walk, with the way she felt at this point. She would prefer to stay indoors and nurse her wounds, thank you very much.

“Helen, please open the door,” the deep masculine voice that definitely did not belong to Rose responded, making her leap out of bed.

She tried to regain her composure and tried to rearrange her hair and straighten the side flattened from lying on it. She promptly gave up when a knock came again.

“Alex?” she asked in surprise, seeing him dressed in his shirt sleeves alone.

His shirt was open at the throat, revealing a span of bronzed skin for her appreciation. She was so lost in feasting her eyes on his sheer physical beauty that she almost did not catch his next words.

“I don’t think you need your maid. You are fine this way. I would like to take a stroll in the gardens with you,” he said, his eyebrow raised in question, his hand extended.

He didn’t appear to be angry with her, and maybe the morning air might serve to calm her chaotic mind.

Taking her hand, he smiled down at her and then led her into the gardens. The gardens in Blackhill were colorful in comparison with the morose nature of the castle. The gardens were obviously tended with care. The flowers were well tended, and hedges were sheared in perfect square. That told her something about the man beside her.

“Do you like flowers, Your Grace?” she asked tentatively

“Just as much as the next man, but I am not that attached to them. Why do you ask?”

“Your garden is quite beautiful and well-tended. I hypothesized that you must love flowers and nature.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, pet,” he said, chuckling, “but my mother was the flower lover and not me. This was her favorite place in the entire castle.”

His eyes turned introspective. Helen suspected he was seeing a completely different picture, probably a memory of his mother.

This was the first time he mentioned his parents. She offered the only comfort she could, rubbing his arm in consolation. At the feel of her touch, he smiled down at her, sadness lingering in his eyes.

“She sounds like she was a wonderful person,” Helen said softly.

Alexander answered with a rueful smile, “Indeed, she was.”

Of course, Sabrina was one of a kind. It was a pity she had the misfortune of marrying the abusive man who became his father, but that wasn’t her fault.

His parents’ marriage was one of convenience and mutual benefit. It was unfortunate that his father had managed to crush her fragile spirit.

The garden had been Sabrina’s only place of solace in the times when his father flew into one of his rages. She brought Alexander with her to the garden and taught him about the beauty of flowers and their stages of growth. The feel of the earth under his fingers quietened his mind in those moments of fear. Even now that he was grown, he

still came to the gardens for solace and solitude, a break from the chaos of his daily life, and the garden always welcomed him like his mother's hug.

This was the only way Alexander could keep his mother's memory alive, and he was proud of this beauty. He preferred to enjoy it privately, but bringing Helen to his sanctuary was the first step towards greater intimacy with her.

He realized that she had gone way out of her comfort zone to make this marriage work. It was not easy for a woman to leave such a happy home to get married to a cynical shell of a man with more thorns than a rose. It was now time to make sacrifices for the sake of the delicate emotional intimacy they shared.

He guided her till they got to a clearing where he had set up the next step in his apology campaign, and her reaction made all the efforts seem justified.

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“My God,” she gasped, her eyes wide, “what is this?”

“A peace offering of sorts. I am really sorry about the way I acted at the ball. It was really uncalled for and grossly unfair to you,” he said with a remorseful tone.

“How were you able to prepare all this in such a short time frame?” she asked, smiling widely, one of her palms flattened on her chest in an expression of surprise.

Anything was possible when you had a matchmaking agency for house staff. It is said that if you wanted to get information about an aristocratic family, the staff had better information than a historical library. It was not quite surprising to notice that they had picked up on the tension between him and his wife, so the moment Alexander asked the cook to prepare food for a picnic, the entire household assembled, all eager to help, the cook and the housekeeper bombarding him with advice on how best to treat his wife.

Under normal circumstances, servants had no right to openly share their opinions with their employers uninvited, but Alexander had a unique relationship with his staff, as they had raised him from when he was just a boy and had struggled with him through thick and thin. They had become a makeshift family—an even better one than his stepfamily.

Besides, with their remarkable team effort, the picnic was set up with the speed of lightning. However, it was not necessary to repeat that to Helen. After all, a man should have his secrets.

In a few minutes, Alexander had Helen settled on a blanket on the floor, and she took

her time admiring the spread before her.

“This is too much,” she said, turning to him. “You shouldn’t have done this.”

“Why? Is a man not allowed to prepare surprises for his wife?” he asked, a teasing smile playing on his lips.

Helen simply arched an eyebrow at his reply.

“Forgive me?”

There was a long silence, so long that Alexander was beginning to wonder what else he was supposed to do to earn her forgiveness.

“Why?” she asked softly. “Why did you react that way at the ball?” she elaborated, seeing the confused look on his face.

“As you know, my half-siblings do not like me very much and recently have decided to create scandals with me at the center simply to blackmail me into doing their bidding. It seems that they have decided to include you as a new pawn in their ridiculous game. When I didn’t see you at the ball, I admit I was scared that you were attacked or something even worse. It was worsened still by the fact that a man was following you from the ladies’ powder room. It appears that the moment I found you, you were just a few heartbeats away from becoming the main character in a scandalous story, and trust me, you don’t want to be notorious. It is exhausting.”

Helen could see that it was really exhausting. It must have been. Alexander had endured the brunt of the misinformation against him, since Society matrons were in support of the stories no matter how outlandish they sounded. It was probably exhausting to have such unbelievable rumors believed by every person in Society and be denied the chance to defend your honor.

It was quite a pity to be able to see how this man had been transformed from an innocent young boy who loved gardening and the outdoors to this man who sat across from her, who was cynical and closed off. She now appreciated the effort he was making in letting her in through the walls that had protected him over the years.

“I didn’t notice I was being followed,” she admitted softly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t consider what being in that house must have meant to you. I should have been more careful. And you do not need to do so much to earn my forgiveness. All I ask for is that you open up to me.”

* * *

Alexander did not like the look of pity in Helen’s eyes. He had only told her about his family to get her to understand him a little better, and so she could understand the danger she might be in. He was no longer that pathetic, little boy who had yearned for his father or his stepmother to show him some modicum of affection.

He was a successful businessman and a powerful figure in society, so he would prefer not to be pitied. To distract himself, he changed the topic.

“My sister’s wedding will be coming up in a week’s time. I trust you have things set for the event?” he asked her gently.

“That soon?”

“Yes, apparently my sister seems to be in quite a rush to get married. Something about not wanting to wait to be joined to the love of her life,” he said, snorting in a way that showed he didn’t believe that to be true in any way.

It was more likely Sophia wanted to snap the wealthy Earl before his family realized that she had probably lied about her personality and the financial background of her

family, because the truth remained that his stepmother had managed to squander both the substantial funds settled on both herself and his siblings and had moved on to Sophia's dowry most likely with the hope of blackmailing him into providing the money from his business.

They had sucked the estate dry so much that by the time Alexander was of age, he had inherited a shell of a dukedom with nothing except for the land and the castle which was entailed in the title.

He was sure if there had been a legal way to sell those off, his stepmother would have. His father had made the tactical mistake of making the sleazy Mr. Stephen the legal counsel for the dukedom and his legal guardian. It was unfortunate that the man was seduced by his wily stepmother, and he released information to her that was supposed to be professional secrets in order to please her. She had promptly dropped him after wringing him dry of information.

When Alexander grew older and heard about it, he had sworn to be a stronger man, not a weak man like his father and the unfortunate Mr. Stephen, who had tried to redeem himself by providing the information about the contract and some private dealings that had helped Alexander.

When he thought about his life, Alexander believed that it would make one amazing story for the opera, with its numerous plot twists that would keep the viewers on the edge of their seats.

Even he was surprised by how his life unfolded sometimes.

It was unfortunate that he could not resist the temptation of pulling the fresh and innocent Helen into the drama that was his life. The best he could do was prepare her as best as he could.

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“I should probably warn you. You have probably gleaned from your first meeting with my sister that she has a barbed tongue and intimidating tendencies, but she is by far the most docile member of my stepfamily. My half-brother and stepmother, on the other hand, are skilled in the art of manipulation and blackmail. They have been honing their skills on me and other members of the ton for years, and they are not above using you to get back at me. So, stay close to me at all times and try as much as possible to avoid having private meetings with them. They are experts at turning even the most innocuous situation into a scandal. I should know. I have been a victim several times over.”

