



My Demanding Duke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: A reckless gamble. A reluctant bride. A love neither of them expected.

Anna Mosley has lived her life in the shadow of her father's debts, her reputation hanging by a thread. But when he wagers her hand in marriage during a drunken card game, Anna finds herself promised to the one man she vowed to avoid — the infamous Duke of Falconbridge.

Hugh De Wolfe, sixth Duke of Falconbridge, never intended to take a wife — until a twist of fate delivers Anna into his path. Fiery, defiant, and entirely unimpressed by his title, she is everything he didn't know he needed. But claiming her hand may prove far easier than earning her heart.

Thrown together by scandal and bound by desire, Anna and Hugh must navigate London society, whispered secrets, and their own growing feelings for each other. As passion flares and their carefully built walls begin to crumble, one question remains:

Can love be won when the stakes were never fair?

This is the second installment of The Forbidden Love Series. It can be read as a standalone novel.

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CHAPTER ONE

HUGH ALEXANDER DEWolfe, Sixth Duke of Falconbridge, was a great believer in the power of fate. As he drank in the vision of the lovely young woman before him, whose eyes stared unseeingly out into the dark garden, he thanked his fortunes that destiny had sent him her way.

Well, fate and an urge to smoke a cheroot, if he was to be honest...

The young woman was dressed simply, when compared to the other fillies dancing inside in the Morland's ballroom. The white gown which clung to her gentle curves was unadorned by lace, flounces, or any other busy trimmings. Its simplicity highlighted the sheer beauty of her face; heart-shaped, high cheekbones, a rosebud mouth which was set in a pout, and large, almond shaped eyes. Her hair was piled high upon her head; a golden crown for an angel fallen to earth.

Hugh was overcome by a strong urge to thread his fingers through those tresses, to see if they felt as silky as they looked.

"It is not wise for young ladies to wander alone at night," he offered, as he stepped forward - hoping that by speaking he might silence the wicked thoughts in his mind.

The young woman started and turned her eyes in his direction. For a moment, Hugh felt as though he had been punched in the stomach, as a pair of cornflower eyes met his.

"You risk your reputation," he continued, when she made no reply.

Too late, he realised that his words might be construed as a threat, rather than helpful advice.

“If you mean to take a punt at sully my reputation, your Grace,” his companion replied archly, aware exactly with whom she was speaking, “Then I feel obliged to warn you that I am no shrinking violet; if I am required to use violence to protect my person, I shall not hesitate to do so.”

Hugh bit back a smile; his angel was definitely of the fallen variety.

“I was not threatening you,” he assured her, in what he hoped was a gallant manner, “I was merely offering you advice.”

To his annoyance, Hugh found his attempt at chivalry was met with a slow, sardonic smile.

“How very like a gentleman, to think that he should police the actions of a lady,” she answered, with an impatient sigh, “Your time might be better spent elsewhere, your Grace. My slipping outside to take some air can hardly compare to the sins currently being committed by young bloods in bawdy houses and gaming hells across the city.”

Hugh raised a surprised brow; it was not often one heard a young lady reference bawdy houses. Who was this creature? Whoever she was, Hugh had obviously made a poor first impression. Despite his irritation that she had not yet succumbed to his charm - which was unusual, for most ladies found him charming - Hugh felt compelled to try to redeem himself.

“I quite agree,” he said, truthfully, “Society places too much emphasis on its daughters’ behaviour, whilst ignoring the sins of its sons. My advice was offered in good faith; I wished to protect you from hypocritical whispers, rather than point out a perceived transgression. I am not so conceited to think that I, of all people, am in any

position to offer anyone lessons on morality.”

His companion’s frosty expression thawed a little at his words and she eyed him thoughtfully. Hugh was glad that he had outed himself as a sinner, for it allowed him to match her stare with a pointed one of his own. To his satisfaction, he noted a faint blush stain her cheeks.

“A man loses his family fortune at the tables and no one raises more than a whisper,” she said, suddenly - as though trying to distract herself, “Whilst a lady might be spotted walking alone in Green Park, and the scandal might taint her for years.”

“It’s unfair,” he agreed, as he took a casual step forward, “Though, at this very moment, my mind is fixated on another unfairness.”

His angel glanced at him with confusion.

“You are aware of who I am,” he said, rather pointedly, for she had addressed him by his title, “Yet I have no idea of your name.”

There was a pause, as his angel eyed him warily.

“I imagine that a man of your status is introduced to so many young ladies, that after a while our names become inconsequential,” she eventually replied, with a shrug, “We must all blend into one, your Grace; just a blur of white dresses and indistinguishable features.”

Though her observation was unnervingly astute, Hugh still bristled in annoyance. True, he did not care to remember the names of other young ladies, but he had a burning desire to know the name of this young lady.

“If I didn’t know any better, I might think you were being deliberately obtuse,” he

said, and his observation was met with a pleased smile.

“You are correct, your Grace,” his angel answered, as she straightened her gloves and smoothed down the skirts of her dress - preparing, perhaps, to return indoors, “I do not think it proper for us to be introduced so informally, alone as we are.”

Hugh frowned; he was unaccustomed to having someone refuse his wishes.

“Well,” he answered belligerently, “I shall just have to arrange a formal introduction.”

His vow was met with a wry laugh and his companion began to move toward the French doors from which he had recently emerged.

“I shan’t hold my breath, your Grace,” she answered lightly, her tone amused, “Your reputation is not that of a man who seeks formal introductions to ladies on the marriage mart -”

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Her words came to an abrupt halt, as Hugh moved to block her way.

She stilled, though she did not look frightened. Hugh was so close to her now, that he could admire the swell of her bosom as she held her breath.

She gazed up at him, with eyes which were now dark with a desire which mirrored his own. Her full lips were parted, begging for his kiss, but Hugh resisted - his pride would not allow him prove her right about his rakish reputation. What's more, he did not dally with innocents - at least, not usually. His fallen angel was upsetting not only his sojourn in the garden, but his moral equilibrium too.

"You are correct about my reputation," he conceded, "I do not usually seek formal introductions to young ladies out for their season, but for you, I'm certain I can make an exception."

He took care to lace his words with all the intent and desire which stirred within him. For a moment, he was rewarded, as her eyes grew hazy with longing.

Hugh stepped forward, desiring to be even closer to her; to feel the heat which radiated from her body, to better smell her teasing scent of jasmine and vanilla.

He soon regretted his sudden move, for his companion's eyes narrowed and she took a step back.

"Am I supposed to feel flattered, your Grace?" she queried, archly, "I am no fool; I am well aware that men of your ilk will whisper any pleasing words that spring to mind, if they think it might gain them a kiss."

Hugh was torn between two feelings at her words; annoyance that she had thought he was trying to steal a favour, and rage at the very idea of any other man doing just that. The possession he felt toward her was not rational, though few men could be accused of being rational when confronted by a beautiful face.

And he was, after all, just a man.

“You place great weight on reputation,” he observed, his calm voice belying the roar of passion within.

“I do,” she answered, primly, “And I’ll wager, your Grace, that when you learn of mine, you’ll make no attempt to make the formal introduction you say you wish for. Now, please stand aside, I should like to return inside.”

He frowned at her words, unsure of how a creature like she could think that anything might deter him for his pursuit. Still, he duly stepped aside to allow her pass; her tone of resignation had dampened the simmering tension between them.

The angel disappeared into the shadows, without so much as a backward glance. Once she was out of sight, Hugh exhaled a sigh of frustration.

He tapped the cheroot in his hand with his index finger, but made no move to light it. His desire for tobacco was now subsumed by a burning desire to know the name of the vixen with whom he had traded barbs..

Not wishing to seem too eager - he was a duke, after all, he had to show some modicum of pride - Hugh paced the garden, for a few minutes. Once a suitable amount of time had passed, he slipped through the French doors, across the dimly-lit library, and back to the ballroom where Lord and Lady Morland were hosting at least a hundred guests.

Once there, he found the room alive with energy. A string quartet in the corner played a jaunty tune, as guests swirled around the dancefloor in a lively country set. Included amongst the dancers was the object of his desire. She was partnered with a young buck of about twenty years, and each time the dance returned her to the young buck's arms, Hugh felt an overwhelming urge to commit murder.

He remained on the periphery of the crowd, his face set in an unhappy scowl. It was not just the sight of the woman he coveted dancing with another which irked him, but the fact that he was unhappy at all.

In his two and thirty years, the ladies of the demimonde had soothed the worst of Hugh's masculine urges. Actresses, opera singers, the occasional dashing widow - Hugh's love affairs had all been brief, neat dalliances, free from the restraints of social strictures and scrutiny.

Occasionally, he had been tempted by forbidden fruit, but he had never wished so much to take a bite as he did now.

An impatient sigh escaped him and he turned his eyes to the other guests, in the hope that someone might distract him from his thoughts. He scanned the faces present, until his eyes alighted on a very familiar one.

"Beaufort," he called, as he approached Lord Bartie Beaufort - an acquaintance of sorts, from White's. Lord Beaufort was the type of fellow who knew everyone and everything; if anyone present knew the name of Hugh's angel, it was he.

"Falconbridge," Bartie replied, his round face breaking into a smile of genuine pleasure, "I didn't expect to find you here."

"I shan't stay much longer," Hugh assured him, his tone droll, "Lady Morland is a close friend of the family's and my mother demanded I show my face."

“A face showing’s worth about an hour, by my watch,” Bartie replied, with a knowing grin.

“Then I have but a few more minutes to endure, before I can safely flee,” Hugh stated, turning his gaze back toward the ballroom floor.

The pair exchanged pleasantries for a while, until Hugh decided it was time to strike.

“I assume she’s been declared the season’s diamond?” Hugh said, with as much nonchalance as he could muster. He nodded his head in the direction of his mysterious blonde, who was now dancing with another chap - much to Hugh’s chagrin.

“Who?” Bartie queried, turning his eyes in the direction in which Hugh had nodded. His gaze fell upon Hugh’s angel and lit up with excitement. Hugh stifled a grin; it was obvious that Bartie had gossip to impart.

“That is Miss Anna Mosley,” Bartie stated, in a staged whisper, “A girl with her looks would usually be batting off suitors, but alas she suffers from a terrible affliction.”

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“What’s that?” Hugh bit out, his heart momentarily frozen with fear.

“A father with a love for the card tables that does not match his skill,” Bartie answered sadly, before elaborating further. “Lord Mosley won a considerable sum in York, just after New Year, and set it aside to launch his only daughter into society. Unfortunately, since his arrival to town, the baron has lost all his winnings and then some, in various gaming hells around the city. He is being refused credit left, right, and centre; the only thing saving Miss Mosley from being ostracised by society completely, is a lingering fondness amongst some of the ton for her late mother.”

Hugh frowned, surprised by the rush of concern he felt for the girl whose name he had only just learned. His own knowledge of the heartbreak that a loved one’s addiction to the card table could bring, stirred sadness and anger deep in his soul.

Fate was cruel, to bestow such a reckless father upon a girl as beautiful as she. Lord Mosley’s gambling left his daughter at risk of suffering insult to both her pride, and her body. There was no doubt that her beauty had not gone unnoticed by the nefarious gentlemen who lurked amongst the shadowed gaming-dens of London’s underbelly.

“Is Lord Mosley present?” Hugh wondered aloud, thinking that he might offer the baron a word of caution - or his fist.

“Lud, no,” Bartie chuckled, “Miss Mosley is here as a guest of Lady Limehouse; the countess is making it her personal mission to see that her late friend’s daughter is seen in all the right places. Not that it will do much good, in the end.”

The defeated tone on which Bartie finished speaking, ignited a spark of rage within

Hugh's belly. How cruel fate was to bestow Miss Mosley with a father so incompetent that her future was written off before it had even begun.

Hugh paused and took a deep breath as his train of thought shifted in another direction. Perhaps fate was not so cruel; she had delivered Miss Mosley his way, had she not?

"Which club does Lord Mosley frequent?" he asked of Bartie, careful to keep the excitement he felt from his tone.

"He's been sighted in The Bird's Nest, of late," Bartie answered, naming one of the more salubrious gambling dens in Pickering Place - not that that was much of an accolade. "However, I'm not certain he'll be there much longer. Shatter does not tolerate punters who fail to honour their debts."

Hugh nodded, visualising the brawny proprietor of The Bird's Nest. Shatter was known for being fair, when fairness was due. He was equally famous for his ruthlessness should a situation deem it necessary for him to be ruthless. He was not the sort of fellow that anyone - even Hugh - would like to cross.

"You should go into service for Whitehall," Hugh commented to his friend, with a smile, "I'm certain your skills at gleaning information would come in useful there."

Bartie gave a snort in response and rolled his eyes. "The problem with that idea, your Grace," he answered, "Is that the gossip in Whitehall is so terribly dull; there's nowhere on earth more interesting, than a London ballroom at the height of the season."

He offered a conspiratorial wink, which made Hugh question if his attempts at acting nonchalant had been at all convincing.

“Well,” Hugh shifted his weight from one foot to the other impatiently, “I believe I have passed the requisite amount of time for a face showing. Goodnight, Beaufort. I’m sure our paths will cross again before the season’s out.”

Hugh offered his companion a stiff nod, before turning on the heel of his slipper and making for the entrance hall. There, the footman called for his carriage, and when the vehicle arrived, Hugh hastened to it.

“Pickering Place,” he instructed his driver, curtly.

Hugh climbed inside and, as the carriage began its journey towards St. James’ Street, he wondered what, exactly, he was going to do once he found Lord Mosley. He had no claim on the man’s daughter, nor any solid evidence that the man might risk her safety at the tables, yet he still felt compelled to speak with him...

It was a madness of sorts; the unrelenting fear which troubled his soul. That same fear had haunted him when Jack had lived and its echo now tortured him. His worry for Jack had been rational; however, Jack was his brother, and they shared the same blood. Miss Mosley was nought but a stranger to him - he had no duty of care to her whatsoever.

The carriage soon arrived at the alleyway which led to Pickering Place. Too impatient to wait for the footman, Hugh opened the door himself and sprang from the vehicle onto the footpath.

“I shall return shortly,” he called over his shoulder before plunging into the darkness. The narrow alleyway, its bricks cold and slick with damp, opened onto a small square. The square was hemmed in on all sides by tall, brown-brick buildings, which housed various businesses of ill repute. Hugh made for The Bird’s Nest, the exterior of which was far grander than those of its neighbours.

Inside, the decor was lush and extravagant; sumptuous velvet hangings lined the walls alongside gilt-framed paintings of Renaissance nudes. The Bird's Nest consisted of a warren of small rooms where men might play any game they liked - or partake in a different kind of fun with the light skirts who frequented the place.

Hugh, familiar with the layout, made for the main room, where he might learn of Lord Mosley's whereabouts.

Despite the early hour, he found a large crowd present, loud and boisterous. An extravagant chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a warm glow on the florid, drunken faces which milled beneath it.

"Your Grace, what an unexpected pleasure."

Hugh turned to find Daniel Shatter standing behind him, his face wearing what appeared to be an attempt at a smile - though it did little to soften his hard features. The proprietor waved a gloved hand and a somberly liveried footman arrived at his side.

"A brandy for His Grace," Shatter instructed curtly, "One of the good ones."

"I'm honoured," Hugh grinned; Shatter had connections to every criminal in London, including cross-Channel smugglers.

"It might not be patriotic, but nothing compares to a good French brandy," Shatter answered, with a shrug. Hugh could only nod in agreement; the embargo on goods from France couldn't end soon enough.

The footman returned a few moments later, bearing two tumblers filled with deep-amber liquid. Shatter handed one to Hugh before lifting his own in a toast.

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“To a good night’s play,” he said.

“Indeed,” Hugh echoed before taking a deep sip from his glass. The liquid burned its way down his throat to his belly, warming him nicely. “Is Lord Mosley about?” he ventured after another sip.

“He’s in the Oriental drawing room playing five-card loo,” Shatter answered evenly, “Though he might not be there for much longer, he’s losing heavily again, and my patience is wearing thin.”

“I’ll cover his losses for tonight,” Hugh assured him quickly, “Just allow him to play a while longer.”

Shatter raised his eyebrows a fraction to convey his surprise, though he passed no comment. Only a fool would refuse such an offer.

“I’ll instruct the footman to keep you topped up,” Shatter said, and Hugh smiled his thanks.

He bid the man good evening, then made for the Oriental drawing room, so called because it was decorated with Chinoiserie wall hangings, hand-painted with motifs of pagodas, dragons, and lilies. Several men sat playing at the lacquered table, over which hung a cloud of smoke. From their dishevelled appearances and the number of cheroot stubs in the ashtray, it was obvious that they had been playing for quite some time.

“Loo,” a croaky voice called, revealing his hand to the table.

“Devil take you, Mosley,” one of his companions grumbled, “That’s the fifth game in a row you’ve won.”

“Luck is on my side tonight,” the baron replied, gleefully.

“I suppose fate owes you a win or two,” the first man answered, with a sigh, “Alas, she has forsaken me, so I must take my leave before I lose my shirt. Adieu, gentlemen.”

The portly man heaved himself from his seat, leaving one spot open at the table.

“May I?” Hugh queried from the doorway, causing all heads to turn his way. One of the players let out a slight groan at the sight of Hugh, who was renowned for his card skills, but the others waved for him to join.

“I should probably quit while I’m ahead,” Mosley chuckled nervously as Hugh took his seat. He brought a handkerchief up to mop at his bald pate while his eyes darted nervously around the table. He was deep in the throes of a winner’s high; though he knew he should leave, it was clear that he would not.

“Deal me in,” Mosley decided after a moment. His posture visibly relaxed as he gave up the internal battle with his conscience.

The group played hard and fast, and for the first few rounds, Hugh allowed the others to win. He found that it was always best to lure competitors into a false sense of security rather than to pounce straight away. Lord Mosely won three hands and his excitement grew even more palpable; with Hugh present, the stakes had been driven higher, and the baron had won himself a considerable sum.