Helen let out a worried sigh. “I would admit that the prospect of meeting them does not particularly thrill me, and all this talk of blackmail scares me silly. They are such beautiful people. Why would anyone want to do that?” she asked, perplexed

“Ah, love,” he replied, taking her hand, “not everyone has your pure and beautiful heart. Do not fret. Just be yourself. Besides, I will be by your side throughout.”

She nodded, even though she still looked shaken.

“Now, enough talk about my stepfamily,” he declared, clapping his hands together. “Let’s enjoy this meal set for us. Shall we?”

“Yes,” she agreed, nodding with a smile. “Everything looks good!”

The next few minutes were agony for Alexander as he watched Helen put the fruit in her mouth, its juice wetting her lips and dripping a little. It enhanced the pinkness of her plump lips. When her tongue darted out to lick the juice from her lips, he swung

his legs as lust shot straight through him faster than a bullet.

“You are not eating Alex?” she asked in what he thought must be a concerned tone, but he was too engrossed with her lips to be sure.

He offered a non-committal grunt in answer as he was incapable of any words at the moment. The sight of her very pink tongue darting out to lick her lips just kicked his arousal into overdrive. Before he knew what was happening, he was shifting the dishes with one swipe of his hand and drew her into his lap.

In the next moment, those intoxicating lips were under his, and he was devouring them with reckless abandon. Ah, she tasted like the sweet tang of strawberries and her. Helen returned the kiss, opening her mouth to allow his tongue in. Their tongues dueled as the kiss turned molten.

Alexander broke the kiss to lay Helen down gently on the cloth and then proceeded to nibble down her throat, alternating between nipping and sucking on her throat until she was reduced to a mass of whimpers. One of his hands made short work of loosening her bodice and freeing her glorious breasts, and then he proceeded to suck one cherry nipple while torturing its twin.

Now, Helen was writhing, but she managed to force out between her pants, “Outside. Alex, we are outside.”

“No one will see, no windows are on this side of the castle,” he replied between kisses, not bothering to raise his head.

That seemed to reassure Helen as her fingers tightened in his hair. Her body writhed with the pleasure he was giving her.. Pleasuring her gave him pleasure, and he was just one heartbeat away from coming.

He felt her hand fiddling with the fastening of his breeches. Soon it was open, and she put her hand in to caress him. He hissed in pleasure.

“Please, pet, you have to stop. I won’t last long if you continue to do that,” he gasped, but Helen ignored him and boldly stroked his member until he wanted to explode.

He held both her hands above her and then lined himself with her wet heat. After a few thrusts and strumming her clit, she was shouting out her orgasm, and he followed soon after.

* * *

Helen could not believe that some members of the ton believed that the marriage act should be endured and not enjoyed. She understood from the gossip among the maids that not every couple enjoyed such bliss. If all couples enjoyed this bliss, how they would get anything done? It took a considerate man to make it good for his wife or lover, and Alexander was considerate. It was one of the reasons she loved him.

Loved?

Helen shot off her bed in surprise as the thought took root. Was it possible she’d somehow fallen for her husband?

She had always known that she cared about Alexander, but it seemed that care had transformed into love without her paying attention.

It would have been a good thing she’d have celebrated if perhaps they had a normal marriage, or she knew he shared her sentiment, but his concern for her and willingness to open up to her about his past didn’t translate to love, and she was not ready to destroy the fragile thing they had by blurting out her feelings.

It seemed she was destined to love her Duke secretly. It had to be enough. She would make it enough.

ChapterThirteen

The next evening, Alexander stood in the foyer of his castle, waiting for his lovely wife to join him.

If not for the need for a good societal image, he would have preferred to stay home, lounging with his wife between the sheets in their king-sized bed upstairs. At least, he was guaranteed to be happier that way than stepping into the proverbial lion's den.

The moment the familiar scent of lavender reached him, he turned to see Helen descending the stairs in a gown of the deepest blue that contrasted with her skin, making it look rich and glowing. She was magnificent, a goddess among men, and he was temporarily struck dumb by that picture.

“How do I look?” she asked shyly when she reached him, swirling her skirts this way and that.

It was adorable how free of artifice she was.

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Another woman would bask in her beauty, but this adorable wood sprite, he had realized, thrived on his validation, and he would do that and more if it was what she needed for her self-esteem.

“You look magnificent, love. I have half a mind to whisk you above stairs and keep you there, dear. But I would prefer to show off your beauty to the world if only to make them hate me even more for snagging such a beautiful woman for myself. I am wicked in that way,” he said, making sure he expressed his hunger through his eyes.

“You do have a golden tongue, don’t you, Your Grace?” she said, chuckling and tapping him lightly with her fan.

“I suppose I do, Your Grace, and I could put it to even better use if you permit me,” he suggested, putting a hand on her waist and dragging her forward for a kiss that turned molten quite quickly.

“I supposed we should go now if we are to make it to the wedding,” he suggested, his breathing ragged when they finally came up for air.

His beautiful wife looked stunned for a moment, and then she collected herself, looping her arm through his.

“Yes, I believe we should,” she replied.

Together, they made their way towards the carriage.

* * *

The wedding was a success, based on the ton's standards. The bride and the groom were resplendent in all their glorious wedding finery. The bride was practically glowing when she was led in by her brother. She exchanged wide smiles with her groom when she got to the altar so much so that the unmarried members swore that they were a love match. Helen wouldn't blame them at all. They did make a beautiful couple, at least on the surface.

Helen even, with her naivety, was amazed by the bride's acting skills. She believed that the beautiful bride had missed her calling.

She would have racked in a lot of money acting for the opera house. Helen admitted that she might have been more likely to fall for her deception if she hadn't met Sophia before and seen her attitude in real life.

Helen particularly had a strong dislike for bullies, as she had had friends who had been ruined through bullying behavior. Many had been made permanent spinsters and consistent wallflowers simply because they had crossed someone in some petty way.

Alexander had warned her that Sophia exacted revenge on people by ruining their good name, but Helen guessed Sophia had practice, having used her half-brother for her debut effort. It amazed Helen how such a beautiful creature could have such a dark heart.

It was unfortunate that Helen was now tied to her family through her marriage to Alexander, but he was worth it, so she was going to endure any meals and encounters with them.

Soon the ceremony was brought to an end, and they all headed to the house for the wedding breakfast. They were beckoned to the high table, where they happened to be sitting close to Alexander's brother.

“Nathaniel,” Alexander greeted shortly.

Nathaniel looked up at him, his lips widening in a sly grin. “If it isn’t the Duke of Blackhill. It seems you decided to grace us lesser mortals with your presence.”

It didn’t skip Helen’s attention that he was purposely ignoring her and remaining seated instead of standing, which was customary for a gentleman to do in the presence of a lady, but then she guessed it would be a mistake to classify Nathaniel as a gentleman simply because he was born into nobility. The man was very crass and sly—a glaring opposite to his brother, who was always collected.

Alexander pulled out her chair for her, and she thanked him before he took his seat beside his brother, effectively providing a buffer between her and his brother. They were served their meal, and Alexander insisted on fishing her food from the platters available.

“Wonders never end.” Nathaniel started chuckling. “Who would have thought that the Ice King of Blackhill would stoop so low as to serve his wife’s meals? I guess you saved the softer parts of your personality for your wife. As your brother, I never received the slightest affectionate consideration from you.”

“Well, I hardly think you have done anything to deserve such affectionate considerations. If I can recall, the last time you contacted me, it was to request that I settle a gambling debt for you. I am left to assume that it was your way of showing brotherly affection.”

At that, Nathaniel was thankfully quiet. It was quite endearing to see how masterfully Alexander handled his siblings’ barbs, and he did so without breaking a sweat or missing a beat. There was always a ready answer in his mouth.

The table enjoyed a few minutes of silence before Nathaniel resumed his verbal

torture.

“Tell me, Your Grace,” he said, addressing Helen, “is he quite as attentive in your matrimonial bed?” A sly smile played on his lips.

Helen almost choked on her drink, but she forced herself to swallow gently before attempting to reply to the rude man whom she had the misfortune of having as a brother-in-law.

“I don’t think that is an appropriate question for the breakfast table, and that information is private, and I intend to keep it that way,” she answered with as much dignity as she could muster even while her palm itched to make a resounding contact with his face and wipe off that smirk. “Then again, I wonder at your interest in your brother’s bedroom activities. Do you have any interest in replacing me in his bed?”

Alexander raised his eyebrow in surprise, and she noted he looked to be hiding a laugh. Nathaniel reddened and looked like he was collecting himself.

“I only asked because I was wondering how soon we can expect the birth of a new heir for the Blackhill Dukedom,” he said, knowingly needling her. She was impressed he had recovered from that barb easily.

Alexander was obviously making an effort to avoid reacting to his brother’s provocative questions. It looked like Nathaniel was simply doing this to annoy Alexander, and any reaction would just encourage him to intensify his campaign to push him into a rage.

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Helen took a deep breath and silently implored the Lord to grant her patience to deal with the man-child who sat two seats down from her.

“I wouldn’t know how soon a child would arrive, My Lord,” she answered, forcing a smile she didn’t feel right on her face. “Of course, we will welcome children whenever we are blessed with them.”

“Well, I am available if the Duke is remiss on his conjugal duties.” He laughed slyly.

It happened so fast that Helen didn’t remember thinking about doing it. It just happened.

One minute she was cradling her soup bowl, trying to drink from it, and the next moment she was emptying the contents of the bowl on his smirky face. Well, that wiped the insolent look off his face.

“Don’t you ever suggest something so insulting ever again,” she said, her voice shaking with barely restrained anger. “I will rather bed a pig than crawl into bed with a man as disgusting as yourself. The next time you choose to insult me or my husband, I promise you the soup will be much hotter. That will definitely be an upgrade to your looks.”

Then, pushing her seat back, she fled towards the entrance of the manor.

* * *

After Helen left, Alexander was shocked for a while, and then the shock gave way to

amusement, and a very big smile appeared on his face and then boisterous laughter that had him throwing his head back.

Who would have thought that his prim and proper Duchess could fly off the handle in such a violent way?

One minute she was sitting down primly beside him, the next moment the contents of her soup bowl were finding a new home on Nathaniel's face. He had always known that his beautiful Duchess was a firecracker, but then he had never seen her in the grip of rage, and damn was she magnificent.

Of course, his heart warmed to see her defend him. It was the first time someone stood to defend him, and he could not help the foolish, goody grin he could feel on his face. And, of course, he could not deny the fact that it was satisfying to see someone put his annoying brother in his place.

"I would advise that you wipe that foolish smile off your face." Nathaniel's voice caused him to turn towards him. "And keep that feral cat you call a wife at home, will you?"

Like magic, the smile disappeared from Alexander's face and was replaced with red-hot rage. He slowly rose to his full height and then placed his hands on the table, making sure to corner his brother using the bulk of his body, to intimidate him. He watched as the look of arrogance in Nathaniel's eyes transformed into fear. The man was many things, but he was primarily a coward at heart.

"I would strongly advise you, dear brother," he said, speaking slowly, his words dripping with so much menace that it was difficult to mistake the barely restrained rage behind them, "to desist from insulting my Duchess because if you do not—" He allowed his lips to curl into a sinister smile, enjoying the shiver of fear that Nathaniel could not quite hide. "—a wardrobe malfunction will be the least of your problems."

He pushed off the table and went in search of his wife, making sure to ignore the curious murmuring of the members of the ton present.

He was sure tomorrow that a brand-new story would be generated in the gossip mills to satiate the appetites of Society gossips, but at present, his goal was to locate his beautiful wife and take her back home, where they should have spent the day, in his now revised opinion.

* * *

Helen would never have guessed in her wildest dreams that a day would come when she would be so embarrassed that she would wish the ground would open up and swallow her.

She had always prided herself on her ability to embody the perfect noble lady with her perfect manners and etiquette—at least in public. She always looked down and criticized people who made spectacles of themselves by throwing fits in public. But it appears she had just successfully joined their ranks in the worst possible way.

It didn't help that even she had not seen it coming. Alexander's brother had rubbed her the wrong way from the first day they were introduced, and the fact that he had contributed to hurting Alexander in the past did not help her have charitable thoughts about him. But she had tried her best, since she believed he was family and hence she was meant to accept him.

The man had started annoying her with the open disrespect and then the petty annoying side comments. She had ignored them all, but when he turned the venom on Alexander, her vision turned red with rage, and before she knew it, Nathaniel was wearing the contents of her soup bowl, and she was not even remotely remorseful. She fled because she didn't trust herself not to do even nastier things to the nasty man, regardless of the other guests present in the dining hall.

It took some time of her pacing the length of the lawn outside the hall for her to recover a little bit of calm. and with that came the realization of the full consequences of her actions. She had just, in one fit of rage, destroyed all the hard work Alexander had put into this event to maintain his reputation, and she felt so guilty for making herself an obstacle to his progress. She wondered how she was going to approach Alexander again when she saw him.

Just then, she felt a strong pair of hands hug her from behind, and she jumped in surprise. She stomped on her attacker's foot as hard as she could, nearly using her head to hit his jaw in self-defense.

"Relax, sweet, it's just me," Alexander said with a groan. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"I'm sorry," she apologized quickly. "I tend to hear a lot of things in English ballrooms."

"It's impressive you could learn this with little instruction," he observed.

She guessed she was so lost in thought that she had not noticed him coming up behind her.

"I can hear the wheels turning in your head," he said with a tone of amusement in his voice. "Why are you thinking so much?"

Taking a deep breath, she made to turn in his arms, so she could see his face and gauge his reaction while she apologized, but Alexander held fast.

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“Let’s stay like this for a while. You can talk with me this way,” he suggested, proceeding to nuzzle her neck in an arousing manner.

“Alex, I really want to apologize for the embarrassment I caused you inside the hall,” she said in a small voice. “It was improper of me as a duchess to lack the ability to hold my tongue?—”

“And soup—” he added with a laugh.

“Alex!” she scolded.

“What is it?” he asked, placing his chin on her head.

“I’m trying to apologize for embarrassing you.”

“Oh, but, darling, you didn’t embarrass me,” he observed, chuckling. “Darling, you were simply magnificent.”

“If you are angry with me, I would prefer you show it. You are scaring me. I expected you to explode with rage because I ruined your carefully concocted plan with my outlandish behavior. What has happened?”

“Well, you did nothing I have not imagined doing a thousand times over. The coward deserved it, and you just administered justice, that’s all.”

“Besides,” he continued, “it was immensely satisfying to see somebody put Nathaniel in his place. You should have seen his face when you threw the soup. It was priceless,

really.”

His laugh eased the discomfort she was feeling, but it hadn't completely abated. She knew she had set the tongues of the ton wagging.

“I guess he never imagined that the proper Duchess of Blackhill would do that. In his defense, though, I was thoroughly surprised myself,” she said, laughing with him.

“Well, you did good today, and your acting was so believable, I am sure everyone has the established opinion that we are a love match. Well done, darling.”

And just like that, the amusement and light-heartedness disappeared and were replaced with such profound disappointment that her chest ached with it.

So Alexander really thought that she had feigned her feelings for him. She had thought that they were getting to know each other, but it seemed they were no better than strangers to each other if he truly believed she could feign such deep emotions on a whim.

It really hurt to think that he thought she was that duplicitous in character to be able to feign deep emotions she didn't feel. She knew that he didn't love her, but over this time, she had thought that he had at least developed a tender spot for her, but it seemed she was wrong, and she had just had a one-sided love affair with him.

Unfortunately, she knew how one-sided love could turn into resentment and ruin happy memories, so it seemed it was time to let go, even if it felt as painful as severing a limb.

Gradually, she pushed at Alexander's arms until he loosened his embrace and turned her to look at him, his brow furrowed in concern.

“What is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” she said, forcing a smile even though she desperately wanted to weep. “I just realized that the three nights we agreed on are over.”

For some time, his expression remained one of confusion until she saw the moment the memory dawned on him, and the look of confusion cleared.

“Yes, I believe so,” he answered tentatively.

“I wonder if you have forgiven me, since I have kept my part of the bargain.”

“Yes, I forgive you.”

“Good,” she said, forcing a cheer in her voice that she didn’t feel. “I guess this is the point where we part ways to enjoy our independent lives happily.”

A shutter dropped over Alexander’s expression, and just like that, the Ruthless Duke returned once again.

“I believe so,” he said, chillingly polite.

The dull pain in Helen’s chest drove home to her how much she had hoped that he would prove her wrong and suggest they change their plans, but it seemed they had different plans in mind when they thought about the future.