“Shall we deal again?” Hugh pondered, offering Mosley a chance to escape.

“Once more,” the baron agreed, his eyes alight with greed.

His expression soon changed to one of dismay as Hugh finally played to win. With each round, Hugh pushed the buy-in ever higher until Mosley had lost all that he had won - and then some.

Still, he would not stop. Now that he was no longer winning, he was chasing his losses.

“One more,” Mosley called, nervously wiping away the sweat from his upper lip. Hugh hid a smile, for the man had walked into the trap he had planned for him. Hugh would bankrupt the fellow, offer him clemency, in exchange for a promise that he would never gamble again...

...But would that suffice in keeping Miss Mosley safe?

The other players began to fall away from the game, throwing their cards down in defeat until only Hugh and Lord Mosley were left. The baron's thin lips were pressed tightly together as though he was trying to keep from breaking into a smile. Hugh felt a momentary pang of worry, but the cards he held in his hand were almost unbeatable.

“What's say we raise the stakes, eh?” Lord Mosley asked as he drew his final card, “My estate in Whitby sound enticing enough for you, Falconbridge?”

“I could always use another estate to add to the pile,” Hugh responded, earning himself a few sycophantic chuckles from the players who had already folded, “What's say I place my estate in St. Ives in the pot to match you - and five thousand pounds to boot.”

A strained hush fell; it was an astronomical sum, one which all present knew that

Mosley could not match.

“I can’t meet your bid,” the baron replied, his brow furrowed into a frown, “As you well know.”

“You have something else I want.”

“And what might that be?”

“Your daughter.”

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It had not been his intention to try to win the fair Miss Mosley, but now that he had uttered the words aloud, Hugh felt a deep sense of satisfaction. What better way was there to ensure Miss Mosley's continued safety than installing her by his side as his duchess?

The other players at the table hummed with excitement; no doubt, this would be the talk of taverns across London for many days to come.

"And what do you want to do with her?" Lord Mosley asked with a sneer - though not, Hugh noted, an abject rebuttal of his demand.

"Marry her," Hugh said simply, "If I win, I shall wipe clean the slate of your debt in exchange for her hand."

There was a silence as Lord Mosley digested this rather tempting offer. He glanced at the cards in his hands and, as though assured by them, nodded his head.

"Alright," he agreed, "But you'll have to double your bid; my Anna's worth more than a paltry five thousand."

"Indeed she is," Hugh agreed, "One might say that her worth is priceless..."

Lord Mosley did not acknowledge the second part of his remark. Instead, he laid his cards out on the table for Hugh to inspect. An approving murmur went up from their fellow players; Lord Mosley held a brilliant hand.

"A good hand," Hugh acknowledged coldly, "But not a winning one. I'm afraid

you've been well and truly loo'd, my lord."

With a flourish, Hugh laid his cards out upon the table - four of the same suit and the coveted Pam.

He had won himself a wife.

CHAPTER TWO

MISS ANNA MOSLEY paced the floor of the drawing-room, anxiously awaiting the sound of her father's return. He often returned in the small hours of the morning, but since coming to London he had never before stayed out all night.

Visions of the terrible mishaps which might have befallen him danced through her mind. Her father mixed with the worst kind of men and gambled with a passion that did not match his skill - or his coin purse. There was every chance that he had upset some nefarious crook and had found himself on the receiving end of a closed fist.

Horried at the idea, Anna scrunched up her eyes so tightly she saw spots, as she willed her anxious mind to settle.

As she continued her pacing, she assured herself that there was also every chance that Papa had - miraculously - won at the tables. Perhaps he was currently sleeping off a night of celebratory drinking in a tavern somewhere?

Anything was possible when it came to her father, and Anna had learned to live with his unpredictable nature since her mother had died, five years before. Living with him was easier when they were resident in Whitby, where her father knew exactly who he should avoid vexing. In London, everyone was a stranger to him and temptation lurked at every corner.

If only they had not come to town, she thought with a forlorn sigh. If only she had convinced Papa to save the fortune he had won at Christmas, rather than take Lady Limehouse up on her offer to sponsor Anna for a season.

Even before she had arrived, Anna had known that the venture would be fruitless. Lady Limehouse had insisted that her lack of fortune was no impediment to finding a husband, but Anna was yet to be presented with evidence to support her claim.

Oh, gentlemen had asked her to dance - she had never been left with an empty card - but none sought to further the acquaintance. She had received no callers to the rented house on Berkley Square, nor had anyone sent her hot-house flowers, or even an invitation that was not made at the behest of the viscountess.

The only eye she had so far managed to catch was that of the Duke of Falconbridge - and Anna would much rather that she hadn't. No matter how handsome he was, Anna knew that the duke's reputation was that of a ruthless, cold-hearted brute. He was a man who gambled heavily with both money and women's hearts - he was not the sort of gentleman that any sane, young lady should wish to be in the company of.

Anna paused and attempted to push his image from her mind's eye. Falconbridge had no doubt forgotten all about her the second that she had disappeared from his sight - she would not suffer the indignity of daydreaming of a man who could not recall her.

Mercifully, from the hallway, came the sound of a distraction to pull her from her thoughts.

"Only me," Josephine, Anna's lady's maid called out as Anna raced out to the entrance hall.

"Oh," she answered, trying to keep the note of disappointment from her tone, "I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

“Your father still not back?” Josephine queried, as she shrugged off her shawl, “Oh, that man. I’ll string him up one day for the trouble he causes you.”

Josie continued to grumble under her breath as she folded her shawl, though she kept her gaze to the floor as though she wished to avoid Anna’s eyes.

“What is it?” Anna prompted, for she knew Josie well enough to know when something was amiss, “Is it father? Did you learn of his whereabouts? Was he involved in some sort of skirmish?”

“That man does not deserve your worry,” Josie sighed, as she finally turned her eyes to Anna, “No, I know nothing of his whereabouts, but when I called to collect the dresses you ordered from Mrs Delacroix, she refused to release them.”

“Why?” Anna asked, although she suspected she might guess the answer. A familiar feeling of anxiety stole over her; her stomach churned and her heart raced within her chest. She had lived so long with the feeling of standing on a precipice waiting to fall that the return of her anxiety felt almost comforting.

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“She is refusing your father credit based on talk of his financial affairs,” Josie answered gently, “She will release them only when she is paid in full.”

Anna’s shoulders slumped as mortification washed over her. Mrs Delacroix would never be paid in full; if the merchants of London were already aware of Father’s dire financial state, then things must be very bad.

“Never mind,” Anna said, attempting a brave face, “I did tell him that I had no need for new gowns; my current wardrobe is quite adequate.”

Josie made a few noises of agreement, though it was obvious that her heart was not in it. “I’ll call for Sarah to make tea,” Anna decided in an effort to lighten the mood, “Perhaps she has a few sweetmeats hidden away that we might munch on while we await Father’s return.”

A few minutes later, Anna and Josie were safely ensconced in the drawing room, sipping tea and eating rout-cake. Though the cake was delicious, it felt dry in her mouth, as other worries stole over her.

How would the grocer be paid, if Papa had frittered away all his money? Worse, how would Sarah - who had been hired as a maid of all work for the season - and James, their temporary footman, be paid their wages?

As Anna chewed, the cake turned to dust in her mouth, and she had to take a sip of tea to force it down.

“Don’t fret,” Josie said as Anna cleared her throat, “It will all work out in the end.”

Anna nodded in agreement and offered her a bleak smile, though unshed tears stung her eyes. It was impossible for her to imagine just how everything would work out when Papa's gambling had landed them in yet more hot water.

A knock sounded upon the front door, causing Anna to leap from her seat.

"Perhaps it's him..." she said, making for the hallway.

For the second time that morning, she found her hopes dashed. In the entrance hall stood Lady Limehouse, resplendent in a rich satin walking gown, with a feathered turban upon her head.

"Forgive me Anna," she called when she spotted her, "I could not stand on formality and send the footman to you with my card - I simply had to see you at once! Why, what exciting news, you must be thrilled."

Hope blossomed in Anna's heart; had father won a fortune so miraculous that it warranted an unannounced visit from the viscountess? She instructed Sarah to fetch another tray, then ushered Lady Limehouse into the drawing room.

"I'm afraid that you have caught me unawares, my lady," Anna said once they were seated, "I have not yet heard the news which has you so excited."

The viscountess' smile faltered when she heard this, and she gave Anna a rather concerned look.

"You do not know?" she confirmed, her eyes worried, "Your father did not tell you?"

"My father is yet to return from his night out," Anna answered, allowing herself a droll tone for her ladyship was all too aware of Lord Mosley's faults.

“Heavens,” the viscountess brought a nervous hand to the string of pearls at her neck, “I did not think that I would be the one to tell you this but, as all the ton is already aware, it’s only fair that you too are informed...”

“Informed of what?” Anna prompted, somewhat impatiently.

“You are to be wed to the Duke of Falconbridge.”

Anna had never been prone to fainting - she was made of sterner stuff than most - but at the viscountess’ words, a wave of dizziness overcame her. She slumped backwards, grateful that she was already seated, her vision hazy.

“I’ll fetch some smelling salts,” she heard Josie cry.

A few moments later, an acrid scent burned Anna’s nostrils, so noxious that she swatted it away.

“Awful things,” she complained as she inhaled a deep breath of fresh air. She had never had to use smelling salts before, and had not imagined their scent would be so foul.

She took another few steadying breaths until her head felt clearer. Once she felt right - well, as right as was possible, given the circumstances - she returned her attention to Lady Limehouse.

“Forgive me,” she said, in a calm voice, “But did you say that I am to wed the Duke of Falconbridge? You must be mistaken; I have no association with the man.”

“I’m afraid you do now,” the viscountess corrected her gently, “He and your father played cards last night, and, when your father ran out of funds, the duke demanded your hand in marriage as a stake.”

Anna flinched as pain seared through her heart. How could Papa have been so cruel and careless, as to gamble her away like she was cattle?

“Your father lost, and Falconbridge, by all accounts, went straight to the papers to ensure that the engagement notice went out in this morning’s news sheets.”

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Hurt turned to anger, as Anna realised that half of London had known about her engagement before she did, thanks to Falconbridge's machinations. He had not even had the courtesy to call on her himself to tell her of his intent.

"I shan't marry him," Anna declared, crossing her arms across her chest defiantly, "He can't force me down the aisle."

"He can't," the viscountess agreed quietly, "Though, I think you should allow it, my dear. Your circumstances are dire; your father is a profligate gambler with no regard for your welfare. I shudder to think what might become of you, given the company he keeps."

"The duke is no less a profligate gambler than father," Anna protested, "And a rake to boot."

"Rumours of his predilection for playing cards are greatly exaggerated," Lady Limehouse replied primly, "People chatter because he usually wins. I don't know how or when you caught his eye, Anna, but I assure you that one day you will be glad you did. Falconbridge wishes to make you a duchess; you will have stability as you have never known - and are unlikely to ever know if you chose to remain to coddle your father."

Unable to form a reply, Anna simply nodded her agreement. She was truly caught between a rock and a hard place. She did not care for the duke, but even she could see that life with him would be easier than waking each day under her father's roof, wondering what next calamity might befall them.

“You’ve plenty of time to think on it,” Josie interjected - the unusual circumstances rendering her brave enough to speak in the viscountess’ company, “It’s not as though you’re to be wed this instant.”

A knock on the door followed her fateful words, and Sarah appeared a moment later bearing a calling card and wearing a perplexed look on her face.

“The Duke of Falconbridge, for Miss Mosley?” she said, though from her tone, it was clear that she did not quite believe her own words.

“Send him in,” Lady Limehouse instructed, with a wave of her hand. She turned to Anna with a smile, “Thank heaven I am here to chaperone you.”

Anna did not share her sentiments; had she been alone in the house, the door would have remained firmly closed to the duke. Despite her mutinous thoughts, she ran a nervous hand over her hair to make certain it was not untidy. Even if she did not like the man, she would rather he find her presentable.

After a moment’s wait, the duke entered, his towering, broad frame all the more disconcerting in the small drawing room.

“Lady Limehouse,” he inclined his head in greeting to the viscountess before turning his gaze to Anna, “Miss Mosley, I trust your father has informed you of the news?”

“My father has not yet returned from his night out,” Anna answered, making sure her tone sounded as cold as her heart felt, “I only learned of our engagement moments ago when Lady Limehouse called to inform me. Though, I am told that half of London knew of it before I did, thanks to the papers.”

A momentary look of regret passed across Falconbridge’s handsome face, though it was fleeting.

“I apologise,” he said, his voice low, “I did not intend for you to find out this way.”

“I suppose there is no kind way to find out that your hand in marriage has been won at a card game,” Anna retorted, offering him a glare, “Perhaps if I refuse your offer, you might accept one of my father’s horses as compensation?”

“Anna,” Lady Limehouse clucked, “That’s no way to speak to His Grace.”

For his part, the Duke of Falconbridge looked most amused by Anna’s outburst. His lips quirked at the corners as though he was suppressing a smile, and his blue eyes danced with merriment.

“Miss Mosley will have all the time in the world to address her concerns to me when we are wed,” the duke declared, turning his attention to the viscountess, “Which I am hoping will take place as soon as she has packed her things. I have procured a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury, so there is no need to wait. We can be married before noon.”

Shock washed over Anna at his words, and she struggled to remain standing. She had never had much control over her destiny, but more than ever, she felt like a ship lost at sea - powerless against the tempest hell-bent on capsizing her.

Mercifully, Lady Limehouse was not as awed by Falconbridge’s declaration as Anna, and she gave an amused titter.

“Really, your Grace,” the viscountess said, in a tone one might use with a misbehaving child, “You cannot expect me to countenance such an idea; you won a wife in that card game, not a serf bound to do your every bidding. Miss Mosley has had quite the shock; she needs time to adjust. The banns shall be read before you marry, as is only proper.”

“I am not a man who usually cares for propriety,” he answered, his dark brow furrowed in annoyance. It was obvious that the duke was not at all accustomed to having his wishes ignored.

“No, but your mother cares,” Lady Limehouse replied, with an icy smile, “And I’ll warrant that she was as surprised as Miss Mosley to learn of your engagement this morning.”

Anna turned her eyes toward the duke and was gratified to see a faint blush stain his cheeks. The revelation that the fearsome Falconbridge was afraid of his mama made him seem almost human - though only slightly.

“You have created something of a scandal,” the viscountess continued, “You shall have to remedy it. It would be best if you and Miss Mosley were to be seen enjoying each others’ company once or twice to quell rumours that the poor girl was sold into marriage.”

Anna wanted to point out that this was not a rumour, it was fact, but she kept her counsel. The viscountess had bought her some time, as well as a little dignity.

“Very well,” Falconbridge inclined his head, “I cede to your wise counsel, my lady.”

Anna’s shoulders sagged in relief; she was not in imminent danger of being spirited away by the duke.

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“Very good,” the viscountess gave a beaming smile, delighted by her victory, “Miss Mosley and I will be attending a ball at Lord and Lady Colridge’s this evening; you shall meet us there. Anna, has Mrs Delacroix sent across any of your new gowns? You’ll need something breathtaking for the occasion.”

“Actually, my lady - ” Josie began, but Anna cut her off quickly - she could not bear the humiliation of Falconbridge learning just how impoverished she was.

“I shall endeavour to look my best,” Anna said firmly.

From the corner of her eye, she caught the duke glancing suspiciously between herself and Josie, but she brazened it out with a placid smile.

“Now that that’s settled,” the viscountess said, with a contented sigh, “Shall we call for tea?”

“I am afraid that I cannot stay,” the duke answered, “I have a few matters to attend to. Might I steal a moment alone with Miss Mosley before I go?”

“I suppose I can permit it as you are engaged.” Lady Limehouse answered, her tone knowing, “Though, only a moment and the door shall remain ajar. Come, Josephine, we shall give our young couple a moment’s privacy.”

Anna watched nervously as the pair swept from the room, leaving her alone with the duke. She felt rather like a chicken in a hen-house, left to defend herself against a fox.

Indeed, Falconbridge’s gaze was rather predatory as he watched her from across the

room.

“Why?” she asked, breaking the silence. It was the question which had plagued her, since she had heard the news. They had met only for a fleeting moment; not long enough, in Anna’s mind, to decide upon marriage.

“I desired you,” the duke shrugged, “I set out to learn who you were, and when it came to my attention that your safety could not be assured, I decided to assure it.”

“And the only way you could do that was by winning me at a card game?” Anna countered, aggrieved by his self-satisfied tone.

“I thought it might aptly demonstrate to you just how precarious your life is when you place your safety into the care of a man like your father.”

Though Anna had been thinking it for years, it still smarted to hear her father maligned by another. He had not always been so foolish; it was only after her mother’s death that his gambling had spiralled out of control. Once, he had been a good man, though those days were long past.

“What will happen to him?” Anna asked, lifting her eyes to meet his.

“I will settle his debts,” Falconbridge answered, with a careless wave of his hand, “Though, he will not be given the chance to incur any further ones. I will make it clear to him that he will be saved from the debtor’s prison only once.”

She nodded, quietly. Manners dictated that she should express some thanks for his generosity, but as his offer was not entirely magnanimous, she remained silent.

“I shall send some of my men out in search of him,” Falconbridge continued, mistaking her silence for worry, “I am certain he is nursing a sore head, in some

tavern or other.”

“As you wish, your Grace,” she replied dispassionately. Her earlier worry for her father had dissipated upon learning just how he had spent the previous night. His carelessness for her hurt in a way that Anna had not realised was possible.

“You need not address me so formally, now we are engaged,” the duke observed, his blue eyes still watching her closely, “In private, you may refer to me as Hugh, if you wish.”

“There are a few other choice names I would like to call you,” Anna commented, unable to stop herself.

To her surprise, the duke let out an appreciative laugh - a rich, warm, almost melodious sound.

“I can’t say that I blame you,” he said, with what appeared to be a smile, “But I will make it up to you, Anna, you’ll see.”

To convey the sincerity of his words, Falconbridge closed the gap between them and reached out to take her hand in his. Despite her dislike of the man, Anna could not deny how attractive she found him and how her body reacted to his touch.

“I can offer you a world of wealth and pleasure,” he continued, as he lifted her hand to his lips, “You just have to let me.”

As his lips connected with her bare skin, a shiver ran through her. A giddy feeling blossomed, deep in her belly, filling Anna with an unfamiliar longing. It must have shown in her eyes, for when Falconbridge let go of her hand, he wore that familiar self-satisfied smile.

“Until this evening, Anna,” he said before offering her a curt bow and taking his leave.

As the door closed behind him, Anna slumped down onto the velvet chaise-longue, her head dizzy and her heart racing.

Arrogant man, she thought mutinously, as she tried to distract herself from her longing. Not only had Falconbridge taken her hand in marriage without her permission, but he had assumed the right to call her by her given name without first asking her.

“Well, how did it go?” Lady Limehouse called as she returned to the drawing room.

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“The duke is arrogant, high-handed, and demanding,” Anna answered dourly.

“Men that handsome always are,” the viscountess replied knowingly, “I’m certain he’ll make up for it in other ways...”

“I fail to see how he might,” Anna responded as she doggedly pushed the memory of his lips on her skin from her mind.

Later that afternoon, however, she was gifted with a small taste of some of the material pleasures life with a duke might offer her.

“Anna,” she heard Josie call from the hallway, “Come look!”

She rushed from the drawing room, where she had been mindlessly flicking through an issue of *La Belle Assemblée*, to find Josie in the hallway with two footmen. Each man held several paper-wrapped packages in their arms, which Josie was handing to Sarah.

“It’s some of the gowns we ordered,” she called to Anna, “From Mrs Delacroix - and there’s a note for you, too.”

She handed Anna a folded piece of parchment, which she opened curiously.

Miss Mosley, she read, Please accept my apologies for the earlier misunderstanding regarding your order. I have sent over some of the finished gowns today; the rest shall follow in haste. I do hope it will not affect your future patronage.

She folded the page again and gave an incredulous laugh; Falconbridge had, no doubt, had a hand in this.

“What did she say?” Josie asked curiously.

“That credit is easily extended when one is engaged to a duke,” Anna answered dryly.

Inside, however, she was furious. She had not asked Falconbridge to help her - not with the gowns, nor with her father. It was he who had presumed to rescue her off his own bat.

Well, Anna would show him just how little she cared for his machinations.

“Which one shall you wear tonight?” Josie wondered aloud as she rearranged the bundles of parcels she held in her arms.

“None,” Anna answered, firmly, “Send a note to Lady Limehouse to inform her that I am indisposed and will not be attending tonight’s ball.”

She might be poor, and her future might be precarious, but Anna refused to allow the duke to think he could buy her admiration - or her hand, for that matter.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN HUGH ARRIVED to Colridge House, on the fashionable Grosvenor Square, later that evening, he found himself in the midst of a crush.

The heaving ballroom could of course be attributed to Lord and Lady Colridge’s reputation as lavish hosts, but as each eye in the room turned his way, Hugh wondered if his presence might also have influenced the number of guests in attendance. Nothing drew a crowd more than gossip and Hugh’s recently announced

engagement to Miss Mosley was the scandal of the season.

Although accustomed to being the object of people's fascination - an occupational hazard, when one was a duke - Hugh found the level of interest directed his way mildly uncomfortable. His eyes scanned the room for a glimpse of Lady Limehouse and Miss Mosley and when he did not sight them, he realised that this discomfort he felt was, in fact, nervousness.

He frowned a little, for anxiety was not an emotion he often felt, and he was reluctant to attribute the fluttering in his stomach to Miss Mosley's absence. To do so, he thought, would be akin to admitting he possessed a weakness - and if there was one thing that Hugh prided himself on, it was his strength.

After greeting his hosts, who effused hearty congratulations on his engagement, Hugh went in search of liquid refreshments to ease the torment of his current predicament. He did not frequently attend society balls, for he found them stifling and dull, and they were rendered even more so when one was the object of universal scrutiny.

"Beaufort," Hugh called with relief, as he spotted Lord Bartie Beaufort hovering on the periphery of the dance floor.

"Your Grace," Bartie replied, with a warm smile, "Congratulations are in order, let me get you a drink."

Lord Beaufort waved down a footman, who near ran to fetch Hugh a tumbler of cognac. When he returned, Bartie lifted his own glass in toast, "To the happy couple; I'm glad to think I played a part in your union."

"How so?" Hugh raised a brow.

"Why, two nights ago you did not even know your future wife's name," Bertie

answered, with a wink, “I must say, I am impressed by the speed at which you move. I have never been in love myself, but I have heard that one knows instantly when one finds it.”

Hugh struggled to hold in a snort of derision at this statement; the word love was not part of his personal lexicon. His motives in securing Miss Mosley’s hand were primarily base, though he would not share that with Beaufort.

“Miss Mosley will make a fine duchess,” Hugh replied, stiffly.

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Bartie's face fell a little at such a dull platitude, though he quickly regained his composure.

"Indeed she will," he agreed, lifting his glass in another toast, "May your marriage be long and fruitful, Falconbridge."

Hugh bowed his head in acknowledgment of his good wishes, but inside his stomach twisted a little. There was still no sign of Miss Mosley and he was beginning to wonder if the marriage would take place at all...

She's just late, Hugh assured himself, as he tried to bat away visions of Miss Mosley escaping London by stagecoach, desperate to be free of him.

"Hark," Bertie cried nervously, drawing Hugh from his reverie, "Is that your mother making her way toward us?"

Hugh followed Bertie's gaze and was greeted with the sight of his rather formidable mother elbowing her way through the throng of glittering guests. Her brow was drawn into a terrific frown and the plumage of her turban wobbled ominously.

"I've just recalled that I promised the next dance to a lovely filly," Bertie stammered, as the Dowager Duchess drew close, "Do pass on my regards to your mother."

Unashamed of his cowardice, Bertie turned on his slipper and fled, leaving Hugh to face his mother alone.

"Mama," he inclined his head in greeting.

Edwina, Dowager Duchess of Falconbridge, offered her son a scowl as dark and imperious as his own.

“Ten years,” she began, not bothering with the niceties of greeting, “For ten years I have been hounding you to find a bride, then when you finally do, I had to suffer the indignity of hearing the news second-hand from Lady Castlereagh.”

“Which upsets you more?” Hugh queried, mischievously, “That I am engaged, or that you were not the first to hear the gossip?”

“The latter,” his mother conceded, with a smile, “I don’t like to be taken by surprise, dear. Though I should not have expected anything less of you; you are something of a mystery, even to me.”

Mother and son exchanged a glance, heavy with a decade’s worth of pain. Hugh shifted uncomfortably, afraid that she might say something which would prod at the wound he guarded deep within.

“Well, where is she?”

His mother broke the silence, casting her dark eyes around the room in search of Miss Mosley. “I can’t say I approve of the girl’s father, but I was acquainted with her mother, when she had her season. A lovely young lady, from good stock, who had the misfortune to marry a man unworthy of her hand.”

That same man was also not worthy of his daughter, Hugh thought, dourly. “Lady Limehouse is escorting Miss Mosley this evening, she will arrive with the viscountess.”

“I would have insisted on an introduction,” came his mother’s dry reply, “But Lady Limehouse arrived a few minutes ago, quite alone.”

Hugh clenched his jaw, unwilling to show just how irked he was by the news that he had been hoodwinked. Against his own desire, he had agreed a deal with Miss Mosley for a long engagement. Now she had reneged on their terms at the first test.

“Excuse me, mother,” Hugh said, with a stiff bow, “I’m afraid there’s somewhere I need to be.”

Hugh offered his mother - who looked more than a little amused at the turn of circumstances - a brief nod, before delving into the crowd in search of Lady Limehouse. He found the viscountess surrounded by a circle of similarly dressed and titled ladies, who all looked at him with naked curiosity as he approached.

A flicker of nervousness crossed Lady Limehouse’s face, as she caught sight of Hugh, but she quickly regained her composure.

“My lady.” Hugh offered the viscountess a curt bow, and the other ladies’ present a courteous nod, “Might I borrow you for a moment?”

“Most certainly, your Grace,” Lady Limehouse said, as she offered him her arm.

“If this concerns our mutual friend,” Lady Limehouse began, once they were out of earshot of her companions, “I can assure you that the poor girl is suffering from a migraine. She meant you no slight and asked me to pass on her sincere regret for her absence.”

“Miss Mosley is not my friend,” Hugh replied, tightly, “She is my fiancée. Her absence is conspicuous, given the gossip circulating about the nature of our union.”

“And who’s fault is that?” the viscountess whispered sharply in return.

Hugh bit his lip, to hold back the sharp retort which danced on the tip of his tongue.

His actions in securing Miss Mosley's hand might have been unconventional, but in his opinion, they were just. And, his opinion was all that mattered; he would not waste his breath trying to convince Lady Limehouse to see matters from his point of view.

“Miss Mosley and I had an agreement; a long engagement in order to quash any untoward gossip,” Hugh said, his voice slow and calm, but his mind racing, “Given that she has now reneged on her word, I see no reason to delay our marriage. We will wed tomorrow, at noon. I'll send someone to collect you in the morning, so that you might be there to act as witness to our joyous union.”

Without waiting for a reply, Hugh offered the startled viscountess a brief bow, then made his exit.

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His dark mood must have been clear for all to see, for the crowd parted like the Red Sea to allow him quick passage to the door. There, a footman called for his carriage, and within minutes, Hugh was hurtling through the dark streets of London toward an unsuspecting Miss Mosley.

With a clearer head, Hugh might have questioned the wisdom of his actions, but for the first time in years, he found rational thought far beyond his reach. His blood thundered through his veins, urged on by a heady mixture of passion and anger.

After what felt like an eternity, the carriage began to slow, then drew to a juddering halt. Hugh pulled back the curtain to see that they had arrived outside the small townhouse on Bedford Square, which Lord Mosley had leased for the season. A light shone from one of the upstairs windows, indicating that the household had not yet retired to bed.

Impatient now, Hugh threw open the carriage door and hopped lithely down to the footpath. He ascended the steps to the front door with equal speed, and gave the brass door knocker a hearty rap.

He waited a moment, but hearing only silence inside, he rapped the knocker again, it's sharp rat-a-tat-tat ringing out through the night. This time, he was gratified to hear noises coming from behind the closed door; footsteps running down the stairs, urgent whispers, and the sound of a key turning in the lock.

The door opened a crack, and the face of young man appeared.

“Who is it?” he called to Hugh, in a tone which sounded forcedly steady.

“The Duke of Falconbridge,” Hugh answered, evenly, “I have an urgent message for the mistress of the house.”

“My mistress is abed,” the lad answered, glaring at Hugh suspiciously.

“Then wake her.”

This command, issued in his most ducal tone, had the exact reaction Hugh had hoped for. The young man’s expression grew uncertain and he closed the door to consult with whoever else stood behind it.

Hugh heaved a sigh of displeasure at the delay, though he could not fault the lad for his caution - at least one member of Miss Mosley’s household cared for her safety. He waited a moment before lifting his hand to the knocker, to remind the footman he was there, but before he could reach for it, the door swung open and he was ushered inside.

“My mistress is in the front parlour room, your Grace,” the footman said, gesturing toward the door on the other side of the hallway, “I am only a bell-ring away, if she needs me.”

His last statement, Hugh surmised, was a thinly veiled threat.

“My thanks,” Hugh replied, inwardly thinking that he would find a position for the lad in Falconbridge House after the wedding. Loyal staff were difficult to come by.

Hugh pushed open the parlour room door and stepped inside its dim recesses. The fire was low in the grate and only two of the sconces upon the wall were lighted.

“Do you always conduct yourself with such ill-grace, or do you save your bad manners for my pleasure alone?”

Miss Mosely, who had been standing at the fireplace, turned to offer him a fiery glare to accompany her sharp words, as the door clicked shut behind him.

“On the contrary, I am consumed by thoughts of how I might please you. It keeps me awake all night, in fact,” Hugh answered glibly, with a truthful ease.

His words took a moment to sink in and he was gratified to note, even in the dimness of the room, Miss Mosely’s blush.

“Might I ask what you are doing here, your grace?” she asked, with deliberate care. As she spoke, she drew the wool shawl she wore around her shoulders closer to her body, perhaps unconsciously thinking it might protect her from him. A fool’s errand, Hugh thought, for nothing would protect her from his raging desire for her if he decided to give into it, not even that woolen monstrosity.

“I might ask you the same question, Anna,” Hugh replied, arching a brow in response to her mutinous glare. “We had an agreement, did we not? You were to be seen with me, out in public, to help quell any scandalous gossip about our engagement. Why did you not attend the Colridge’s ball?”

“I had a migraine,” she answered, tilting her chin defiantly.

“You also have two servants,” Hugh reasoned, his voice tight, “You should have had one of them deliver me a message to say that you would not be attending.”

“Is your pride wounded, your grace?”

There was a slight bitterness to her tone, that made Hugh carefully consider his response. Was he in a position to complain about his bruised pride, when hers was still grievously wounded from learning just how little she meant to her father?

“My pride has taken many a battering,” Hugh waved away her concern with a gloved hand, “Do not concern yourself with that.”

The none-too-discreet roll of Miss Mosley’s eyes let Hugh know that she was not at all concerned by his suffering.

“We had an agreement,” Hugh continued, determined to finish his piece before Miss Mosley tried what remained of his patience, “Which you reneged upon.”

“I did, your Grace,” she agreed, with surprising alacrity, “I suppose this means that you no longer wish to marry me?”

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Hugh gave a slow, amused smile in reply.

“No, Miss Mosley,” he answered, suppressing a note of triumph, “It means that I no longer see the need for a lengthy courtship to quell gossip around our betrothal. Your failure to appear at tonight’s ball only added fat to the fire, I don’t see how a long engagement would extinguish the scandal now.”

“So, you..?” Miss Mosley trailed off, her expression uncertain. She looked at him in the way that Hugh imagined a mouse might look at a cat before it pounced.

“So I,” Hugh finished for her, “Will be here before noon with a vicar and a ring. Have your belongings packed, Miss Mosley, tomorrow night you will be sleeping under my roof.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DUKE OFFalconbridge had only left the room, when the door was thrown open again to reveal Lady Limehouse. Her fur lined cape was thrown haphazardly over her evening gown, which led Anna to guess that she had chased the duke from the Coleridge’s ball.

“My dear,” the viscountess gushed, as she hurried toward Anna, “Are you alright? Did Falconbridge - did he - did he...harm you in anyway?”

Anna shook her head in reply; dark cad though he was, the duke had not strayed past the bounds of propriety.

“What did he say?” Lady Limehouse continued, as she placed her hand on Anna’s arm and guided her toward the settee.

“He said that had I reneged upon our agreement.”

Lady Limehouse inhaled sharply at Anna’s flat answer.

“You mean he no longer wishes to marry you?” she fretted, her brow creased, “Why, this is a sure disaster-”

“No, he still wishes to marry me,” Anna interrupted, struggling to quell her quivering bottom lip, “Only now he sees no advantage in a long engagement - he wishes us to wed tomorrow!”

Anna’s outraged tone was not met with the response for which she had hoped; instead of sharing her indignation, Lady Limehouse let out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank heaven for that,” the viscountess said, as she retrieved a fan from her reticule to cool herself.

Anna scrunched her nose in confusion, unable to comprehend Lady Limehouse’s response to her dreadful news. The viscountess caught sight of her confused expression and offered her a smile of condolence.

“I know that you do not wish to marry Falconbridge, Anna,” she said, reaching out to take Anna’s hand, “But now you must.”

“Because my father sold my hand at a card game?” Anna questioned, trying to keep the mutiny she felt from her voice. “I can live with the shame of that; heaven knows that I have lived with worse, thanks to father.”

Lady Limehouse's grip on Anna's hand became tighter and the older woman's eyes welled with sympathy. Anna, ashamed of her outburst, dropped her gaze to her lap.

"How I wish that I had known just how much you suffered, Anna," Lady Limehouse replied, a slight catch in her voice, "I would have pushed harder for your father to allow you spend time with me."

She trailed off for a moment, lost in regret. Guilt stirred in Anna's belly; she was not the viscountess' responsibility. They were not even blood relations.

Anna made to reassure Lady Limehouse, but before she could, she was silenced with a wave of a silk-gloved hand.

"No," Lady Limehouse said firmly, "Let me say my piece. You must marry Falconbridge in the morning Anna, not just because your father promised your hand to him, but because by receiving the duke here tonight, whilst alone, you are now compromised."

"C—c-compromised?" Anna stammered, aghast at the very suggestion, "My lady, you know well that nothing happened between the duke and I."

"I do," Lady Limehouse answered, evenly, "But the ton will not see matters in the same light. I have no doubt that Falconbridge was observed arriving in his ostentatious carriage. Tongues will begin to wag and by morning your reputation will be sullied beyond repair. Unless -"

"Unless I marry the duke," Anna finished for her.

A wave of despair hit her, so fierce that she felt winded. She closed her eyes against the panic which welled in her chest, determined not to cry.

Lady Limehouse took her hand again, her grip steady and reassuring.

“I knew your mama well,” the viscountess said, her voice as stiff as her posture, “I am not fond of expressing sentimental notions, but I do believe that such an advantageous marriage is what your mama would have wanted for you, Anna. She would not have liked to think of you living with your father, with your future souncertain.”

A tactful way to describe life with papa, Anna thought, allowing herself a moment to be amused. For a moment, she imagined what it would be like, to wake up in the morning and not have to worry about debts, unpaid bills, or if papa had gambled away the servants’ wages.

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As enticing a dream as that was, it was overshadowed by the thought that she would also wake up each morning next to the Duke of Falconbridge.

“Tomorrow night, you will be sleeping under my roof.”