“I’ll inform the driver we are to leave now.”

“All right,” she agreed, watching him walk away, each step ripping her heart from her chest.

* * *

The drive back to the castle was gloomy, to say the least. They sat side by side, but they might as well have been a million miles away from each other, with the way they were both lost in their thoughts. Helen managed to hold herself together till she got home and went up to her chambers. Once inside her chamber, she cried herself to sleep, her soaked pillow the only testament to her pain.

She felt extremely foolish, ruining the bubble of happiness they were in by bringing up their contract, but seeing as he hadn't even attempted to dissuade her, she knew it was best she saved what little pride she had left.

She fell asleep to thoughts of what could have been between them if only she'd kept silent.

The next morning, Alexander stood at his window, looking over the entrance of the castle and the carriage that was stationed there.

In a few minutes, Helen emerged in a smart traveling dress, footmen trailing behind her, loading her luggage onto the vehicle.

Anger had blinded him when she'd brought up their contract, when for that brief moment, he'd forgotten that they weren't an actual couple.

He was going to suggest they continue their ruse, but if she wanted to leave, he was more than willing to let her go. When all was packed, she turned and looked straight up at him, or rather the window, since he knew she couldn't see him. It was too high

up.

The ache that had been residing in his chest since the previous night worsened, and so did his mood. With that one look, Helen extended her hand to the footman and disappeared into the coach. The carriage started moving, carrying her away from him. He watched the carriage until he couldn't see it anymore, and with each mile it covered, the ache turned into actual pain, and he sank into his seat in his study, reaching for his whisky bottle.

He had done the right thing, he tried to tell himself even though his subconscious was beating him for letting her go.

She deserved to have an uncomplicated life, and she would have a good life away from his manipulative family and the trouble they cloaked themselves with as a shroud.

Yes, he had done well, he told himself while he downed the glass of whiskey, welcoming the burning sensation down his throat. It was nothing compared to the pain in his heart.

ChapterFourteen

Margaret watched Helen from her place at the doorway, her heart clenching in pity. The poor girl was a shadow of herself, and it was a testament to how deeply she had been hurt that Helen, who had always loved the outdoors and was so full of life, spent her days sitting by the windowsill, staring off into the distance. Margaret was willing to bet that those eyes saw nothing. She recognized that gaze, and she should know as she herself had spent months with that look in her eyes. Helen was overthinking and always lost in thought, and it hurt Margaret's heart to see her sister this way.

That day, a week ago, when she had looked out the window and saw the carriage

bearing the crest of the Duke of Blackhill, Margaret had been elated, thinking that the ducal couple must have concluded their honeymoon early and had come for a visit. She had really missed her sister more than she thought possible, her marriage being the first time they had lived apart as siblings. Margaret was elated to have the opportunity to see her sister again. She rushed down the staircase in a decidedly unladylike manner, but in her excitement, she didn't particularly care.

By the time the carriage stopped in front of their manor, Margaret was already waiting in front of the house. The moment the carriage doors opened and her sister was handed down by the footman, she knew something was wrong, and her excited smile dimmed a little.

Helen looked drawn, her face and manner completely lacking the usual glow seen in newlyweds. The fact that there was no sign of the Duke further drove in that something was horribly wrong.

When Helen strolled towards her, Margaret opened her mouth to ask her what happened but promptly closed it when Helen collapsed in her arms, weeping loudly. That was a very rare occurrence in recent years.

Margaret had always known her sister to be the strong one. Yes, Helen was the younger daughter, but she possessed emotional intelligence beyond her years. She was the only one who stood by Margaret's side when she broke into pieces in the previous year. But it appeared that husband of hers had succeeded in achieving the impossible by breaking her strong sister into pieces.

She had warned him, Margaret thought angrily.

She was going to confront him eventually after she helped Helen mend. In the meantime, she held Helen close until her heart-rending cries subsided to sobs and hiccups, after which Margaret guided her to her old bedroom and tucked her in. Helen

promptly fell asleep.

Margaret understood her exhaustion. She should know what an emotional wound felt like. She had just recently healed, so she understood that Helen would require peace and quiet and a hearty dose of familial love in order to recover.

Helen slept through the night, but in subsequent days, she had kept to her room, refusing to come below stairs to join them for their meals. Margaret made sure that a tray was always sent up to her, and she sat beside her throughout to make sure Helen ate because she always claimed that she didn't have an appetite.

But Margaret vowed that she was never going to let her only sister starve to death simply because of the fickle whims of a man. Helen had kept quiet about the reasons why she had returned, but Margaret knew there was nothing on Earth that was capable of making Helen this way apart from the Duke she had married.

As Margaret watched her, she decided that it was time now to push a little in order to gain better returns. She had been handling Helen with kid gloves because she wanted to avoid pushing too hard too soon, but it was now time for the tough kind of love. She walked into the room, and the fact that Helen didn't turn to acknowledge her presence showed Margaret that her sister's mind was very far away.

Helen was obviously lost in thought, probably thoughts that had something to do with her returning home.

"Helen," Margaret called, tapping her shoulder lightly. "How are you doing?" she asked when Helen turned to look at her with tired eyes.

"I am quite well, Margaret," Helen answered, forcing a smile. "Are you done having breakfast?"

“I think I should be asking you that, since you left your food untouched,” Margaret observed, gesturing to the table, where a tray containing a covered meal sat untouched.

“I am not hungry. Don’t worry about me. I am fine,” Helen said, smiling tightly.

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“You are not fine, and we both know it. You returned from your matrimonial home a fortnight ago, and every day you sit at that window, staring off into the distance. We are your family, and we will always welcome you when you come, but you need to tell us what is wrong, so we can help you. You are becoming a shadow of yourself, and frankly, it breaks my heart to see you this way.”

“I will be fine. Do not worry about me,” Helen replied and looked away, back to the window.

“I’ll take a card out of your book then,” Margaret said with a determined tilt to her chin. “If you will not tell me, I could just go confront that husband of yours because I could bet my last coin that he is the root cause of all this... hopelessness.” Her voice rose in anger.

That got Helen’s attention, and she turned back to Margaret, giving her full attention.

“You will do no such thing, Sister. Alexander has nothing to do with this,” she said in a raspy voice, the clear proof of many days of disuse.

“Then who did this to you?” Margaret asked in a mellow voice.

“I did this to myself,” Helen replied, looking up at Margaret, her eyes filled with tears. “I made the mistake of falling in love with the Duke, so I don’t really have the right to cry and complain when I found out that he had no romantic feelings towards me.”

“He did warn me that our marriage was one of convenience, but somehow, I believed

that in time he would come to love me at least half as much as I came to love him, but I was wrong, and it hurts so much. Maggie, it hurts a lot,” she said, dissolving into more sobs.

Margaret drew her sister to her chest and held her while she cried. Unrequited love was simply the worst. She should know after pining after George for the better part of one year. The heart could be foolish that way, but she believed that her sister’s situation was better because she definitely did not believe that the Duke held no feelings for Helen. The man was already halfway in love with Helen even before the wedding, if the calf-eyed looks he gave her when he thought no one was looking was any indication. But then, it was common knowledge that men could be quite daft sometimes, unable to see what was right before them.

It was quite unfortunate that both of them had to go through heartbreak so early in life, and Margaret really thought it was time that they took some time away from London, the Season, and the men to find themselves and recuperate. She knew the perfect place that guaranteed peace, quiet, and maybe a little magic for new beginnings.

When her sobs had subsided, Helen pulled away, wiping her tears she apologized.

“I’m so sorry, Maggie, for blubbering all over you like a little child,” she mumbled with a rueful smile.

“Do not worry about it. What are sisters for? Besides, we have really been through a lot at the hands of men. And you looked after me while I mourned my broken engagement with George. As someone who has been through the heartbreak of the romantic sort, I think it was terrible to waste much time dwelling on it. You will lose so much time that way. I don’t know about you, but I would rather use that time to find happiness for myself. Besides, I think with everything that happened this year, we deserve a break. What do you say we go visit Grandma Agnes in the Highlands?”

“Really?” Helen asked, her face brightening up with a smile. “It has been so long since we last visited. I really miss her a lot. I would love to see her,” she said in excitement.

Agnes was their maternal grandmother and their only living grandparent who’d spoilt them silly after their mother had passed. They hadn’t seen her since she withdrew from London to the estate her late husband had gifted her in Scotland.