Anna shivered a little, as she recalled the satisfaction with which the duke had spoken those words. He had not overtly implied it, but the dark glint in his eye and the cruel curl of his lip had suggested that not much sleep would be had.

Lady Limehouse, unable to read minds, interpreted her shiver as a sign of fatigue.

“My dear, you must rest,” she insisted, guiding Anna from her seat to a stand, “I will have a word with the servants and ensure that the house is in order tomorrow for the ceremony.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want the duke pass comment on the dust in the parlour room,” Anna replied, dryly.

“We would not,” Lady Limehouse agreed, refusing to be baited by her sarcasm, “Nor shall he - or his mama, for that matter - find you wanting. Your dress will be fresh, your trousseau packed, and we will offer the guests some form of refreshment.”

The duke was hardly what Anna would class as a “guest”, given that he had forced his way into her life, but she kept this thought to herself.

“I will have one of my footmen scour the local inns for your father,” the viscountess continued, as she led Anna toward the hall, “It is only right that he is here too.”

Again, Anna kept her thoughts on this matter to herself. There was plenty that she wished to say about her father, but all of the fight had left her body and she felt almost weak.

“The servants,” she whispered to the viscountess, as they reached the door, “Can you get word to the duke that I shall not agree to anything, unless I can bring them with me?”

“Of course,” Lady Limehouse assured her, “Leave everything to me.”

Though it went against her nature, having been the person who for so long fixed every problem that arose in the household, Anna ceded to Lady Limehouse’s command. There was a comfort in having someone else take care of matters, she conceded, as she walked past a pale-faced Josie to the staircase.

She floated up the runners in a daze to her bed chamber, where she undressed and donned her nightgown. To her surprise, the moment she crawled into bed she had to struggle against the heaviness of her eyelids.

Perhaps it is the shock, she thought, as she drifted off to sleep. A deep sleep, which was filled with images of the Duke of Falconbridge, some frightening, some strange, and some which thrilled her to her deepest core.

The closest Anna had ever come to marriage in her short life, was a few years prior when a solicitor from Whitby had taken to calling on her, after they had shared a dance at the local assembly rooms. The solicitor’s attentions had been fleeting, coming to an abrupt end at the same time that Lord Mosley lost one-hundred acres of land to a farmer whilst playing cards in the local inn.

Although Anna was initially hurt, she did not begrudge Mr William Dalton for deciding that taking her hand in marriage might prove an act more expensive than its

worth. If she were a man, she would probably have made the same choice to stay as far as possible from a profligate gambler like Lord Mosley.

As the experience with Mr Dalton took up the entirety of her romantic history, Anna had never bothered herself with daydreams of weddings or husbands. In fact, she had never once imagined what her wedding morning would look like, for it had seemed a fool's errand to daydream about such things.

If she had imagined it however, she was certain that she might have imagined something happier than the morning she had spent.

From the moment she awoke, she had been haunted by the sound of the pendulum ticking in the longcase clock in the hallway, counting down her last hours of freedom. Josie had tried her best to keep up a constant stream of chatter, as she assisted Anna with her toilette. When the time came to dress, however, even Josie's indefatigable cheer wavered.

"Nothing's ever as bad as you imagine," the lady's maid assured, as she buttoned up the last of the pearl closings on the gown Anna was to wear.

Hardly the bracing words a bride expected on the morning of her wedding, Anna thought wryly, as she observed herself in the mirror.

The gown was a simple white, morning dress of white lace over a pink satin petticoat. The bodice was lightly embroidered with pearls and every time Anna caught sight of them, she thought of the old nursery rhyme.

"Marry in pearl, your life will be a whirl," she said aloud to Josie, who clucked in response.

"Better than red," the lady's maid answered, as she set about pinning up Anna's hair,

“Marry in red, you’ll wish yourself dead.”

“Were there no crimson gowns amongst the pile to choose from?” Anna asked dryly, her words earning her a thwack from the hairbrush in Josie’s hand.

“Things aren’t that bad, Miss Anna,” Josie admonished, “His Grace seems intent on looking after you properly.”

As opposed to father, who did not look after her at all, Anna thought, finishing in her head that which Josie was too polite to say aloud.

“And he’s handsome,” Josie added wickedly, when she did not reply.

“If you like that sort of thing in a man.”

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“Tall, dark, and unfathomably rich, you mean?” Josie chuckled, “I don’t think I’d object—though I wouldn’t have the energy in me, for one so young as he.”

Anna blushed, which caused Josie to exclaim in despair.

“Oh, don’t look so frightened my dear,” she whispered, pulling Anna into a brief hug. “It won’t be so bad. Not that I’d have any knowledge of it, but men like the duke are said to be very gentle when it comes to those matters.”

Anna almost laughed at the idea of anyone describing the Duke of Falconbridge as a gentle lover. Even a girl as green as she knew of his reputation. Funnier still, she thought as she squeezed Josie hard, was the scene she and her lady’s maid painted. Josie had as much experience in love making as Anna. Her advice on the matrimonial bed was a definite case of the blind leading the blind—right into the wolf’s den.

Josie was prevented from offering any further words of wisdom, as the sound of knocking on the front door indicated that their guests had begun to arrive.

“Lawks! Look at me all teary-eyed, when I haven’t yet finished dressing your hair,” Josie cried.

She sprang into action, neatly pinning the last of Anna’s hair, before pulling a few tendrils free to frame her face.

“Pretty as a picture,” Josie declared, once finished, “Oh, if only your mother was here to see you.”

Josie's tear-stained cheeks quelled the dry retort on the tip of her tongue. If Anna's mother was still alive they wouldn't be here, dressing Anna for a marriage she had been sold into.

"I wonder if father will be here to witness the joyous union?" Anna replied, in a bid to change the subject. Talk of her mother was too painful to bear at the best of times and today was most certainly not the best of times.

Anna's question on her father's whereabouts was soon answered by Lady Limehouse who knocked on the door to alert the pair that it was near time to begin.

"I will escort you down, child," the viscountess said, after declaring Anna the most beautiful bride she had ever seen.

For a moment, Anna refused to meet the viscountess' eye. Shame coursed through her body as she realised the truth; her father had not been found and would miss his only child's wedding.

Lady Limehouse waited nervously, expecting Anna to question Lord Mosley's absence. However, she could not bring herself to do so, for that would be an acknowledgement of the hurt she felt.

"How kind you are, my lady," Anna said brightly, linking her arm through the viscountess'. "Lead the way."

CHAPTER FIVE

HUGH FELT A light pang of regret as he watched Anna walk toward him. Though her expression remained stoic he could tell, from her rigid posture and set jaw, that her father's absence smarted.

Despite enlisting the help of Daniel Shatter—who had connections to every blackguard and knave in London—Hugh had failed to locate Lord Mosley in time for the wedding. Unperturbed, Hugh had thought the baron's absence would further remind Anna that she was safer in his care than her father's. Now, as she walked toward him—her chin held high, her steps measured and deliberate—Hugh realised that his assumption had been incorrect.

As Anna came to meet him at the top of the room, her eyes finally met his. They were shadowed with emotions that pricked his conscience. Resignation, a touch of defiance and something else; sorrow. Carefully contained but unmistakably present.

The triumphant satisfaction Hugh had anticipated feeling at this moment was suddenly complicated by an unwelcome twinge of guilt. This was not how he had imagined claiming his prize.

Marry in haste, repent at leisure, his conscience chided. Though, as Hugh took in Anna's radiant beauty, he hoped that his new bride would allow him a few moments of worship alongside his penitence.

“A-hem.”

The Reverend Potsley—clutching his prayer book in one gnarled hand and a brass ear trumpet in the other—cleared his throat loudly, interrupting Hugh's train of thought. A mercy, for his acute guilt was in danger of turning into aching desire.

“SHALL WE BEGIN?” the reverend boomed at a volume fit to wake the dead. The small gathering winced collectively, and even Anna's composed expression faltered momentarily.

Hugh stifled a sigh of irritation; Potsley was the only curate he'd been able to find at such short notice. He suspected that the ear-shattering acoustics were the reason why

the reverend's diary had been so empty.

"Yes, let's begin," Hugh answered, enunciating every word with equal volume.

"Excellent. Dearly BELOVED!" the rector bellowed, sweeping his arms wide and nearly striking Hugh with his prayer book. "We are GATHERED HERE in the sight of GOD to join this man and woman IN HOLY MATRIMONY!"

The ceremony continued in much the same alarmingly loud manner. As Potsley bellowed the liturgy Hugh sighted, from the corner of his eye, the feathers of his mother's turban shaking—Edwina had already descended into gales of mirth. Hardly an auspicious start to a marriage.

He imagined that Lady Limehouse beside her was less than amused. The viscountess had made clear that while she regarded his title and fortune impressive, she was less than impressed by Hugh himself. Hugh did not blame her for her misgivings; his pursuit of Miss Mosley had been slightly less than proper, but he would endeavour to prove to the viscountess—and to his new bride—that he intended to attend to his husbandly duties with care.

He would honour and protect his new wife until the day he died.

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"NOW TO THE BEST BIT!" Reverend Potsley bellowed, interrupting Hugh's reverie.

He tilted his ear trumpet in Hugh's direction, his bushy eyebrows wagging. "You may REPEAT AFTER ME, Your GRACE!"

Hugh winced at the volume and exchanged a brief glance with Anna, whose lips twitched almost imperceptibly. His eyes met hers, and for a brief moment, something passed between them—a silent acknowledgement that they both recognised the absurdity of the moment. It wasn't much, but Hugh would take it.

"I, Hugh Alexander De Wolfe," Hugh began, raising his voice to a volume typically reserved for after midnight in Boodle's, "Take thee, Anna Catherine Mosley, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part."

A small crash punctuated his final words as the reverend, attempting to shift his position for better hearing, backed into a small occasional table. The vase upon it—filled with a hastily gathered bouquet from the garden—fell to the floor with a crash.

"Apologies," the reverend boomed without a trace of actual contrition. "You can take it from my fee."

Anna's turn came next, and Hugh watched as she straightened her shoulders and spoke her vows with remarkable composure, considering the circumstances.

"WHAT WAS THAT LAST BIT?" Reverend Potsley bellowed, jamming his ear trumpet closer to Anna's face as she reached the final portion of her vows.

"Obey," Anna repeated, slightly louder, a flash of something—possibly rebellion—crossing her features.

"EXCELLENT!" the reverend beamed.

The reverend was not only deaf but possibly blind, for his beatific smile did not waver in the face of Anna's glare. She shot the reverend a look that could curdle milk, and Hugh suppressed a grin at her antics, glad to see the return of her spark.

The exchange of rings followed, during which Hugh slipped a simple gold band onto Anna's finger. As his hand held hers, her eyes widened, and Hugh could only conclude that she was as affected by the brief connection of their skin as he.

"By the power vested in me," Reverend Potsley concluded, his voice sufficiently loud enough to wake the dead, "I now pronounce you MAN and WIFE."

Hugh leaned forward to place a chaste kiss upon his wife's cheek, causing their small audience to burst into applause.

"How wonderful!" his mother cried, jumping from her seat to rush to her new daughter-in-law with the determined air of a general claiming territory. "Welcome to the family, my dear. Unfortunately, my son's impatience means we have not been formally introduced. I am Edwina, Dowager Duchess of Falconbridge. Though I beg you, never refer to me as that, just call me Edwina. 'Dowager Duchess' makes me feel positively decrepit, and I've worked far too hard on this youthful complexion to have it undone by a title."

"Thank you, Your Grace, I mean, Edwina," Anna replied, her smile small but

genuine. It was the first time Hugh had seen her smile that day, and he found himself oddly jealous of his mother.

"Come now," Hugh interrupted, offering his arm to his bride so that she might return her attention to him. "I believe there's a wedding breakfast awaiting us. We must toast our joyous union."

His wife arched a brow at his hyperbole but nonetheless allowed him to lead her from the drawing room to the dining room, where a hastily laid buffet breakfast awaited them.

"Where did all this come from?" Anna whispered, as she glanced at the sideboard. It was heavily laden with bottles of champagne, trays of delicate pastries, fresh fruits, and a selection of savory dishes that Hugh's French chef had conjured despite having thrown what could only be described as a Napoleonic tantrum upon hearing of the rushed nuptials.

"My staff were eager to impress their new mistress and insisted on sending this over," Hugh answered, as he picked up a plate. "Allow me to serve you."

He moved deftly along the buffet table, piling the plate high with delicious nibbles.

"I won't eat all that," Anna said, her brow raised, as Hugh finished the mountain of food off with an iced French fancy.

"You will try," Hugh answered, as he led her to a seat. She was far too thin for his liking; no doubt the stress of caring for her father had taken a toll on her appetite.

"I am not a child your Grace," she answered, as she sat.

Her expression was once again mutinous, and Hugh realised that he would have to

rein in his more high-handed impulses...for now.

“Indeed you are not,” he agreed solicitously, “But you see, you are now both my wife and the new Duchess of Falconbridge. I’m afraid that the title comes with some responsibilities, the most urgent of which is attending to my—our—chef’s artistic temperament. If he hears you left your plate untouched, then we will be eating slop for the next year.”

“Maybe I like slop,” Anna countered, though when she caught sight of Hugh’s quelling glare, she hastily speared a strawberry with her fork.

“Delicious,” she said dryly, as she lifted the berry to her plump lips.

Despite her defiance—or perhaps because of it—Hugh felt a dark stir of desire in the pit of his belly. Anna would not be an easy wife; she would not placate or appease him for the sake of it. They were well suited on that score; easy was not a word anyone had ever used to describe Hugh’s disposition.

"You look beautiful," he spontaneously offered and was pleased to see a hint of colour rise in her cheeks.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied formally.

"Hugh," he corrected firmly.

She did not acknowledge his rectification. Instead, she turned her attention to her plate, slicing a pastry with such vicious satisfaction that Hugh momentarily wondered if he was imagining it was him.

He would have to work harder at winning her over. While Hugh's tastes in the bedroom were a touch broader than most, they did not stretch to masochism or mutilation.

Any further conversation with his wife was halted by the arrival of the other guests at the table. He spent the next half hour in silence as his mother and Lady Limehouse monopolised Anna's attention, chattering about what parties she must attend, shops she should visit, and a whole host of other activities that would keep a new wife busy.

"You look as though you've eaten a lemon dear," his mother commented, as she noted the look of annoyance on his face.

Hugh, who had spent the last half-hour listening to Reverend Potsley chew—at the same volume as he spoke—with one ear and his mother drawing up a busy itinerary for his bride with the other ear, frowned in response.

"I was contemplating on whether my plan to remain in London is fair to my new wife," he answered darkly, "Perhaps we should retire to Kent so that Anna has time to adjust to her new title in privacy. By the sound of it, you and Lady Limehouse

have so many engagements planned that she will not have a moment's rest."

Nor would she have a moment to warm his bed, Hugh thought sullenly. Not if she was galivanting across town every evening with his mother.

To his consternation, his mother did not take his concerns onboard. Instead, she looked rather amused by his words, as though she understood his true motivations.

"We shan't steal her away from you entirely, dear," Edwina replied in a tone meant to placate. "But you were right that it is prudent for you both to remain in London for now. You should be seen in society, attending the right events, presenting yourselves as a happily married couple to counter the scandal of your hasty engagement."

Her last words were delivered with a scowl of disapproval, which both Anna and Lady Limehouse replicated. Recognising that he was outnumbered, Hugh threw up his hands in defeat.

"Alright," he grouched, "I concede defeat. But, you will allow Anna a day or two to rest."

"The Lavery's ball isn't until Wednesday," his mother answered primly, "That should be time enough."

Hugh bristled with annoyance, but before he could offer a sharp retort, Lady Limehouse interrupted.

"Now that's settled," the viscountess said, gently laying their discussion to bed, "We should toast to the happy couple."

The young footman, who had barred Hugh's entry the night before, sprang forward to fill their glasses with champagne. He filled Hugh's glass to the brim, offering him a

conspiratorial smile. Solidarity amongst men, Hugh thought, glad that the footman was at least on his side.

"To the new Duke and Duchess of Falconbridge," Edwina proclaimed, as she lifted her glass in toast. "May your union be blessed with happiness, longevity, and a brace of grandchildren to keep me amused."

Hugh did not miss the slight widening of Anna's eyes at his mother's reference to their future offspring. While she raised her glass with the others, she then took what appeared to be a fortifying gulp rather than a genteel sip of champagne.

"HEAR, HEAR!" the reverend contributed, causing several pieces of fine china to rattle dangerously. "TO MARITAL HARMONY AND FRUITFUL LOINS!"

Lady Limehouse choked discreetly on her champagne.

On that auspicious note, the breakfast ended.

Hugh bid his mother and Lady Limehouse goodbye, then waited patiently for Anna to say her farewells to the household staff. She lingered for an interminable length of time with the maid and the footman, her eyes misty with tears.

"They will follow us to Falconbridge House when your father returns," Hugh assured her, "Josie will follow later with your luggage."

A second carriage had been employed to ferry his wife's belongings to her new home, but as they passed the lone, battered portmanteau in the hallway, Hugh realised that such measures had been unnecessary. His mother was right about one thing; the Duchess of Falconbridge needed to go shopping.

With a final goodbye to their guests, Hugh and Anna departed the house on Berkley

Square for Hugh's St James' residence.

Hugh allowed his hands linger a tad longer than necessary on Anna's waist, as he assisted her into the carriage, then followed her inside.

At last, a moment alone with his prize.

CHAPTER SIX

ANNA SETTLED INTO the plushly appointed interior of the carriage, arranging her skirts with trembling fingers. Falconbridge's hands on her waist had set off a strange warmth, deep inside her, that left her feeling entirely discombobulated.

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Dash that man, she thought darkly; her resolve to remain aloof with her new husband had faltered at the first hurdle. One touch and she was a quivering mess. She could not allow his handsome face to distract her from the hurt he had caused her. The wound of her father's absence still throbbed fresh; what kind of man bet his daughter's hand in marriage, then didn't even have the decency to see her wed?

Anna did not have time to nurse her hurt, for the duke slid into the compartment beside her, his imposing frame making the carriage feel suddenly smaller. Another mark against him, she thought irrationally; he was inconsiderately large.

"Comfortable?" Falconbridge enquired with what sounded like genuine concern.

"Quite," Anna replied, primly.

She would not let him see how unsettled she felt. The expensively outfitted carriage was comfortable, but also a reminder of how drastically her circumstances had changed in a matter of hours. She was now the Duchess of Falconbridge. She had married a man she barely knew...

The carriage lurched forward, and Anna instinctively gripped the seat. Through the window, she watched as Berkeley Square receded from view. Though she held no attachment to the house, it felt strangely like watching her old life disappear before her very eyes.

"It's not far to St. James' Square," the duke offered. "A quarter hour at most."

Anna nodded, uncertain how to respond. How was she supposed to pass fifteen

minutes alone in this small space with a stranger?

"The staff will have prepared your room," Falconbridge continued, filling the silence.

"You'll have your own chambers, of course, adjoining mine."

The implication of his words hung in the air between them. Anna felt heat rise to her cheeks despite her determination to remain composed.

"How kind," she managed, fixing her gaze on the passing scenery rather than meeting his eyes.

"Anna." Her name on his lips compelled her to look at him. His expression was gentle, but there was a steely determination in his blue eyes. "I know this is not the marriage you would have chosen for yourself."

An understatement if ever there was one.

"How astute you are, your Grace," she replied, her voice cooler than she intended.

"Few women dream of weddings where their father is..."

She paused, unable to say the words. Missing presumed drunk? Gambling away what was left of his estate? Perhaps lying dead in the gutters of St. Giles?

"Hugh," he corrected for the second time that day, his voice tight. "I am sorry, Anna, your father wasn't there, but I did what I thought best. Lord Mosley's complete disregard for your safety necessitated a hasty wedding. And it was you who broke our agreement. If you recall, I had allowed for a long engagement but you reneged on our deal."

"How magnanimous you sound, allowing us a lengthy engagement," she replied, turning to face him fully, "Though you conveniently left out the part where you made

our getting married a unilateral decision."

Falconbridge's jaw tightened. "You are safer in my care than in your father's."

There it was again, Anna thought with irritation, that high-handed belief that he knew what was best for her. Rather than argue with him—for she sensed the duke was not a man to back down easily—Anna folded her arms across her chest and directed her gaze outside.

"Anna," Falconbridge called her name, refusing to be ignored. She turned to look at him, hoping that he might see the contempt in her eyes.

"Our union may be unorthodox," he continued, unabashed by her glare. "But I see no reason why it cannot evolve into something more... mutually satisfying."

The way his gaze dipped to her body left no doubt as to his meaning. Anna felt a strange flutter in her stomach that had nothing to do with the carriage's movement.

"You presume much about my willingness to be satisfied," she replied, surprising herself with her boldness.

A slow smile spread across the duke's face, transforming his aristocratic mien into something almost boyish.

"On the contrary," he murmured, leaning in so she was cornered by him, "I presume nothing. But I look forward to discovering what might bring you satisfaction, should you allow me."

Anna turned away, flustered by the heat that unfurled within her at his words. She would never manage to keep the duke at arm's length, when his every word stirred desire.

Dash him to hell, she thought again.

“And what else is expected of me?” she queried sharply. “Do you require heirs, your Grace? Will one spare suffice, or do you wish for two? I’m afraid that you may later regret your choice of a bride; my father’s side has an unfortunate habit of breeding daughters.”

“If an heir had been my only concern when picking a bride, I would have gotten married years ago,” Falconbridge replied, his tone mild but his eyes dangerous.

"To someone more biddable, perhaps?" Anna suggested, arching a brow.

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"I am surrounded by people who wish to do my bidding," he countered, leaning slightly closer. His scent of sandalwood and leather enveloped her. "I find your spirit refreshing, Anna."

Her breath caught as his knee brushed against hers. She shifted away, pretending to adjust her skirts.

"I can assure you that will soon fade, your Grace," Anna retorted, dryly.

The carriage turned onto St James' Square, ending their sparring match. Anna stilled as she peered out of the window at the line of imposing homes which housed the upper echelons of London society.

Which now included her, she realised with a shock. Anna's breath caught as the carriage slowed before an imposing Georgian town house. Three stories of white Portland stone gleamed in the late morning sun, its façade punctuated by tall windows and crowned with an iron balustrade.

"This is it?" she asked faintly.

"Your new home," Falconbridge confirmed, taking her gloved hand in his much larger one. "At least when we're in London, but now is not the time to discuss our other estates."

The carriage drew to a halt, and a footman immediately opened the door. The duke descended first, turning to assist her down.

As her feet touched the ground, Anna lifted her gaze to take in the full grandeur of Falconbridge House. This was her home now. This imposing stranger was her husband. For the second time in her life, a strange dizziness overcame Anna, and she realised she might faint.

Before her knees had a chance to buckle, the duke swept her up into his arms and carried her up the steps and over the threshold of her new home.

Anna gasped, her hands instinctively flying to his shoulders for stability. The solid warmth of his body against hers sent her pulse racing traitorously.

"Put me down at once!" she whispered, mortified by the impropriety of being carried like some conquest. Her protest fell on deaf ears as the duke strode through the entrance of Falconbridge House with her securely in his embrace.

"Forgive me," he murmured, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "But you looked as though you might swoon. I couldn't have my new bride sprawled across the floor on her first day. It would lend credence to the rumour that I obtained you in a less than proper manner."

"I have never swooned in my life," Anna retorted before adding. "And you did come obtain me by dubious means, or have you forgotten already?"

Her words fell on deaf ears. The duke did not release her from his grasp until they were well inside the entrance hall, where a line of servants stood waiting. Anna fought to regain her composure as he gently set her on her feet, distracted by his hand which lingered at the small of her back.

"Your Grace," an elderly man in impeccable livery stepped forward. "We are honoured to welcome Her Grace to Falconbridge House and wish you both the heartiest of congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you, Wilkins," the duke replied, before gesturing to Anna, "May I present my wife, Anna, Duchess of Falconbridge."

Anna felt a dozen sets of eyes upon her. Though the servants maintained perfect decorum, she could sense their curiosity at this unexpected, hastily acquired duchess who had arrived with nothing but the clothes on her back.

"A pleasure to meet you all," she said, lifting her chin a fraction higher. She might not have chosen this role, but she would not be cowed by it.

"Her Grace will require tea in the blue drawing-room," the duke continued. "And perhaps some food. It has been a rather eventful morning."

"Actually, dear," Anna interjected, applying a false sweetness to her tone, "I will take tea in my room. As you said, it has been an eventful morning, and I wish to rest."

The servants stilled as they waited for the duke's reaction. They had never, Anna realised with amusement, seen anyone contradict his wishes before.

"I prefer my tea strong," Anna continued before Falconbridge had a chance to upend her escape. "Can anyone show me to my room?"

"Yes, your Grace," a young maid squeaked, as she stepped forward. "I can show you."

"Thank you," Anna inclined her head graciously.

With a nod to her husband, who looked rather stupefied by the turn of events, Anna followed the maid up the sweeping staircase to her room and away from the stranger who was now her husband.

Anna was not hiding, per se, she was simply exercising her right to remain in her room until she awoke from the strange fever dream she had found herself in.

A maid had knocked earlier to say that dinner was served and had almost managed to remain impassive when Anna had replied that she would not be attending. Since then, Anna had paced the Axminster carpet before the fireplace, regretting both the events that had led her here and her impulsive decision to refuse to dine with Falconbridge.

Her stomach rumbled in protest, reminding her that she had eaten very little at the wedding breakfast and nothing since. Pride prevented her from ringing for a tray, though she suspected the duke would send one up regardless. He seemed determined to fatten her up, as though she were some half-starved waif he'd rescued from the streets.

A soft knock interrupted her brooding thoughts.

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"Come in," she called, expecting a servant with the aforementioned tray.

Instead, Josie appeared, pink-cheeked and bright-eyed from her journey, carrying Anna's portmanteau—which looked even more battered in its new opulent surroundings.

"Josie!" Anna exclaimed, happy to see a familiar face. "I did not know you had arrived."

"Just this moment, miss. I mean, your Grace," Josie said, the new title sounding strange to Anna's ear. "Lud! I can't believe this is your new home. You're likely to get lost on the way to breakfast, it's that big."

Anna felt her anxiety lift, as Josie continued speaking in her familiar, cheerful patter. The lady's maid exclaimed over the furniture, the drapes, and even the carpet, as she busied herself unpacking Anna's bag. It was comforting to have such a familiar figure, in such unfamiliar surroundings.

"Now," Josie sighed, as she came to the end of her task, "Lady Limehouse insisted on sending a few additional items, suitable for a new bride. Her words, not mine!"

"What has she sent?" Anna asked, curiously.

Josie's cheeks turned pink as she fished in the bag to extract Lady Limehouse's gift. From its depths, she extracted a silk nightgown, which she laid out on the bed. Anna gasped at the garment; it was crafted of almost transparent silk, with delicate lace panels strategically placed to preserve its wearer's modesty—barely.

"Lady Limehouse said it was from Paris," Josie explained apologetically. "She insisted every new bride should have something... special."

"Special?" Anna echoed faintly. "Is that what the French call it?"

"Shall I put it away, Your Grace?" Josie asked anxiously, eyeing the nightgown warily as though it might bite.

Before Anna could answer, another knock sounded at the door. At her acknowledgment, the maid who had shown her to her room earlier, entered carrying a tray.

"His Grace sent this up, Your Grace," she explained, setting the tray on a small table near the fireplace. "Since you declined to join him for dinner."

"Thank you," Anna replied, uncomfortable that her cowardice had been revealed to Josie.

The maid moved to stoke the fire—a rather futile act, for it was already blazing—before bobbing a curtsy and departing.

As the door clicked shut behind her, Josie turned to Anna, her gaze anxious.

"I know His Grace is rather fearsome," Josie began, her expression one of worry, "But you cannot hide away in your room for the entirety of your marriage."

"That sounds like a challenge," Anna answered, archly.

Josie's face fell and Anna felt a rush of guilt; it was unfair of her to be so short with her only friend in the world.

“Forgive me,” Anna relented, “I did not mean to be so flippant. I am not hiding from His Grace. I was simply overcome with tiredness. It has been a very long day.”

“Indeed’ in it has, miss,” Josie agreed, as she stifled a yawn, “My trotters are aching from it all.”

“Then you must go to bed,” Anna said firmly, waving a hand to silence Josie’s protest. “No, you cannot argue with me, Josie. I’m a duchess now, after all.”

Josie made a few feeble attempts at protesting further, but she quickly relented to Anna’s wishes.

“I’ll be back in the morning to help you dress,” she assured Anna, before departing for her new lodgings with a loud yawn.

Once Josie had gone, Anna settled herself by the fire and fell upon the plate of food the duke had sent. Falconbridge might be overbearing and high-handed, but Anna could not fault the duke’s concern for her stomach.

When her plate was empty, Anna rang for the maid to remove it and bring hot water for her toilette.

As the maid bustled about, filling the copper hip bath with steaming water and laying out scented soaps, Anna cast furtive glances at the scandalous nightgown still spread across the bed. Would the duke expect to exercise his marital rights tonight? The question had lurked at the edges of her mind all day, growing more insistent as night approached.

"Will there be anything else, Your Grace?" the maid asked when finished.

Anna shook her head, forcing a smile. "No, thank you. I can manage from here."

The bath, at least, provided temporary comfort from her worrying mind. Anna sank into the warm water, allowing the heat to seep into her tense muscles. As she washed away the remnants of the day, her thoughts returned to the duke. Despite her determination to remain aloof, she couldn't deny the strange fluttering in her stomach whenever he was near. Unbidden memories of the kiss they had shared stirred her belly. What would it be like, she wondered, to allow him to kiss her again? To allow him to take full liberties with her body?

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Despite the still-warm water, Anna decided she'd had enough of her bath. The luxuriously scented bath oils were clearly having a poor effect on her modesty if she was daydreaming of willingly handing her body over to Falconbridge.

Once clean and dried, Anna stood before the bed, contemplating her nightwear options. Her own modest night-rail, well-worn but comfortingly familiar, lay beside Lady Limehouse's scandalous creation.

Opting for familiarity, Anna slipped the old nightdress over her head. Her reflection, when she caught sight of it in the mirror, was reassuringly nun-like.

Let him get aroused by that, she sniffed, as she searched for her hairbrush.

She was brushing her hair when she heard it—a soft knock at the door connecting her chambers to the duke's. Anna's heart leapt into her throat, her fingers freezing mid-stroke.

"Come in," she called, proud that her voice did not betray her nerves.

The door opened to reveal Falconbridge, still fully dressed save for his coat and cravat. His white shirt was open at the throat and rolled at the sleeves, revealing a tantalising glimpse of tanned skin and muscular forearms. He leaned against the doorframe, his gaze sweeping over her. He did not speak immediately, but the way his eyes darkened as they took in her simple nightdress made Anna's breath catch.

"You missed dinner," he said at last, his voice even but edged with something sharper.

“I wasn’t hungry,” she replied, hoping that he had not asked the maid if she had finished the tray he’d sent up.

His jaw tightened, and he stepped inside, shutting the door behind him with deliberate softness.

“I have few rules, Anna,” he began, his voice low, “But you will dine with me when we are home together. Is that clear?”

“I am not a child,” Anna snapped in response to his high-handed dictum.

“Then stop acting like one,” he countered, taking another step forward, his presence filling the room.

Anna could not look away from him; he radiated masculinity, power, and promise—another blow to her shaky resolve.

The duke’s gaze flickered from her face, taking in her nightdress properly for the first time.

“Get thee to a nunnery,” he quoted, with a quirk of his dark brow.

Anna stiffened. “If you’re disappointed that I’m not dressed as a harlot, then I’m afraid you picked the wrong bride.”

Falconbridge gave a wicked grin, stepping so close that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

“Disappointed? No, my dear. I find your modesty enchanting.”

His fingers brushed the high collar of her nightdress, just the ghost of a touch, but it

sent a shiver through her.

Anna knew that she should step away from him. That she should slap his hand aside and remind him that he had bought her hand, not her body. But she didn't.

Instead, she held her ground, heart pounding as he traced the delicate line of lace at her throat.

"How sweet you look," he murmured, "But there's a fire beneath your angelic surface that says you desire this as much as I."

Anna's breath hitched, galled that her yearning for him was so obvious.

"You are insufferable."

"I've been called worse."

Anna stilled as the duke's fingers ascended the sensitive slope of her neck, lingering at her pulse, which quickened beneath his touch. He cupped her chin in one big hand and brushed his thumb across her lips, his eyes watching for her reaction.

Driven by a strange fire, Anna's gaze locked with his and she parted her lips to take his thumb between them. She felt the warmth of his skin against her tongue, tasting him as her lips closed around the digit.

The duke froze, curious as to her next move, and she took great delight in nipping down sharply on his flesh.

Falconbridge drew a sharp breath, but instead of pulling away, a slow smile spread across his features, his eyes dark with evident pleasure at her boldness.

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"So there is a wildcat beneath that nun's garb ," he whispered, his voice thick with admiration as he stroked her lips with his now-wet thumb. "I suspected as much."

In one swift move, he reached out to pull her against his body. His other hand moved from her mouth to the back of her neck, fingers threading through her hair, so that she was caught entirely.

His lips came crashing down upon hers, claiming her in a kiss that was unrelenting in its demands. His hands roved her body, climbing from her hips, to her waist, right up to her breasts, which—Anna realised with shock—were screaming for his touch.

He gave a growl of approval as he found her nipples erect beneath the cotton of her nightdress. Anna in turn whimpered with longing, as his fingers rolled and teased the sensitive peaks through the thin fabric. Between her legs began to ache with need as he teased her nipples, and Anna arched against his body seeking release.

He pulled her against him sharply so that she could feel his male hardness pressing against her and then, to her despair, he released her.

"You're not the only one who can tease," he said with a rakish smile, as he lifted her hand to his lips.

She blinked in confusion as her husband placed a chaste kiss upon the back of her hand and bid her goodnight.

"Sleep well, Anna," Falconbridge said, before turning and departing for his chambers.

She waited a few moments to be sure he was gone before throwing herself onto her bed. Her body screamed for satisfaction; she felt bereft, deprived of a release she had not known she'd needed until she'd felt his touch.

Dash that man, she thought darkly, as she settled herself under the covers. The Duke of Falconbridge was not going to allow her an easy marriage.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HIS NEW WIFE would be his undoing; Hugh was certain of it.

From the moment she had nipped his thumb in quiet rebellion, Hugh's resolve to take things slowly with Anna had crumbled to dust.

His conscience was the only reason his wife's maidenhead currently remained intact. As he had pulled her against his body, a quiet voice had urged him to stop. That same voice told him that it would be caddish to pluck her virginity in one fell swoop, when she had already given so much of herself to him. Much to Hugh's surprise, he had listened.

Anna had given him her hand; despite her doubts, a part of her trusted him. Hugh was rather surprised to learn that her trust meant a great deal to him.

It had taken all of Hugh's willpower to release his wife from his grip and return to his chambers, but he had. Which is why he found himself now, pacing the floor so furiously that he was certain to wear a hole in the carpet.

"To hell with this," he muttered aloud as he realised that sleep would not soon come.

He needed something to distract himself from his aching need for the woman next door, and what better distraction than the card table?

In just a few minutes, Hugh was dressed and inside his carriage, travelling to Pickering Place. As the vehicle made the short journey from St James' Square, Hugh's mind replayed the image of his wife taking his thumb in her mouth. He closed his eyes as he imagined her sensual lips wrapped around another part of his body and to his shame, he realised that his cock was once again straining painfully against his breeches.

He'd need an entire bottle of brandy to render him temporarily impotent if Anna was to remain a virgin until dawn, he thought dourly.