“He hated me so much that he wanted me to get as far away from him as possible,” she used to say when they discussed her moving there, but they knew her words held no heat, as the two were madly in love with each other, which then turned into a friendship before his passing.

“Yes, I am sure she would love to have us as well,” Margaret replied, happy to see that Helen was gradually returning to her cheerful self. “She had sent several invitations over the past year, but between the Season and everything else that happened over this year, it thoroughly escaped my notice. I think that this is as good a time as any to set out on an adventure,” she said, intoning the last word theatrically.

Helen chuckled in response.

Margaret smiled back in happiness. Maybe there was hope still of getting cheerful Helen back. Hopefully, by the time they returned, the rock-headed Duke who married her sister would have come to his senses.

* * *

Alexander had felt the profound pain of loss once when he had lost his mother, and it became clear to him that he was alone in the world despite having several family members. When his father had died and his stepfamily had abandoned him, rather than feeling a sense of loss, he had felt relief to be free of their tyranny.

But the feeling he experienced this time felt even worse than that long-forgotten feeling of loss. It felt like a limb had been cut off from his body, the wound fresh and unhealing. It had taken days of him being completely distracted and unproductive for him to accept the truth. He, the Fifth Duke of Blackhill, nicknamed the Ruthless Duke, was in fact missing his wife.

He missed her presence, her laughter and bright aura that enlivened the cold walls of the Blackhill castle, and her enthusiasm and mischievous smile. He missed the feeling of her skin beneath his fingers and her haunting scent and the taste of her lips. He was addicted to Helen, and he was finding it difficult to recover from the withdrawal.

Since the day she had left, he had become unable to perform his duties. Reading and replying to correspondence had become a daunting task he avoided with everything in him. Any sound of carriages around his estate had him hurrying to the window just in case she had decided to return home.

He downed whisky in the hopes of dulling the pain in his chest, but it only made matters, since he woke up in the morning with even worse pain and a splitting headache. He was a mess and wondered how on earth he had survived without her because it seemed now that he had gotten the taste of what it felt like to have her in his life—he could no longer live without her.

He didn't need anyone else to confirm what he knew. He loved her, and she loved him, and it was that love that he'd been too scared to see that had led to her leaving him behind. His little wife was selfless in that manner. She'd have left him just to keep herself from suffocating him with her feelings.

That should have felt surprising, but it felt relieving to admit it to himself. He suspected he had started the free fall of love the moment he had gone to the Ludlow house to ask for her hand in marriage and seen the spitfire she truly was, and every day with her only fanned the flames of that love.

It was little wonder he had become scared with the increasing intensity of his feelings. The more he fell for her, the more he became vulnerable, and for someone who had lived behind emotional walls most of his life, it was a scary thing to be so exposed. So, he had pretended that he felt nothing, hoping he could suppress such feelings to death. He had allowed Helen to leave him, and now he was miserable.

It was quite clear to him that he had to go back to Helen and tell her about the love in his heart and beg her to return to him, as she was the only thing he needed to feel the peace he'd secretly longed for all his life. No longer would he suffer just to appease his ego.

Helen had stolen his heart one heart-stopping smile at a time, so it was foolish to pretend he was still in possession of it. He was going to confess to her and perhaps persuade her to give him her heart again in return.

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Having made the decision, he felt more energized than he had in a while, and he was preparing to head to the Honeyfield townhouse when a knock sounded at the door. When he answered, the door opened to reveal his butler.

His butler looked around at the mess that was his study without batting an eyelid, but then butlers were renowned for their perfect composure.

“Lord Nathaniel Osbourne to see you, Your Grace.”

At that name, Alexander’s hopes, which were taking a positive turn, fell back to the pit of his stomach.

What the hell could he possibly want now?

Squaring his shoulders, he answered his butler. “Show him in.”

Nathaniel walked in, dressed fully in a way that identified him as one of Society’s dandies. He always made sure he followed the times and trends whenever he was in London, regardless of the availability of money. It seemed with his family, it was just as they said: someone else’s money was much easier to spend.

Once he poked his head through the door, his nostrils flared, and his face contorted in disgust. Alexander didn’t blame him. He had most likely been hit by the odor of alcohol and the state of disarray the study was in.

“You look like hell,” Nathaniel said, walking towards the desk where his brother sat.

Alexander shrugged. He did feel like a mess. “To what do I owe the displeasure of your visit?”

“Ha ha, Brother. You’re always so happy to see me.”

At Alexander’s raised eyebrow, Nathaniel sighed. “You’re no fun,” he complained. “I came to thank you on Mother’s and Sophia’s behalf for attending the wedding. I have always thought you were not the familial man, but you proved me wrong.”

“Please elaborate,” Alexander said sarcastically.

“Why, I don’t think you needed to send your wife all the way to Scotland just to punish her for her outburst at the wedding breakfast,” Nathaniel answered so honestly that Alexander was confused. “Thank you for standing up for your family.”

“Scotland?” Alexander asked, confused.

Could he have treated Helen so badly that she had decided to leave London entirely just to avoid him?

“From the look on your face, I think it is safe to assume that you know nothing of your wife’s flight. It seems like your wife discovered your cold, calculating tendencies and decided to run for her life. I would have done the same if I were her.”

Hooking a foot into a chair, Nathaniel pulled it to himself and sat. “You have always been the architect of your problems, and it seems you have successfully sent your wife, the one person who tolerated your bad behavior, away. I guess she could always find better men in the Highlands. I have heard that the men who live there are virile and quite protective of their females. I do see the appeal,” he continued with a taunting smile.

At that, Alexander's vision turned red, and he slammed a hand heavily on the oak desk, causing Nathaniel to jump in fright. Then, drawing himself to his full height, he placed both hands on the desk, making sure to crowd Nathaniel.

Dropping his voice to a menacing growl, he spat, "You know nothing about me, Nathaniel."

"Oh, I believe I know plenty," his brother answered, glaring. "You kicked us out of our family castle the second Father died and then put us on a measly monthly allowance as though we weren't even related. Is that something family does?"

"I never kicked you out. Your mother took you all and left, and your allowance is what my father stipulated before his demise."

"You're lying!" Nathaniel spat angrily. "Mother said?—"

"Your mother is the liar here," Alexander growled. "It is I who has been unfairly treated all this while, and that is worthy of an apology."

"You're lying," Nathaniel said again, although his voice shook as though he didn't know what he believed.

"And I would warn you to tame your tongue where my wife is concerned. The next time I hear you so much as breathe her name wrongly, I will cut off your allowance faster than you can blink."

"You cannot—" Nathaniel protested.

"I can, and I will. Believe me." Alexander gave a dark chuckle. "I will not warn you anymore." Then rising to his full height, he gestured to the door. "I would appreciate it if you took your leave. I have some urgent matters to attend to, but first, you have a

cottage Father assigned to you outside of London. Sell it to me, and I'll pay you double its worth."

Nathaniel's frown deepened as he considered the offer. "All right."

Alexander brought up the document that had been sitting in his drawer for a while. He'd been maintaining the cottage since he discovered its presence and had made plans to purchase it from his brother, who would be so desperate for money that he wouldn't care to know the actual cost of the property.

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Nathaniel signed reluctantly and then stood up to leave, walking out of the room with a sullen look on his face. Alexander knew there would definitely be a long conversation between him and his mother, but there were some truths that needed to be told.

Once Alexander heard Nathaniel's carriage leave the castle grounds, he sent for his man of affairs and gave instructions for him to handle all the work he wouldn't be around for, as he'd be taking time off to spend with his wife.

"Your Grace, don't you want to—" the man said, indicating his state of undress.

"I do not have the time."

It took a lot of work to make Alexander relatively presentable, considering that he had neglected his appearance for quite some time, but the man with his incredible grooming skills had Alexander looking his best in record time. All that work was lost when he mounted his horse as if the devil was on his heels and raced to the Honeyfield townhouse. He was sincerely hoping Nathaniel had been lying about his wife's journey.

When he got to the Honeyfield townhouse, he knocked, and the old butler he recognized from the few times visiting Helen opened the door, but instead of a smile, the man was giving him a look of disgust usually reserved for scum scraped from under his shoe.

Alexander guessed he deserved that after his horrible treatment of Helen.