His carriage left him at the alleyway beside Berry Bros. & Rudd, Wine Merchants, that led to Pickering Place. Gas lamps cast eerie, flickering shadows along the damp walls, while the distant sounds of raucous laughter and heated arguments grew louder with each step he took toward the notorious square.

Hugh made for The Bird's Nest, idly reminiscing on his last visit. He'd thought he had won a wife that night, but he now realised that it would take more than a good hand of cards to truly win Anna.

"Your Grace, what a surprise."

Daniel Shatter materialised at Hugh's side a few seconds after he arrived. He motioned to someone out of sight, and a few moments later, Hugh was handed a glass of the finest brandy one could smuggle over the Channel.

"My congratulations on your marriage," Shatter said, lifting his glass in toast.

If the proprietor of the gaming hell found it odd that Hugh wasn't spending his wedding night with his wife, he gave no indication. Then again, discretion was Shatter's specialty; he hadn't commented nearly a decade earlier, either, when Hugh had decided to mourn his brother by haunting the very hells that had destroyed him.

“There is still no sign of Mosley,” Shatter continued, once they had both drunk to Hugh’s marriage. “If I hear anything, I’ll send word.”

“My thanks,” Hugh nodded gravely, as though this were the true purpose of his visit—though in truth, he hadn’t given a second thought to Lord Mosley all day. The man did not deserve a moment of anyone’s concern, in Hugh’s opinion.

“A few young bloods are in the Egyptian Room, if His Grace feels like indulging,” Shatter added, all business now that the social niceties were complete.

“Perhaps I’ll relieve them of their allowances,” Hugh answered. It was only polite for him to play a few hands, given Shatter’s assistance over the past few days.

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Hugh made his way to the Egyptian Room, so called because of its papyrus wall-hangings and the enormous sphinx statues which stood sentinel-like on either side of the fireplace. Golden sconces cast a warm glow across the emeraldbaize-covered table, illuminating the faces of the men playing.

Hugh recognised Lord Beaufort's face at once, though Bartie—who held no cards—had quite obviously folded early.

“Your Grace,” he said with a grin, as Hugh took the seat beside him, “I was just about to give up on the night.”

“Not winning?”

“I never do,” Bartie answered with a grin, “But usually there's a bit of entertainment to be had. Frightfully dull this lot, they're taking it all very seriously.”

This last remark was delivered in a whispered aside. At the centre of the table was a rather large pot of coins and promissory notes. The young men all wore looks of intense concentration and Hugh guessed that several had staked their quarterly allowances.

“Is that the younger Lord Lewisham?” Hugh queried of Bartie, with a discreet nod to a lad with limp hair and a florid complexion.

“It is,” Bartie confirmed, “He doesn't look too upset about Graystone's condition.”

The Duke of Graystone had recently suffered terrible injuries after losing control of

his phaeton. The accident was both tragic and peculiar, given Graystone's young age and his reputation as a remarkable whip. At only four-and-thirty years, Graystone was unmarried and had no male issue, so Hugh's old friend from Eton, Lord Nathaniel Lewisham, had been called back from serving with Wellington's army, to assume the title once his brother passed.

"I'm glad it's Nate who will inherit," Hugh commented as he watched the younger Lord Lewisham throw his cards down petulantly on the table as he lost the hand. "I couldn't imagine that Tulip carrying the line."

"Poor Graystone, an awful tragedy," Beaufort sighed. "But Lord Lewisham is lucky to have a friend to advise him on the trials of unexpectedly inheriting a title,."

Hugh stiffened at the mention of Jack; his brother's death was a wound he did not often examine. Yet, since he had met Anna, Jack's ghost seemed ever present.

"Lewisham will be fine," Hugh answered, brushing the topic aside. Though, inwardly, he felt a stab of pain on his friend's behalf; to lose a brother was to lose a piece of oneself. At least for Lewisham the sense of guilt might be less, he thought, somewhat bitterly. Fewer sleepless nights, fewer what ifs. An accidental death was so much easier to mourn than...

"Gravesend is onto a winner," Beaufort commented as the game came to its conclusion.

A young lord, fresh down from Oxford at Hugh's guess, gave a whoop of delight as he revealed the winning hand. His face was familiar and Hugh realised, with a start, that he had been present on the night that he won Anna's hand. He observed as, with a greedy smile Gravesend reached out and pulled the sizable pot toward him, leering at his fellow players.

“Nobody likes a popinjay,” Bartie said, in response to the young lad’s gloating. He waved down the footman to fetch another drink and gave Hugh a roguish smile. “The chap has been winning all evening, it would be highly entertaining if someone was to take the wind out of his sails.”

“I’m not a court jester, Beaufort,” Hugh countered, though when the dealer called for the next game, Hugh signalled his intention to join. There was nothing like a game of cards to distract from one’s memories.

As usual, Hugh allowed himself to lose the first few rounds. Loo was a game of both chance and skill—observation of one’s opponents being the oft-overlooked key to success. Hugh was patient, biding his time and carefully noting not just the patterns in his opponents’ play but their temperaments too. As half of the young bloods were deep in their cups, it was quite easy to tell when they had been dealt a good hand.

Gravesend, however, was a little more difficult to discern. Hugh quickly realised that the young buck was not as drunk as his companions, though he made a great show of brandishing his brandy glass.

They were on their third round, when Hugh noted it—a discreet glance between Gravesend and the dealer, whose hands trembled ever so slightly as he manipulated the deck with practiced precision. Hugh observed carefully as the cards were dealt and hid a smile as he noted Gravesend—with a quick slight of hand—slip one of the cards beneath the table.

The impertinent upstart was cheating!

Hugh allowed the game to carry on. Bartie, who bet small and folded early, was out first, followed by several other players, until only Hugh, Lord Lewisham, and Lord Gravesend were left. Hugh’s attention sharpened as the final trick drew near, watching Lord Gravesend with quiet intensity. The young blood’s eyes were alight

with avarice, a sight Hugh had seen countless times at the tables.

“What say I stake my estate in Dorset, your Grace, will you match me?” Gravesend called, as Lewisham finally folded.

“I could match your bet ten times over, boy,” Hugh answered coolly as he pushed back his chair, “But I cannot match your luck—though I don’t know if I’d call concealing cards luck. Cheating is rather more correct, don’t you think?”

In three quick strides, Hugh circled the table to Gravesend and pushed back the young man’s chair to reveal the card on his lap.

"I believe this belongs in the game," Hugh said as he picked up the card, his voice low but unmistakable in its anger. The room fell silent as the coveted Pam landed on the baize, its presence undeniable. Gravesend’s face drained of color, and his hand twitched as though he wished to snatch the Pam back.

"It seems your luck has run out, my lord," Hugh finished, with an arch of his brow.

The room was stunned to silence for a moment, until Gravesend let out a howl of anger and rounded on the dealer.

“You fool,” he shouted, leaping from his seat to confront the young lad, “Idiot! I should never have trusted a lout like you to be discreet.”

Hugh raised a brow in disbelief; there was nothing more cowardly than a man who blamed others for his own misdeeds.

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The dealer paled and cast a terrified look from Gravesend to Hugh, his expression one of a man deliberating on his next move. After a moment, he made up his mind; turning on the heel of his foot and running for the door—knocking over one particularly inebriated chap in his haste.

Gravesend, blindsided by the sudden desertion of his accomplice, blinked in confusion.

“I expect the lad did not wish to stick around to face Shatter’s ire,” Hugh called, taking great satisfaction in the way the young lord’s face paled at the mention of the infamous proprietor. “If you were a wise man—though I have my doubts about that—you’d beat a hasty retreat too. Mr Shatter does not take kindly to those who try to cheat the house.”

Gravesend shot one final venomous glare at Hugh, his pale eyes incandescent with rage.

"You’ve made an enemy, Falconbridge," he hissed through clenched teeth as he yanked the door open with such force that it slammed against the wall. As Gravesend's footsteps echoed down the corridor, Hugh returned to his seat beside Bartie.

“You did say you wanted some light entertainment,” Hugh quipped, to the shocked Lord Beaufort.

“Yes but I’d rather you hadn’t made an enemy in the name of amusing me,” Bartie answered, his eyes worried as he glanced at the door Gravesend had just stormed

through.

“A small addendum to the long list of enemies I have made in my two and thirty years,” Hugh shrugged. His prowess at the card tables had earned him many adversaries; Gravesend was but a child in comparison.

“Gravesend has lost more than money this night,” Bartie warned, uncharacteristically serious in tone, “He’s lost his reputation.”

“His own doing, not mine,” Hugh shrugged again. Exhaustion had washed over him and he was in no mood to humour Bartie’s anxieties.

Lord Beaufort was many things, but he was no fool. Sensing Hugh’s impatience, he gamely changed the subject.

“How goes your engagement to the lovely Miss Mosley?” he queried, “I must say, I am quite invested in your romance, given that it was I who was witness to your being struck by Cupid’s arrow.”

Hugh hid a smile at his friend’s innocent tone; Bartie had no doubt heard that Hugh had been stood-up for the Colridge’s ball and was fishing for information.

“It goes well enough,” Hugh conceded, “We were married this morning.”

Bartie rewarded Hugh’s bald statement by spluttering on the brandy he had just lifted to his lips, so surprised was he by the news.

“You do move quickly,” Bartie grinned, once he had cleaned himself off. “Though—if I may be so impertinent as to say—in your haste, you seem to have forsaken romance, your Grace.”

“In what way?” Hugh frowned.

“You’re spending your wedding night with me,” Bartie answered, with no little exasperation. “And while I am excellent company, I am not your blushing bride. I don’t think she will be overly impressed tomorrow if she learns you spent your first night married in a gaming hell with a brace of drunks and reprobates—present company excluded, of course.”

Though Hugh didn’t want to admit it, Lord Beaufort was entirely correct. He should not have ventured out to Pickering Place, even if his wife’s bed was closed to him. He should have suffered the agony of his longing at home, with stoicism and a bottle of brandy. He had spent too many years as a bachelor, thinking only of his own needs. He had much to learn if he was to win Anna over.

It was just slightly galling to find that Bartie—the perennially single dandy—was a better husband than he.

“No need to thank me,” Bartie waved an airy hand to Hugh’s dark expression, “I just ask that you think of me when you name your first born child.”

“Maybe the second,” Hugh begrudged, as he gathered his things. “Goodnight Beaufort.”

Hugh strode from The Egyptian Room back into the main gaming hall, where he flagged down Shatter to tell him of Gravesend’s tricks.

“Your employee disappeared the moment the ruse was discovered,” Hugh finished, with an apologetic shrug.

“He’ll stay disappeared, if he knows what’s good for him,” Shatter muttered, his brow creased into a deep frown.

Hugh shivered on behalf of the errant employee; Daniel Shatter was not someone any man would want as an enemy. He was known across London for his ruthlessness; many a young buck had learned the hard way not to cross him.

“And Gravesend?” Hugh questioned, not wanting the young dealer to bear the brunt of the blame.

“The young Lord Gravesend will soon find that he’s barred from every establishment from here to the West India Docks,” Shatter shrugged, “And if I meet him down a dark alleyway, he might find all his fingers broken too. My thanks for your help, your Grace.”

With a brusque nod, Hugh took his leave, exiting Pickering Place down the same dark, damp alley, back to St James’ Street and his carriage.

The journey to St. James’ Square was mercifully brief. Once inside Falconbridge House, Hugh climbed the stairs to his bedchamber, boots muffled against the thick carpeted runners. He crossed the room quietly and eased the door open to Anna’s bedchamber. He found her asleep, one hand curled beneath her cheek, moonlight catching the soft curve of her shoulder. She looked impossibly young, impossibly innocent. Hugh stood motionless, watching the gentle rise and fall of her breath, overwhelmed by a sense of protectiveness.

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This woman had joined her life to his. If Hugh wanted to win her heart, he would have to make his life one she would want to share.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANNA WOKE AT the crack of dawn, refreshed after an unexpectedly deep sleep. The fire in the grate was low, but the room retained its heat. She slipped from her warm bed to the window, pulling back the damask curtain to watch the sunrise over St James' Square.

Outside, she saw the first stirrings of life: a lamplighter extinguishing the last flickering street lamps, a sleepy footman in livery hauling a coal scuttle inside, and a maid chattering to a costermonger as he unloaded baskets of fruit and vegetables from his cart.

Anna pressed her fingers to the cold windowpane, absently watching the scene unfold. The predictability of others' routines—the slow rhythm of the square at first light—was oddly comforting. Even more so now that she had woken to a life that no longer felt like her own. Would she, too, find comfort in new habits? Would she ever feel at home in this grand house, in this marriage she had not chosen?

A soft draught curled around her ankles, pulling her from her thoughts. With a small shiver, Anna drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders and turned back toward the fire, grabbing a book that Josie had thought to pack into her portmanteau.

She had intended to lose herself in the familiar pages of Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, in the trials and triumphs of a young woman navigating society. But the words blurred

as she stared at them, her mind circling back to the night before.

To Falconbridge. To their kiss. To the thrilling hardness she had felt when he pressed her against him.

And yet, he had not taken her to bed.

Why?

Heat crept up her neck as she closed the book with a snap, frustrated with herself for ruminating over a man she claimed to despise. She should be grateful for his restraint, should she not? A proper gentleman would give her time to adjust to her new role as a wife. And yet, the memory of his lips against hers, of the restrained power in his touch, made her ache with a longing she barely understood.

Though, she understood well enough, that if Falconbridge had decided to claim his marital rights last night, that she would have surrendered happily to his demands. This knowledge filled her with a sense of shame; what was it about the man that made her forget herself?

A gentle knock at the door interrupted her brooding thoughts. Anna smoothed her nightgown, before calling, "Come in."

The door opened to reveal Josie, bearing a tray of tea and a warm smile.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she said brightly, setting the tray down before moving to stir the dying embers in the hearth. "Oh, I'm glad you're awake so I've someone to talk with. There's that many servants here, you wouldn't believe. I'd imagine that if His Grace was so inclined, he'd never have to lift a hand to scratch his own backside."

“I can’t imagine there’d be many volunteers for that position,” Anna snorted, pulled from her tumultuous thoughts by Josie’s familiar pattering.

“The world is full of strange people,” Josie answered with a mischievous smile. “I’m sure there’d be one. And, mark my words, it would probably be the underbutler, Mr Reeves. As you well know, I’m not one to gossip, but a stranger man I have never met...”

Josie told Anna the gossip she had gleaned at breakfast as she bustled about the bedchamber with practiced efficiency. She laid out one of the day dresses Madame Delacroix had sent over days before, along with stays, a petticoat, and a chemise, before helping Anna change.

“Pretty as a picture for your first full day as a duchess,” Josie declared after she had finished pinning Anna’s hair into a simple knot.

“I expect I’ll have much to do,” Anna ventured, nervously. “Meet with the staff, inspect the house—I’ll have to write to my aunts to tell them the news of the wedding.”

“No hurry on that front, dearie,” Josie assured her. “It might take weeks for a missive to reach Aberdeen; a delay of a day or two won’t make a difference. If you want my advice—not that I’d deign to offer advice to a duchess—the first thing you need to do is to eat a hearty breakfast.”

“I concur,” a deep voice called, startling both Anna and Josie.

She turned to find her husband leaning against the door frame, just as he had last night. Mercifully, this morning, he was fully dressed, his shirt properly buttoned, a cravat at his throat.

“Most people knock, before they enter a room,” Anna snipped, earning herself a shocked pinch from Josie.

“I am not most people,” Falconbridge shrugged, before allowing himself a self-aware grin at his high-handedness. “I pray you will forgive my unannounced interruption. I have been a confirmed bachelor for so long that I have acquired bad habits. You will have to be strict with me, if you wish to bring me to heel.”

Anna resisted rolling her eyes at his silver tongue. Josie however, had turned pink and looked as though she might swoon. Traitor, Anna thought, mutinously.

“You are not a dog for me to train, your Grace,” Anna answered the duke, with a tartness to cancel his sweet.

“Nor am I a stranger to you,” his reply was swift and firm. “I will not tell you again, you will address me as Hugh when we are alone.”

His eyes met hers, holding her gaze in a challenge. Anna was no clairvoyant, but she could see him thinking of their embrace last night. He was correct; they were not strangers.

"Shall we go down to breakfast?" Falconbridge broke the silence first, extending his arm for her to take.

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Anna hesitated for just a moment before placing her hand on his arm. Josie gave her an encouraging nod, and they made their way from the bedroom to the hallway, then down the grand staircase.

Up close, Anna could see that the duke—though immaculately presented—looked tired, with dark circles shadowing the skin beneath his eyes. Perhaps he had spent a sleepless night plagued by his conscience, she thought, pleased by the idea.

The dining room was elegantly appointed, like the rest of the house. Morning sunlight streamed through tall windows, illuminating the polished wooden floors. A sideboard laden with various dishes stood against one wall, bearing enough food to feed Wellington's army. Servants stood discreetly by the wall, ready to serve their new duchess.

"Is breakfast always such a grand affair?" Anna questioned as she took a seat at the table.

"Not usually," the duke admitted, as he sat down opposite her, "I believe the staff are showing off a bit, for your first morning."

"I shall have to tell them to rein in the extravagance," she replied, "I don't usually take breakfast."

"Well, today you will," Falconbridge was firm.

Anna quashed a smart retort as a footman arrived with a cup of steaming hot chocolate for her and a Arabic coffee for the duke. This was followed by plates of

warm crumpets with jam, a dish of eggs and meats, and a platter of cheese and fruit.

Mindful of the temperamental chef in the kitchen, Anna sampled a little from each course, loudly praising each dish.

"You've hardly touched your food," Falconbridge observed, undeceived by her theatrics. "You need to eat, Anna."

"As I said earlier," she replied, defiantly, "I do not usually take breakfast. I'm starting to feel like a pig being fattened for winter. Do you intend to take me to the slaughter house later, is that your grand plan?"

Falconbridge had the good grace to look slightly sheepish at her words.

"Forgive me," he conceded, "I have been told that I can sometimes be a little overbearing."

The understatement of the century, she thought with amusement. Though she was touched by his humility—it almost made him endearing.

"Nonetheless," he said continued, said humility vanishing in an instant. "You'll need your strength. I've planned an outing for today. Shopping for new dresses and baubles, then, if you're amenable, I thought we might attend the theatre later. There's a comedy on at the Theatre Royal."

He laid out the plans casually, as though they were a normal married couple making normal plans for their day. Anna wondered for a moment what it would be like not to fight against him, to just allow him take control.

"I do not think most husbands accompany their wives shopping," she said, managing to sound neutral to his suggestion. An improvement on her prior hostility.

“I am not most husbands,” Falconbridge shrugged, unconcerned that people might find it strange to see a duke in a dress shop.

That was what it was to be so powerful, Anna realised; he could do as he pleased without worry of censure.

“Perhaps I have plans of my own for the day,” she ventured, unable to resist teasing him, for he looked so self-assured.

He quirked a brow, his expression that of a man torn between amusement and annoyance.

“Do you?” he queried.

“I do not,” she answered, her tone light, “Though the next time you make plans for my day, you might consult me on it first.”

“Duly noted, my dear,” his boyish smile causing a lurch of longing in the pit of Anna’s stomach.

Hating Falconbridge would be far easier if he wasn’t so devilishly handsome, she thought as she speared a sausage with her fork. It was going to be a long day.

Anna’s second experience of Madame Delacroix’s was very different from her first. Weeks ago, she had been an unknown country mouse, with a limited budget and was treated as such. Now that she was a duchess, the famed modiste herself attended to her, fawning loudly over her figure, her beauty, and her fortune.

Well, she did not quite say the last part aloud, but Anna could guess.

Her adoration increased anytime Falconbridge, towering in the background,

suggested a preferred material, colour, or style.

“Oui, your Grace,” she exclaimed, when the duke suggested they try bolder colours, “Your wife is too beautiful to fade away in pastels.”

Falconbridge’s eyes traversed her body, from top to toe, and Anna felt a frisson of desire in her belly. There was something strangely erotic about being watched by him as she stood in front of the mirror, scandalously clad in a thin muslin shift.

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His gaze lingered on the curve of her waist, and Anna found herself standing straighter, her breath catching when his eyes met hers in the looking glass. The heat in his stare was almost dangerous, she thought with faint alarm.

She ripped her attention away from him, focusing instead on the task at hand. The sooner she selected her dresses, the sooner she would be safe, bundled back up in her staid walking dress.

Flustered, she said yes to nearly every fashion plate Madame Delacroix showed her. Within an hour, she had ordered almost two dozen gowns, as well as four coats, two riding habits, and a magnificent evening cloak of midnight blue velvet lined with silver fox fur. Falconbridge had completed the order—the cost of which Anna could not even hazard to estimate—by insisting that themodistcreate an original design for his new duchess.

“Something that really shows off her beauty,” the duke drawled, his gaze dropping for a split second to Anna’s breasts, “Nothing too low cut though, I do not like to share.”

Anna blushed, both annoyed and thrilled by his possessiveness. Madame Delacroix fell into raptures, promising to dedicate her every waking moment to the duke’s request.

Themodisteled Falconbridge away to show him some of her sketches, leaving Anna in privacy. She changed quickly back into her walking dress, glad for its thick material and high neck.

She exited the dressing room to find Falconbridge waiting for her on the shop floor, carrying several paper-wrapped parcels.

“Just a few bits that caught my eye,” he said, as he led the way from the shop out to Bond Street. A footman hurriedly relieved the duke of his burden, leaving Falconbridge free to offer Anna his arm.

“What say you to some jewels?” he queried, “Something with sapphires, to match your eyes.”

Anna resisted rolling said eyes; Falconbridge’s generosity was impressive—even touching—but he could not buy her affection.

“I am feeling a little overwhelmed,” she stated, deciding honesty was the best course of action. “I would like to return home; I don’t think I’d survive another hour of shopping.”

“Then home we shall go,” he replied easily, signalling to the footman to open the carriage door.

Inside the lushly appointed compartment, Falconbridge tucked a blanket around her knees, his expression one of concern. It was quite the feat, Anna thought with amusement, that the man could make her feel like a sensual siren one minute, then a dowager aunt the next.

“Really,” she laughed, as he muttered something about sending for a warming brick, “I’m perfectly fine. I am just unaccustomed to spending so much time shopping. Or spending so much money, for that matter.”

“Money is no concern,” Falconbridge waved her comment away with a gloved hand, “Though I am in agreement that the excursion was becoming tiresome.”

“Oh?” Anna raised a brow.

"I had an epiphany of sorts in the dressing room," he said, his voice low. "I realised I would much rather be removing your garments than watching you try on new ones."

“It would be more economical for your purse,” Anna stuttered, her words earning her one brow raised in amusement.

"Are you volunteering to go naked to save my fortune?" he queried, his expression wolfish. "As I said, money is of no concern, but far be it for me to deny your wishes, my dear. Though I must warn you, society might not be as appreciative of your economising as I would be."

His eyes gleamed with mischief as he leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. "Perhaps we might compromise—extravagance in public, and whatever state of undress you prefer in private."

Anna felt heat rise to her cheeks, but found herself unable to look away from his penetrating gaze. What had begun as an attempt to divert from her discomfort with such lavish spending had somehow drawn them into an even more dangerous territory of intimacy.

"You are incorrigible, Your Grace," she managed to whisper, though there was no reproach in her tone.

"Only with you," he countered, pulling her against him, “And did I, or did I not, ask for you to call me by my given name when we are alone? I believe you take some pleasure in vexing me, my dear.”

Anna did not have a chance to protest, for he caught her lips in a searing kiss.

The world outside the carriage melted away, the steady rhythm of the horses' hooves fading beneath the wild hammering of her heart. His hands framed her face with surprising tenderness, contrasting the ferocity of his lips as he deepened the kiss. A shiver of longing coursed through her, as she pressed her breasts against his broad chest. When at last he pulled back, his eyes burned dangerously with barely restrained desire.

"Say it," he commanded, his voice rough with longing, his finger tracing the outline of her swollen lips.

"You're incorrigible, Hugh," she whispered.

He smiled at the sound of his name upon her lips, before once again claiming her mouth as his own.

She would, Anna realised with a pang, say anything he wanted if he could just soothe the aching need he created in her.

Mercifully, the carriage came to a sudden halt, preventing Anna from offering to debase herself in a moving vehicle. She would have been flung across the compartment if it wasn't for the pair of strong arms that held her.

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“We’re home,” the duke observed, with a rueful sigh.

Worried that he might instruct the driver to do another circle of the square, Anna quickly scooted away from him, her hands busy smoothing the fabric of her skirts.

“Thank you for an enjoyable morning,” she parroted, feeling entirely discombobulated.

The duke regarded her with open amusement, one brow arching to acknowledge he saw that her composure was feigned.

“Is that all I get? A polite dismissal after such—” he reached out, catching her gloved hand before she could escape entirely. “—a passionate embrace?”

Anna’s breath hitched, but before she could retort, a footman rapped on the door and swung it open. Cool air rushed in, soothing her heated skin and allowing her a modicum of composure.

“It wasn’t a dismissal, it was a review,” she whispered, feeling bold, “That was most enjoyable, despite the abrupt ending.”

With a mischievous smile to her husband, she slipped her hand free of his and allowed the footman to assist her down.

Hugh quickly followed, taking her arm to escort her inside. He would have followed her up the stairs, she guessed, had she not firmly informed him that she intended to nap.

“I’m sure you have correspondence you must attend to,” she said, refusing to meet his eye.

“Now that sounds like a dismissal,” he observed, sounding both amused and a tad disappointed.

To her surprise, Anna felt a pang of guilt, worried that she had hurt him. She met his gaze, allowing herself, for just that moment, to be vulnerable in front of him.

“It’s just, I really am overwhelmed by it all,” she admitted, her voice at a whisper.

Falconbridge stilled, his eyes thoughtful. For a moment, Anna worried that he would bat her concerns aside, lead her upstairs, and demand his marital rights.

But he did not.

Instead, he nodded silently before offering her a curt bow.

"I am a slave to your happiness," Hugh said softly, as he took her hand and lifted it to his lips. "And I am happy to wait for you."

The slight look of regret in his eyes had Anna guessing that the second part of his statement was a case of definite hyperbole. Still, he brimmed with warmth, concern, and kindness.

“Until this evening, Hugh,” she said, with a nod before turning toward the stairs. She climbed quickly, wishing to be free of him and the conflicting feelings he elicited within. Perhaps she should have allowed him to follow her upstairs to claim her maidenhead, she thought in a panic. It might have been easier to bear his demanding embrace than this unexpected gentle kindness from a man she had promised she would never love.

CHAPTER NINE

HUGH BARELY SPARED a glance at the stage as Sheridan's *The Rivals* unfolded—his attention fixed instead on his wife beside him. She sat still, hands folded in her lap, her posture poised yet betraying a quiet tension.

Perhaps, Hugh thought—or rather, hoped—she was as affected by their closeness in the intimate confines of their box as he was.

From his seat, he had an unimpeded view of the audience below—London society in all its chaotic splendor. The pit churned with the restless energy of drunken gentlemen jostling for space, while fruit sellers wove between them, shouting their wares. Above the fray, the elite preened like peacocks, their jewels catching in the candlelight as they turned to see and be seen.

Yet, throughout the performance, it was not the stage that held the audience's attention but Anna. The flicker of quizzing glasses aimed in their direction had been relentless all night long.

Her debut as Duchess of Falconbridge would be dissected in the papers the next morning with greater scrutiny than the performance on-stage could hope for. Even if Shakespeare himself had risen from the grave to present a new work, he would have been ignored in favor of her.

Hugh reached out, resting his hand atop hers—partly to offer support, but mostly to satisfy the desire to touch her that had consumed him all night. Her fingers curled slightly in response, and he waited to see if she would pull away.

Much to his relief—for his ego was only so resilient—she did not pull away. Instead, she turned to him, her expression anxious.

“It feels as though everyone is watching us and not the play,” she whispered. “I might as well be sitting here naked for how they’re staring.”

Hugh went utterly still. Her words were innocent—yet his traitorous mind seized upon them with unholy enthusiasm. A grown man of two-and-thirty, and yet, with nothing more than an offhand remark, she had reduced him to a randy schoolboy, his body betraying him with embarrassing swiftness.

"If you were sitting there naked, my dear, the performance on stage would be entirely forgotten—for I'd be putting on quite the show myself."

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Hugh couldn't resist indulging his urge to tease her—and was rewarded with a charming blush and a rosebud mouth curved into a smile of amusement laced with censure.

“You're incorrigible,” she retorted, a definite smile now playing on her luscious lips.

“Yes, we decided that earlier,” Hugh agreed.

He squeezed her hand and allowed her return her attention to the play. Meanwhile, he was forced to focus his attention away from his manhood, which was now straining painfully against his breeches.

He turned his gaze to the audience, paying particular attention to the sweaty, spot-ridden faces of the louts in the pit. Nothing was more certain to take the wind out of a man's sails than the sight of another, slovenly drunk man.

A face amongst the heaving crowd caught Hugh's attention—Gravesend. The boy's features looked remarkably intact for a lad who had been caught wronging Daniel Shatter. As though sensing Hugh's gaze upon him, the young man turned and lifted his head to stare up at Hugh. Though far away, there was no mistaking the look of pure malice on Gravesend's face.

Hugh felt a stir of disquiet in the pit of his stomach, as he recalled Bartie's warning that he had made an enemy on his wedding night. He shrugged off the feeling with an irritable shake; Gravesend was a penniless baron, what harm could he do to the holder of one of England's most powerful titles?

Hugh lifted his chin haughtily and returned his gaze to the stage. The Rivals' witty dialogue washed over him unheard, his mind consumed by the venomous glare he'd received. His fingers tightened around his wife's delicate hand, a protective instinct rising within him despite his earlier dismissal.

He suddenly realized the source of his disquiet: Anna. His life had always been his own, his actions bearing consequences only for himself. Now that Anna was his, he was responsible for protecting her. Judging by the stirring passion he felt at the very idea that Gravesend might harm his new bride, Hugh realised with startling clarity that he'd be quite capable of killing any man who sought to hurt her.

The strength of his feelings shocked him somewhat. He had allowed no one to penetrate the thick walls of indifference he'd built around his heart after Jack's death. And yet, in just a few days, Anna had not merely found the cracks—she'd slipped through them.

On stage, the play came to a final, chaotic end. The audience bellowed in approval, loudly applauding the actors as they took their bows.

“What fun,” Anna cried, turning to Hugh with a smile.

“Quite,” Hugh agreed, hoping that she would not press him for his opinion on the play—for he could not recall even one scene.

The audience below began to move as one undulating mass toward the doors. Hugh and Anna remained seated in the comfort of their box, until the worst of the crush had left. Anna filled the time with excited chatter about the play—the actors, the writing, the staging.

“You are a lover of the theatre?” Hugh guessed, suppressing a grin at her gaiety. Her enthusiasm was charming, especially when contrasted to the jaded cynicism of most

ladies of the ton.

“I am now,” she answered, “This was my first play.”

“First of many,” Hugh rushed to assure. Her enthusiasm was not just charming now but touching. A woman of Anna’s social rank would usually have had many opportunities to visit the theatre, but Anna’s circumstances had not been usual. He wondered what else she had been deprived of, living at the mercy of her father’s profligate ways.

The crush now ended, Hugh stood to assist his wife from her seat. He offered her his arm, which she took without hesitation, then led the way to the bustling foyer.

There, a crowd lingered, glittering and loud under the chandeliers. Uninterested in entertaining anyone, Hugh adopted his haughtiest, most ducal expression as he pushed through the mass of bodies.

Unfortunately for Hugh, there was one man immune to his forbidding visage: Lord Beaufort.

“Falconbridge,” Bartie hailed as they passed. “How exciting to see you with your new bride. Your Grace, my congratulations on your marriage. You might be pleased to know that the whole theatre was praising your elegance and beauty.”

This last part was directed to Anna, who looked rather alarmed by the news.

“Anna, may I introduce you to Lord Beaufort,” Hugh said through gritted teeth before turning to his friend. “Bartie, this is Anna, Duchess of Falconbridge. Tell me this, my friend, are you ever at home? Everywhere I go, there you are.”

“There’s plenty of time to stay home when the season is over,” Bartie replied, his

jolly nature still bouyant despite Hugh's questioning. "As to my being everywhere you go, I like to think that the fates themselves have divined that our paths should cross—after all, you might not be married if it wasn't for me."

He winked at Anna, who in turn glanced at Hugh with confusion.

"It was like seeing Cupid's bow strike," Bartie continued, addressing her in a stage whisper loud enough for Hugh's benefit. "He prowled the periphery of the Morland's ballroom like a wounded beast, until I took pity on him and told him your name."

"That's quite enough of that tale, Bartie," Hugh interrupted, with a quelling glare.

"Now that you are married, and his heart is not so wounded, his pride has returned," Bartie finished, with a mischievous wink to Anna—who looked rather too pleased for Hugh's liking at Bartie's ribbing.

"I will endeavour to keep him on his toes, Lord Beaufort," Anna replied, her own smile playful. "For as they say, pride comes before the fall."

"It's too late for that I fear, your Grace; your husband has fallen so deeply for you that there's no hope left for him at all. Oh, I do love a good love story!"

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Brimming with bonhomie, Bartie took Anna's hand and placed a kiss upon the back of it, before bidding Hugh goodbye and disappearing—mercifully—back into the crowd.

“What a delight Lord Beaufort is,” Anna commented as she watched Bartie mingle. “Have you known each other long?”

“Too long,” Hugh muttered as he ushered her toward the exit.

He felt somewhat awkward at Bartie having brought up the “L” word; love was not part of Hugh's usual lexicon. Was that what he felt toward Anna? Desire: certainly. Protectiveness: without a doubt. But, romantic love? Surely that was a mere idea, invented by reprobate poets with drinking problems and debt.

“Well, I do hope our paths will cross again,” Anna said firmly, tilting her chin in that defiant way that set Hugh's pulse racing.

He felt a stab of jealousy toward Lord Beaufort; what would it be like to approach the world with his same gentle ease? To make everyone feel instantly comfortable in your presence, instead of awed and a little afeared?

Hugh did not dwell on this too long. A life adjacent to power rather than as the holder of it had been open to him once, but that door had slammed shut the day Jack died. He did not like to ruminate on what ifs.

Outside was chilly, the warmth of the Spring day long disappeared. Hugh hailed their carriage, which was waiting a bit away, then turned to Anna to make certain she was

comfortable. He frowned as he pulled her cloak tighter around her, unhappy to think she might catch a cold.

“I should have told you to wait inside,” he said apologetically.

“I have never been so warm in my life,” she assured him with a smile, taking a gloved hand to the sliver-fur collar and stroking it fondly.

Something about that action stoked desire in Hugh’s belly. He felt his manhood stir at the idea of her naked beneath the cape, the soft fur caressing her silky skin.

Mercifully, the carriage arrived before all the blood in Hugh’s body rushed to his cock. What a scandal that would have been if he had been sighted at full mast in public. Being married to Anna truly was like reliving his teenage years, he thought ruefully.

Hurriedly, he assisted his wife to alight—allowing his hands to linger on her waist—before following her inside.

The footman clicked the door shut and Hugh turned to Anna, intent on solicitously covering her knees with a blanket. But as she turned her face toward him, her ethereal beauty caused something inside Hugh to snap.

He could not stand the torture of being so close to her without touching her a second longer. With a groan of desire and defeat, he reached out and pulled her into his lap.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked, wriggling her bottom in protest.

As said bottom was placed directly on top of Hugh’s aching cock, this did not help her protest.