“Is the Viscount in?” he asked with as much dignity as he could muster, considering his appearance.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The butler bowed, remembering his manners. “He is in his study.”

“Please announce my presence to him.”

Alexander was ushered in quickly and led to the salon, where everything had started. He was bombarded by images of the things that had happened between him and Helen in this room. He could almost feel the rage coming off her in waves, and he smiled at the fact they’d come a long way from then.

In a few minutes, the butler returned to usher him to the Viscount’s study. Alexander knocked, and at the Viscount’s answer, he walked in. The Viscount made to stand up, but Alexander waved him off.

“No need to stand on my account—we are family, after all.”

The Viscount shot him a disbelieving glance. Alexander couldn’t quite settle down, so he paced the study, feeling the cool weight of the Viscount’s stare on him.

“I came to see my wife,” he said, turning suddenly to meet the Viscount’s eyes.

“The Duchess is not here, Your Grace.”

“Then where is she?”

“I believe she went with her sister to visit their grandmother. They left about an hour ago, in fact,” the Viscount answered flatly, a thread of anger in his voice.

“Where?” Alexander asked quietly

“Scotland.”

It seemed Nathaniel was right, but then Alexander was ready to chase his wife to the ends of the earth. He was going to get her back no matter what happened. He loved her too much to just let her go.

“But I can’t let you go to her,” the Viscount said, rising from his seat. “Not after how much you hurt her.”

“My Lord, you are mistaken. I?—”

“I gave you my shining star of a daughter, and she came back to me a wilted flower. Now you are back for her? I cannot allow that.”

“I didn’t leave her. She left me,” Alexander explained, his feet itching to be on his way to bring his wife back to their home.

The more he was delayed here, the further she was sure to have gone.

“For good reason, I’m sure,” the Viscount spat. “Do not think I do not know the rumors about you. You must have hurt my daughter in some way for her to?—”

“I am sick and tired of the ton and their silly talk. I have never once done any of the things they’d accused me of, yet those foolish things hang over me like a dark cloud,” Alexander yelled as his hands shook with rage. “I have lived under that cloud since I was a boy, and now I’m a man, and you all expect me to continue? Do you all never seek to know the truth? Helen was right in telling me to speak up because I keep letting the real villains get away with all the evil they’ve perpetrated, but no more. I’m going to find my wife and tell her I love her, and so help me God, if you try to

stop me...”

The Viscount looked taken aback and then broke into a smile. “Give me a moment, and I’ll procure a map of the route they’re taking.”

“All right.” Alexander nodded in surprise.

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Helen's family, like her, were odd, and it seemed it was the same with their staff, as they shot him looks with proud smiles on their faces. They all seemed to appreciate brutal honesty above all else, and he didn't know how to deal with that.

He'd lost her once by not being honest about how he felt about her, and when he finally found her, he wouldn't make that foolish mistake again.

"Here you go, Your Grace," her father announced, stepping back into the study. "I'll suggest you use one of our finest stallions, as you've run yours ragged in your ride here. I already told my groomsman to saddle him for you."

Alexander laughed and nodded. "I thank you for your kindness."

"I am very happy to see you so in love with my daughter." The Viscount gave a watery smile. "I pray you two have a long, happy life together."

I pray so too.

But Alexander said nothing as he stepped outside and mounted the horse.

He started his journey down the path and then nudged the horse into a speed that surprised him. It seemed his father-in-law had a good eye for horses. A new deal popped up in his mind, but he pushed it down his list of things to do later.

His primary concern now was finding his wife. After riding for hours, he spotted the carriage bearing her family's seal jostling terribly along the road. Speeding past them, he pulled up near the front, startling the horse and carriage driver.

He heard two feminine squeals from inside the carriage and hoped he hadn't badly hurt them.

"Identify yourself!" the carriage driver yelled.

"You have something of mine in that carriage, and I want it back," Alexander announced.

Indeed, Helen was his, and he'd be damned if he let her go again.

Chapter Fifteen

"Thear Grandmother's library is so big that she had to dedicate a whole tower to it," Margaret said happily.

She'd been chatting nonstop since they'd begun their journey three hours prior.

Helen wondered where her sister got the energy or how she was able to keep such a happy disposition when they were being tossed about with each dip and bump in the road.

Their carriage was not the best there was, but it was of good quality and should have been enough to soften the heavy blow of traveling down the English roads, but their new driver seemed ignorant of better paths, and now they were stuck bouncing around in the carriage.

"Father mentioned that Scottish men are so much nicer than English men and more handsome, too. I wonder if I'll find myself a Scottish beau." Margaret tittered. "Oh, imagine it, Helen. Me wrapped up in the arms of a man more than twice my size."

"That is a rather scary sight." Helen tried for a laugh, but it had been so hard since

she felt her heart rip in two at her separation from Alexander.

Thinking of him now brought a longing in her heart which then turned into anger at the fact that days had passed and he hadn't come looking for her and begging her to come back. It then turned into grief that she'd been alone in her feelings, and alone she'd continue to be because she couldn't imagine herself with any other man.

Who would be able to fill the huge hole the Duke had left in her heart?

She'd been called on by various gentlemen of the ton who'd been invited by her father, but even though they were handsome and apparently could keep up a conversation, there was no spark between them.

"I know it's scary to imagine, but think of it, Helen." Margaret sighed, falling back into her seat only to be jostled by the carriage. "You have to use your imagination."

"I can't," Helen admitted softly.

"Oh, Helen." Margaret smiled softly. "You really do have to. It's the only way you can heal. Do you think he's lying around, pining the way you are?"

Her words sent a sharp spear through Helen's heart that she didn't know when acid poured from her mouth.

"You do not have a right to judge me, Sister, when it took you your entire youth to get over a man who never wanted you."

Margaret gasped and fell back into her seat, tears brimming in her eyes.

"Sister, I?—"

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“Don’t.” Margaret raised a hand to stop her. “Don’t you dare apologize because it is true. I did waste my youth trying to mourn a man who was happily living his life, and that is why you should learn from my mistakes. Do not waste these years you have on giving in to grief. You know him, and you know that the Duke is a man who goes after what he wants. If he wants you, he’ll be back.”

“But—”

“No excuses, darling girl. That man, if he wants you, will comb the heavens and the earth looking for you.”

“But—”

The carriage stopped with such force that it threw them out of their seats. It took them almost a minute to re-orient themselves.

“Mr. Jenkins, what in the world is going on out there?” Margaret scolded.

“My Ladies, there’s a bandit on the road,” the man announced, sounding scared. “Don’t come out. I’ll try to deal with him.”

Oh God.

Helen’s heart pounded, worrying for the driver and for themselves.

Who knew what evil the bandit would perpetuate before letting them go?

“Identify yourself!” she heard Mr. Jenkins yell.

“You have something of mine in that carriage, and I want it back,” she heard the bandit say.

His voice was oddly familiar, but fear didn’t let her place it quickly.

“Nothing here belongs to you, bandit,” Mr. Jenkins answered him.

The bandit laughed. “Bandit?” he asked. “I am not a bandit. Only a man who is crazy in love, who has been searching for his wife.”

Helen and Margaret gasped.

It was Alexander. He was here.

“You have no wife here,” Mr. Jenkins said.

Of course, he wouldn’t recognize the Duke. He had just started working for them, so he wouldn’t know Helen was married to him.

Margaret shot her an ‘I told you so’ look and nudged her. “Go to him,” she urged.

Helen shook her head, wondering what it meant that Alexander was here. He’d been looking for her?

“Helen, love,” he called. “Please put this foolish man out of his misery and come to me.”

“Go, Helen.” Margaret pushed her again.

“I can’t.” Helen shook her head.

“Why not?” Margaret asked, surprised. “You wanted to see him, and now he’s here.”

“I did want to see him, but now that he’s here, I don’t know what to say.”

“Say what’s on your heart,” Margaret advised.

“Helen,” he begged again, “please forgive me.”

His voice sounded broken and full of emotion, tugging at her heartstrings.

“Speak your anger, your pain, your grief, and your love,” Margaret suggested. “Tell him everything you told me.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good. Now go out there and make peace with your husband.”

Helen took a deep, steadying breath and opened the carriage door, stepping out with Mr. Jenkins’ help.

“If you need me to step in, don’t hesitate to call for me,” he told her with a firm look.

She nodded and turned to Alexander, trying to mask her shock at his appearance.

He looked like Mr. Jenkins had said—a bandit with messed-up hair, a partially buttoned shirt that hung loosely off him, and an old pair of breeches he usually wore to do manual work around the castle.

“Why do you look like this?” she asked in surprise.

“I rushed out of the house in a mad dash to find you,” he answered, his eyes drinking her in, and she didn’t use that phrase lightly, as his eyes ran from the top of her head down to her toes.

“Why?”

“Why?” he echoed.

“Yes. I want to know why you left your home in such a state and in such a hurry to come find me, and I want an honest answer.”

He looked stunned for a moment and then pulled out a piece of paper, handing it to her. She tried to hide her disappointment, as she'd been expecting him to wax lyrical about his feelings and not hand her a piece of paper. Perhaps it was a love letter, she reasoned, but scanning through the document, she spotted signatures and testimonials, wondering what it meant.

"What is this?" she asked, handing it back to him.

"It is a proof of ownership, darling." He smiled. "I just purchased a cottage in the country."

"Oh, congratulations to you then," she said tonelessly. "If that is all you came to say, then goodbye."

"Wait." He rushed to pull her into his arms. "Don't you understand? I bought a cottage in the country for us to have the honeymoon that we never had."

"Why would we go on a honeymoon when we're separated? Besides, ours is a marriage of convenience, not a love match."

"You're such a stubborn woman." He laughed. "I don't want us to be separated anymore, damn you. What I'm trying to say is I love you. Helen. I am absolutely and quite terribly in love with you, and I want nothing more than to have you as my wife again."

Helen gasped as Margaret squealed behind her.

When had she even appeared?

"But it was my fault. It was I who ended us?"

“It wasn’t you, love. It was I who stubbornly refused to admit that I’d fallen irrevocably in love with you that is to blame,” he interrupted her. “I failed to stop you from leaving, and I failed to see that you weren’t faking your concern for me. You really did care for me, didn’t you? It was why you stood up to Nathaniel for me and why you chose to forgive me even after seeing my black moods. It was why you brought up the contract because deep down, you hoped that I’d damn the contract.”

She nodded, unsure what to say.

“I truly am sorry for making you feel that you were alone in your love. The truth is, I fell for you from the very first moment I saw you breathe fire at me in your father’s home, and I fell harder seeing all the attempts you made to get me to cancel the contract.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I did.” He smiled, kissing her forehead. “I probably should have damned the contract from the start and told you I wanted a real marriage with you, but I was scared that once you saw me for who I am, you would leave.”

“I would have never done that.”

“I know that now.” He nodded, pulling her even closer to him. “Forgive me, darling wife. My life is incomplete without you.”

“My life is incomplete without you too,” she cried, hugging him.

His lips fell on hers with a hunger she reciprocated, and for a moment, they forgot where they were. At least until their audience cleared their throats when his hands started to roam up and down her body.

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“You two are absolutely beautiful,” Margaret gushed. “But please do remember there’s an unmarried woman in the vicinity.”

“I apologize, sister-in-law.” Alexander laughed, and putting a hand out in front of him, he continued, “Would you mind if I stole my wife away from you?”

“I would not, except I’m a woman, and I can’t travel alone,” Margaret pointed out.

They’d been traveling on their own, as Helen was now a married woman and considered responsible enough to chaperone.

“Would you mind staying at our country residence till your handmaid can be brought?” Alexander suggested.

“I wouldn’t mind at all.” Margaret smiled. “I love the country.”

They were helped back into the carriage by Alexander, who stopped to warn Mr. Jenkins about driving too roughly, which was a welcome effort on his part, as their bottoms were truly sore.

When they neared the country home, Helen could barely hide her gasp at the sprawling green fields leading up to the manor.

Workers dotted the fields harvesting wheat, and they looked up from their work as they approached. Helen marveled at the wealth of her husband.

The workers cheered as they approached, and she knew then that her husband must

have been a good duke to have his workers show such joy at his arrival.

She turned to look at him astride his horse, looking regal even though he wasn't dressed in trappings befitting his station. She recognized the horse with the sleek brown coat as one of her father's and wondered what had happened to Alexander's black stallion.

Her mouth went dry at the sight of how powerfully he sat astride the horse, his back ramrod straight. Lust licked its way across her bloodstream in a slow and steady stream that had her flushing.

He caught her eyes and winked, and she flushed even deeper.

"My, Helen, that man really loves you," Margaret observed.

"I know. It's so hard to believe it," Helen replied softly.

"I am really happy for you," Margaret stated. "I only hope I'm quite as fortunate as you."

"You will be if you keep an open mind." Helen giggled. "There are many handsome Scottish men, as you've said. Who knows? You might give me handsome red-haired nephews and nieces."

"Oh, stop it." Margaret tittered. "But that wouldn't be so bad."

They burst into laughter, stopping when they felt the carriage come to a halt.

"We're here, ladies," Alexander announced.

"Come. Let's go see your new home," Margaret suggested.

They alighted from the carriage with Alexander's help and met a line of staff already waiting for them outside.

Introductions were done quickly, and they were shown to their chambers to refresh themselves before the noon meal. Alexander stepped into the chamber and smiled, watching Helen's things be unpacked by the maids. When they were done, the servants stepped out, giving them privacy.

Now alone, she was unable to meet his eyes. What could she say to him?

"Do you like the house?" he asked, still standing by the door.

"I—yes, I do," she answered, nodding. "It is quite beautiful."

"Indeed." He smiled. "It has been in my family for generations but was given to Nathaniel in the will. I bought it back from him."

"Oh? I don't think he'd have been too happy to get rid of it."

"On the contrary." Alexander pushed off the door and came to sit beside her on the bed. "He hadn't known about the inheritance or the worth of the property, so it was quite easy for me to buy it from him."

"That was rather low." She laughed.

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“I will increase his monthly allowance to make up for my deception. That is the best I can do.”

She shook her head at him, and in a moment of weakness, she rested her head on his shoulder.

“You make me so happy that I’m almost scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Scared that we won’t always be like this.” She sighed. “Happy and in love. I’ve seen what marriage does to people.”

“Yes, and I’m a product of one such marriage, which is exactly why I will do my best to keep us happy and in love.”

She smiled broadly at him as his words tugged at her heartstrings again.

“I love you, Alex,” she said finally, giddy she could say it without feeling fear anymore.

“And I love you more, my Helen.”

He placed a kiss on her forehead, and then she turned her face up to him, and he placed a chaste kiss on her lips, which turned heated quickly.

“Ouch!” Helen exclaimed when he laid her across his lap and spanked her bottom.

Apparently, it was still hurting from the brutal beating it had received from the carriage seat.

“What is wrong?” Alexander asked, worrying over her.

“My bottom hurts.” She sighed, resisting the urge to do something even more unladylike by rubbing it. “Our journey was not a smooth one, to say the least.”

She noticed he had a faraway, naughty look on his face and slapped his arm.

“You can at least say sorry.” She pouted.

“I am sorry, but it’s hard for me to hear my wife has a sore bottom which is not of my own making.” He laughed.

“You’re a cad.” She slapped his arm again.

“But you love me anyway.”

“Indeed.” She smiled as he embraced her, placing a warm kiss on her neck that had her sighing in pleasure. “I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Epilogue

“I don’t think it is proper for us to be lazing around so much.” Helen sighed, lying on Alexander’s chest. “Don’t you have work to oversee?”

They’d extended their month-long honeymoon to five months and had made good use of their time away from the eyes of the ton, getting to know each other better and in more intimate ways that would have made Helen blush months ago.

Her husband had proven himself more than capable of loving, spoiling her with gifts that were so thoughtful that she was always at a loss for words. And he'd begun to open up about his past, letting her into the dark recesses of his mind. It hadn't been easy walking down that path with him, but with honesty and a few letters that had arrived from his brother, he walked around with more light than she'd seen in him before.

"I do have work to oversee, but my wife's needs will always come first," he said, kissing her forehead.

"You are a silly, silly man." She laughed. "But I love it, and I love you."

"I know."

He sat up gently as a knock sounded at their chamber doors, and he donned a robe to go answer it.

He returned a few minutes later with a tray laden with breakfast and a bunch of correspondence.

Seeing as they were delivered to their chambers, they knew they were from family, and he handed Margaret's letter to her as well as one from her father. Her friends' letters were also a reminder that Helen hadn't seen or written to them in almost an age, and she opened theirs first. They both had matching sentiments, anger and excitement being the most prominent, about her marrying the Duke without them being present, but they also gushed about how their best friend was now a duchess.

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They asked to be invited to tea once she was in town, as they wanted all the juicy details. She laughed out loud, catching Alexander's attention.

"They are just letters from my best friends, Joana, daughter of the Marquess of Kilburn, and Ariadne, daughter of the Viscount Yardley," she told him. "They want to be invited to the townhouse for tea once we return."

"I know the Viscount," he said thoughtfully. "I asked to purchase one of his mares a while back, but he refused me."

"And no one refuses a duke." She smiled.

"You're learning," he mused.

"I have a great teacher." She winked. "Any mail from Nathaniel?"

Nathaniel had tried to fix his broken relationship with Alexander since he discovered his mother's deceit, and men being men, they'd quickly bonded as Nathaniel mended his ways, and he was now helping Alexander oversee some investments in his absence. The man had good taste in alcohol and had earned Alexander a great deal by telling him which companies to invest in.

He'd even quickly won Helen's friendship and now asked after her fairly often. She was looking forward to his visit when they returned.

"Yes. He enquires about the tea he sent."

“Oh, I forgot to write back to him.”

The tea in question had been a ginger one that he claimed would help with the weird sickness that had riddled her the past month. She’d found the smell of eggs and even custard, which was her favorite, nauseating and had fast gotten used to retching into her chamber pot each morning.

The family doctor was to arrive that day, so she wasn’t too bothered, but her husband had been driven to the end of his wits’ each morning. He’d been attentive, holding her hair and using a warm sponge around her abdomen till the cramping subsided.

She’d thought it was her monthly cycle, but when she thought about it, she realized it had been a while since she had seen her flow. She suspected the cause of her current illness but didn’t want to get excited too early, so she kept her suspicions to herself. Especially because she also didn’t know how well Alexander would take the news.

“What did Father say?” she asked, trying to peer over his shoulder.

Alexander and her father had bonded strongly over their love of horses and frequently corresponded on the subject. They even had private dealings that she wasn’t included in, which made her pout.

“He is my father, you know,” she complained.

“But now, he’s mine.” He laughed, kissing her cheek.

“Hmm.”

She settled back to read Margaret’s letter and squealed in excitement.

“What is it?”

“Maggie is engaged!” she cried joyously.

“To one of her Scottish admirers?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “He’s an Englishman. A duke who’d been visiting his estate in Scotland.”

She read through the story of their meeting and laughed again. Apparently, he’d walked into her chambers one night when he’d come to visit their grandmother, and she’d screamed the entire house down, accusing him of trying to steal her virtue. It had all been a misunderstanding concocted by their grandmother to get her to live outside her novels.

Apparently, her chambers were originally the one he stayed in when he came to visit, and Margaret had been placed there on purpose.

She’d tried to apologize, but he was adamant about avoiding her until she helped him solve a small problem with his three-year-old daughter.

“That is quite an interesting tale,” Alexander stated. “I guess Maggie is getting her fairytale ending, after all.”

“I know,” Helen gushed. “I’m so excited.”

“Which duke is it?”

“The Duke of Holbrook.”

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“Oh. He lost his wife two years ago in that horrible fire accident.”

“Indeed?” Helen asked with a gasp. “That is so horrible.”

“Indeed. I remember the Duke sustained some terrible scars trying to save his wife and son, but in the end, he could only save his son.”

Helen shook her head at the morbidity of the tale.

“When is the wedding?” he asked. “And where will it be held?”

“In a month, and it will be at his Scottish estate,” she answered. “The Duke doesn’t like crowds.”

“A smart man.” Alexander smiled, his grin turning wolfish.

She shook her head at him. “Anything from Sophia?” she asked.

Sophie, too, had tried to make peace with Alexander when the truth of what their mother had done surfaced. She’d apologized profusely and promised to tolerate Helen, even though she disliked her for reasons best known to her. They exchanged correspondence regularly too, and it seemed marriage was fast becoming her sister-in-law, who’d somehow won her mother-in-law’s affection.

His stepmother, however, shamed by her own actions, had kept from sending him any letters, which was not a great loss in anyone’s books.

“Yes. She’s traveling to America soon for her second honeymoon.”

They shook their heads at Sophia’s antics, making a note to write to her before she left.

“I have one from Letitia,” Helen announced, ripping the letter open. “She’s inviting us for a night at the opera when we return.” She smiled. “I will write her back first. I absolutely adore her.”

“As she does you.” Alexander laughed.

“How is the deal with Cecil going?” she asked.

He never really liked to discuss the intricacies of his business with her, which she understood, but she liked knowing things were going well for him.

“Perfectly,” he answered. “I am expecting a letter from him soon.”

“Congratulations, darling,” she said with a smile.

“I thank you, dear wife.” He laughed. “You could choose to congratulate me in some more enjoyable way, though.”

“You are insatiable.”

“Only with you, my love.”

Their reverie was broken when a knock sounded at their door.

“Who is it?” Alexander asked.

“Doctor Fraser is here to see you, Your Graces,” the butler announced.

Helen donned her robe and used her hand to arrange her hair into a near-normal state before Alexander gave admittance.

“Send him in.”

The doctor was a middle-aged man with graying hair and a warm, fatherly smile she’d been accustomed to since childhood. He’d always brought her sweets every time he visited.

Alexander had insisted on him coming so he would be sure she was getting the best care. It was touching how he worried about her.

“Doctor Fraser,” she greeted, smiling broadly at him.

“Little Helen.” Doctor Fraser smiled, then seeing Alexander, he bowed. “Your Grace.”

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“Do not stand on such formality with me, Doctor,” Alexander answered. “I hear you’re almost family.”

“I’ve known the Duchess since she was a wee girl.” Doctor Fraser laughed. “She was always getting into scrapes.”

“Was she?” Alexander asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, yes, she was. Unlike her sister.”

“Well, good news, Doctor Fraser. Maggie is getting married,” Helen announced.

His face broke into a wide smile. “Your father must be over the moon with excitement.”

“I don’t know if her letter has reached him yet.”

“All right.” He nodded. “Now, what are your symptoms?”

She sat up at his serious tone.

“I wake up with the need to empty my stomach. The smell of eggs and custards nauseates me. I-I haven’t gotten my monthly cycle for a month now.”

At her words, Alexander’s eyebrows rose, as he knew what that could mean.

“I think you already know what your diagnosis is,” the doctor observed.

“Congratulations to both of you. The Duchess is expecting.”

They were both stunned to hear it and looked at each other and then back at the doctor.

“Are you certain, Doctor?” Alexander asked.

“Quite certain, Your Grace.”

“I’m going to be a father,” Alexander said slowly, and then turning to her, he smiled broadly. “I’m going to be a father!”

Helen’s heart, which had been pounding violently in fear, calmed at the joy in his voice. “Yes, you’re going to be a father.”

“Oh God, thank you!” he exclaimed, and then he turned to the doctor and shook his hand. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, Your Grace,” the doctor replied. “I’ll leave my list of instructions and bill with your butler. Congratulations once again.”

Once he shut the door behind him, Alexander was on her again, hugging her from behind, with a hand on her stomach.

“I’m going to be a father,” he stated calmly now, and she could sense his mood change. He was slowly receding to the dark recesses of his mind.

“Yes, and you’re going to be a good one,” she encouraged. “The best one there is.”

“How do you know that?” he asked softly. “I don’t...”

“I know because I know you, and I know you would never do anything to hurt

anyone you love.”

“For all you know, I could change. I could hurt my child.”

“I’ll be right beside you to talk sense into you if that ever arises.”

“We’re going to have a baby,” he said again.

“Yes, we are.”

“And we’re going to be good parents,” he said with conviction this time.

“Indeed, we will.”

He stayed silent, and so she chose not to fill it, finding solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

A few months ago, she’d been thinking that she’d probably spend the next few years of her life trying to find a match for her sister, but now she was happily married, and her sister would soon be married too.

The future really was a fickle thing one could only see by living. She heard Alexander’s gentle snore and smiled. He’d never believed her when she said he snored, and it was honestly something she found adorable about her beautiful husband.

She was really happy she had chosen to give love a chance when it looked like nothing good would come out of it. She only hoped they continued to experience more beautiful moments ahead.

The End?