“Kissing my wife,” he said throatily, as he placed a hand on the back of her head to draw her down into a searing kiss.

He was relieved when she responded eagerly to the embrace, her arms wrapping around his neck.

He was gentle at first, softly worshiping her lips, but impatience and desire soon overtook him. He pulled her closer, so that her breasts were pressed against his chest, pillaging her mouth with his tongue.

She did not pull back from his assault. Instead, she responded with a sigh of longing that set Hugh on fire.

“I need you facing me,” he whispered, as he pulled away from her for a moment.

With strong arms, he lifted her bodily so that she was straddling him, a leg on either side. His hands found her skirts, hitching them up so that he could pull her down properly atop his hardness.

Had she not been wearing drawers and he trousers, Hugh was certain that he would have plunged his cock deep inside her, so fierce was his need. Restricted by circumstance, he kept one hand on her hip, urging her to grind against him, as his other hand pushed open her cape.

Her straddled position meant that her breasts were level with Hugh’s face—much to his delight. The bodice of her dress low enough to allow Hugh to press his mouth against the swell of her bosom, but even that was not enough to sate him.

“I will buy you a new one,” he promised his slightly confused—but thoroughly aroused—wife, before taking his other hand from her hip and using both hands to rip the bodice apart.

“What are you—?” Anna said, but she was unable to finish her question for she moaned with longing as her breasts spilled forth and Hugh caught one pert nipple in his mouth.

He suckled it greedily, lightly fondling her other hard bud with his free hand. He bucked his hips, urging her to press herself against his hardness, painfully aware that he was on the verge of spilling his seed in his breeches.

She whimpered with need, her naked desire threatening to send Hugh completely over the edge.

Mercifully—for her virginity at least—the carriage drew to a halt. They were home.

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“Oh dear, look at me,” Anna whispered, as she looked down at her breasts, completely exposed in her ripped gown.

“I should have instructed Madame Delacroix to design all your dresses that way,” Hugh grinned, allowing himself one more caress of her swollen white orbs.

The sound of the footman jumping to the ground outside, set Hugh into swift action. He lifted Anna from his lap, tucked the cape firmly around her so that her modesty was covered, and smiled assuringly.

“Hold it tightly closed,” he instructed, as the door opened.

He disembarked first, blocking the door so that only he could see her as she clambered out. The gas lamps on the square were dim enough to hide her slightly disheveled state from prying eyes.

Hugh placed an arm around her shoulder and ushered Anna inside, where he quickly bundled her up the stairs.

He would not hesitate this time and allow her to dismiss him.

Once they reached her chambers, she turned to him, her mouth parted, her eyes a question.

Her beauty and innocence in that moment, left Hugh with a startling certainty; she would be his undoing.

He groaned with longing, as he pulled her against his body, allowing his hardness press against her soft stomach.

Never before had he felt such an aching need to take a woman, to claim her as his own, to spill his seed inside her...

Steady, a voice urged him, as his hands roved Anna's gentle curves beneath the soft fur cape. Had he not decided that it would be caddish to pluck her virginity in one fell swoop? Especially when she had already given so much of herself to him.

She had given him her hand. Despite her doubts, a part of her trusted him, and despite his strongest urges, Hugh could not bring himself to shatter that trust. He bit back a groan as he realised that his conscience would not allow his aching member its release—at least, not this night. Curses but this new found conscious of his becoming a bother!

With great effort, Hugh focused his attention away from the bulge in his breeches, to the woman in his arms.

"Lets get this off you," he murmured against her ear, pushing her cape to the floor. He then slipped behind her, his fingers finding the buttons at the back of her gown. With deliberate slowness, he undid the first button, then the second.

Hugh allowed his lips trace each piece of newly exposed skin as his hands continued their task, unfastening each button until the garment—at last—hung open. With a sense of triumph, he eased the silk from her shoulders, letting it slide down her arms to the floor. She wore no stays and a swift tug had her drawers and petticoats spilling to the floor with a sigh.

His promise that he would take things slowly met a quick stumbling-block as Anna turned and was revealed to him entirely, trembling and bare in the soft candlelight.

He allowed himself a moment to drink in her beauty, before he captured her lips again. Without breaking their kiss, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he lay her down gently.

“Please,” she whimpered, as he momentarily drew away from her to remove his coat and slippers.

She lay naked against the pillows, her blonde hair cascading across the white linen, her breasts swollen, nipples pink and taut. Hugh’s gaze skimmed down the softness of her stomach and the gentle swell of her hip, to the soft mound of curls which covered her sex.

He bit back a curse at his stupidity, for the swell of his cock, pressing painfully against his breeches, was in danger of overriding any ounce of self-control he had left.

"Hugh?"

His name, called in a gentle whisper, brought Hugh's attention back to his wife.

Her eyes were wide, as desire clashed with uncertainty. Her mouth, a perfect rosebud, was slightly parted, begging to be covered with his own.

With a groan of regret, Hugh lay down alongside her, drawing her into a deep searing kiss.

He plundered her mouth with his tongue, trying to assuage his pressing desire. When that served only to make him more aroused, he reluctantly drew his lips from hers, and trailed a line of hot kisses down her neck to her collarbone, to the glory of her breasts.

Hugh circled his tongue around one pink areola, before flicking the nub of her nipple with his tongue. Anna gasped in response, her hips bucking upward in an invitation he desperately wished to accept.

Anna's soft moans filled the chamber as he worshiped at the altar of her swollen breasts, her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to her. The sweet sounds of her pleasure threatened to undo his resolve entirely. Hugh knew he must redirect his attention if he was to keep his promise not to claim her fully.

With exquisite slowness, he trailed his hand down the curve of her waist, over the slight swell of her stomach, until his fingers brushed against the soft curls at the apex of her thighs. Anna tensed momentarily, then relaxed as he returned to kiss her lips, gentle and reassuring.

"Trust me," he whispered against her mouth. "I promised you pleasure and I never renege on a promise."

The trust in her eyes nearly undid him as she nodded, her breath coming in short whimpers of need.

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His fingers traced delicate patterns along her inner thighs, gradually moving higher with each caress. Once she was suitably relaxed, he placed himself between her legs, and trailed hot kisses along the soft skin of her upper thigh. Anna's breath quickened as he continued his journey, his destination becoming clear.

"Wait", she called, a note of uncertainty in her voice.

“Trust me,” he assured her again.

Her eyes widened slightly, but she nodded, her curiosity evident in the flush spreading across her skin.

With that, Hugh continued with his mission. He pressed more reverent kisses to the soft skin of her inner thigh, moving ever closer to her centre. Anna tensed momentarily when his mouth finally touched her slick crease.

“Relax,” he murmured against her skin. "Just feel.”

With exquisite gentleness, Hugh's tongue traced the wet seam of her womanhood, tasting her arousal for the first time. Anna gave a startled gasp as his lips touched her sex, her fingers clutching at the bedsheets. Encouraged by her response, Hugh continued his gentle exploration, moving upward to the pearl of her pleasure and circling it with his tongue.

Anna's shock quickly gave way to pleasure as Hugh worshipped her clit with his mouth, alternating between gentle friction and delicate flicks of his tongue. Her hips began to move of their own accord, seeking more—and threatening to send Hugh's

resolve completely over the edge.

To distract himself, Hugh slid his hands beneath her, cupping her bottom and lifting her slightly to grant him better access. His tongue delved deeper, tasting her essence as her passion mounted. The sounds of her pleasure—soft whimpers and breathless moans—were more intoxicating than the finest wine.

When he could stand the torture no more, Hugh returned to her clitoris, where his tongue found the perfect rhythm to drive her to the brink. Carefully, he brought his hand to her wet lips and slid two fingers inside, as deep as he dared. Her muscles gripped around his fingers and Hugh continued his sensual assault of her clit, until she was slick with sweat and writhing with pleasure.

“Please,” she gasped, her hands tugging at his hair, as though she wished to him to stop.

But Hugh persisted and a moment later, Anna gave one final gasp before she found her release. He grinned with self-satisfaction as he felt her muscles lap against his fingers, while her body writhed in ecstasy—he always delivered on his promises.

Hugh waited for her pleasure to abate, for her breath to return to an even keel, before bringing himself up the bed to lie beside her. He pulled her into his arms, surprised by his sudden need for a different kind of intimacy—tenderness.

“You’re sleepy,” he commented, for her eyes were heavy, her breathing slow.

“I’m not,” she protested, defiant to the last.

He smiled as he placed a kiss on the top of her head. Within moments, she was dozing softly, her naked body pressed against his.

I'll just wait a few moments then return to my own bed, Hugh thought, as he felt her breathing turn slow and rhythmic. He had never spent a full night with a woman, for he had never felt the need. But, as the minutes stretched on he grew more and more reluctant to leave the warmth of her body cradled in his arms. It felt so right to be holding her; it felt like home.

Just a few more minutes, he promised himself again, before he too drifted into a peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MORNING LIGHT filtering through the gauzy curtains awakened Anna slowly, the unfamiliar warmth beside her drawing her from her dreams.

She turned her head cautiously upon the pillow. Her husband lay beside her, his breathing deep and even. His dark hair fell across his forehead, softening the aristocratic angles of his face. In sleep, he looked almost boyish, without the sardonic smile that so often curved his lips.

She squirmed as the events of the previous night rushed back to her in a flood of sensation. Her lips felt bruised, her nipples sensitive, and her most intimate area ached once again with longing. What had this man done to her? His touch, his mouth, the unexpected pleasure that had coursed through her body like lightning—he had cast a spell upon her.

Anna drew the bed sheet higher beneath her chin, feeling a flush spread across her cheeks. A lady did not indulge so eagerly in such wanton behavior, as she had last night. And she had not merely indulged but reveled in it, her body betraying her with its primal response to his attentions.

The memory of her straddling Falconbridge in the carriage, her breasts bare against

the cool air, brought a rush of shame—and worse, arousal. If the carriage ride had been any longer, Anna was certain that her maidenhead would not still be intact.

And yet it was.

Anna scrutinised her sleeping husband, wondering why—for a second night—he had not claimed his marital rights. He'd had every opportunity, given that she had offered her naked body to him on a proverbial plate. Yet he had not taken her; instead, he had lavished attention onto her body, onto her desire—with startling results.

She flushed as she recalled the pleasurable torture his tongue had created, building until she had lost complete control of herself. She hadn't known that her body was capable of such sensations and, to her distress, she wanted more.

He has cast a spell on me, she thought wildly, wriggling from beneath the sheets to escape him.

Completely naked, she hopped from the bed, her eyes scanning the room for something to cover herself with.

“That's a view a man could become accustomed to waking up to.”

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Anna jumped, turning to find Falconbridge awake, propped up on one shoulder, openly admiring her body. She made to cover her breasts with her hands, to shield them from his impudent eyes.

“It’s a little late for modesty, my dear,” Falconbridge advised, his tone kind but his expression mischievous. “I have already seen them and committed them to memory. On my death bed, they shall be the image I conjure as I slip away to meet St Peter.”

“I do not think it is he you shall be meeting upon your death,” Anna answered with a sniff, as she finally sighted her old nightgown folded on the chest of drawers.

She snatched it, throwing it quickly over her head.

“My old friend,” the duke commented, eyeing the garb with amusement.

He slid from beneath the covers, to reveal himself shirtless but—mercifully—wearing his trousers from the night before. Conscious that she had scolded his earlier ogling of her, Anna made a concerted effort not to stare at his broad shoulders, strong chest, and lightly muscled stomach. Unfortunately, upon said muscled stomach, a line of dark hair ran tantalisingly from his naval to beneath his breeches, and Anna felt a desperate desire to see where it led.

Damn it, but he was devilishly handsome, she thought with despair.

“Last night was wonderful,” he continued, crossing the room to take her hand. “There is no shame in desire, Anna. What we did was a perfectly natural act between husband and wife.”

“Y-y-you did not take your pleasure,” she stuttered, her tone a little accusing. It was easy to say not to feel ashamed when he had not lost himself completely in front of her. He had not even taken off his trousers.

“I told you,” Falconbridge shrugged, as he lifted her hand to his lips, “I will take it, only when you ask me to. Now, I shall give you some privacy. I am needed in The House of Lords this morning to vote on a Member’s Bill. We will dine together this evening.”

“I am being relieved of my breakfast duties?” Anna could not help ask, quirking her brow.

“You did say that you don’t take breakfast,” he shrugged, “I am not a complete autocrat.”

“Just a partial one,” she replied, before she could help herself. She was not usually so smart-mouthed, but something about his calm composure—especially when he made her so flustered—urged her to it.

Falconbridge raised a brow of amusement, his eyes impudently traversing her body from top to toe.

“I have changed my mind about your nightrail,” he finally declared, his eyes dancing, “In this light it is completely see-through. I can’t recall if I said this last night, but your nipples are utterly beguiling.”

“You rogue,” Anna squeaked, bringing her hands up to cover her breasts from his gaze—whilst hoping that he had not noticed how hard her nipples had become at his words.

“Indeed,” he grinned, “You’ll find I’m a partial autocrat but a complete rogue—I’ll

make a for a very demanding but satisfying lover, once you allow it. Until this evening, my sweet.”

With a short bow, Falconbridge took his leave to his own chambers. Anna waited for the door to shut behind him before she allowed her hands to stop their attempts to hide her modesty.

“Until this evening, my sweet,” she mimicked him irritably. His words and his shameless gaze had awakened that same sweet, agonising need within her, and a part of her wished that he had stayed to show her again that world-shattering pleasure.

Just once more, then she would return to being aloof with him...

Exasperated with herself for failing so spectacularly at her mission to keep her husband at arm’s length, Anna stalked to the mirror to view her reflection. Her nightrail remained, she saw with annoyance, just as modest as it had always been—he had been teasing her!

“That man,” Anna muttered again, making for the washstand. Upon this stood a jug of water and a basin, which Anna used to wash herself. She dressed quickly, donning one of her “old” dresses, made of cambric so worn that the colour had faded somewhat.

“Lawks! What are you wearing that for?” Josie cried a few minutes later as she entered, carrying a breakfast tray.

“What’s wrong with it?” Anna questioned, feeling defensive.

Josie had seen her in the same dress countless times and had never once raised a complaint.

“The staff will think you want to muck in with the cleaning,” Josie fretted, throwing a terrified glance over her shoulder at the closed door, as though afraid one of Falconbridge’s servants was eavesdropping. “Why don’t you put on one of your new ones?”

“Because I don’t want to,” Anna answered, her tone firm.

She craved familiarity and comfort—and that would not be found in a new gown she felt too afraid to move in. Nor would it be found in this house, which still felt so strange to her.

“We will go for a walk, Josie,” she declared, her heart suddenly set on the idea.

She would not find anything as comforting in London as the windswept cliffs of Whitby, nor would she see heather and stone walls stretching to the horizon—but at least she would have a chance to burn off the restless energy coursing through her.

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"Where shall we go, your Grace?" Josie asked, the title still sounding a tad silly to Anna's ear.

"Green Park, I think," Anna replied, knowing it wasn't fashionable like Hyde Park where the ton paraded. "It's quieter there."

"Apart from the cattle," Josie grumbled, "I was going to encourage you to wear your new boots, but I shan't now. It's I who'd have to clean 'em if you trod in a pile of dung, your Grace."

Anna hid a smile at her mulish tone—she far preferred Josie cynical than reverent.

She hastily gulped the tea Josie had brought while the lady's maid went to tell the footmen to ready a carriage. Within a quarter of an hour, they were seated inside a splendid barouche, its top down so that they could appreciate the warm Spring morning.

"I could get used to this," Josie confided as the vehicle turned from Pall Mall onto Malborough Street. "Much less bumpy than the gig up home."

"It wasn't so bad," Anna replied, compelled for some reason to defend the creaky old thing.

"You're not so homesick that you've forgotten having to pick splinters from your derrière, are you?" Josie laughed.

"I suppose this is more luxurious," Anna conceded, with a nod to the leather seats, the

gleaming wood, and the liveried footman and driver seated at the front.

“Change can be difficult, even when it’s change for the better,” Josie advised, awkwardly patting Anna’s hand. “And, I suppose, you’re feeling out of sorts with your father still not home.”

Anna stilled; in all the time since she had said “I do” to the duke, she had not given her father a second thought. A wave of guilt swept over her which she could not fight despite the anger she still felt toward him. What kind of daughter was she, to have not even enquired of his whereabouts?

“He’ll turn up, he always does,” Josie assured her, reading her thoughts.

Anna longed to question her further, but she was conscious of the driver and the footman seated nearby. Gossip was like currency amongst servants and Anna did not wish to provide them with any tales to carry home.

A few minutes later, the carriage pulled to a halt, just inside The Wren Gate entrance to the park. Anna immediately felt a sense of relief at the sight of the open green fields before her. Finally, a part of London that felt a little like home.

To their right lay The Queen’s Walk, a tree-lined path which ran the eastern edge of the park. The perfect place for a private chat, she thought with satisfaction.

"We shall walk from here," Anna announced, causing the footman to stare back at her with barely concealed horror.

"If I may say, your Grace, I don't believe that His Grace would approve of you walking unescorted—"

"I am not unescorted," Anna cut him off, gesturing to Josie. "I have Josie."

"Your Grace," the driver interjected now, his tone pleading. "I do not believe that His Grace would consider a lady's maid to be proper protection. Perhaps we might drive you through the park instead?"

Anna felt a flare of irritation at her absent husband's seemingly endless ability to dictate her life choices. Even while tucked away in The House of Lords, he had the power to control her.

"I wish to walk," she sniffed, reminding herself that she was now a duchess. "We will return within the hour."

Before either man could protest further, Anna had descended from the carriage, Josie scrambling after her.

"His Grace will be most displeased," the footman muttered, just loud enough for Anna to hear.

"Then His Grace may express his displeasure to me directly," she replied, lifting her chin. "Come, Josie."

As they walked away from the carriage and onto the graveled path known as the Queen's Walk, Josie cast nervous glances over her shoulder. "Are you certain this is wise, Your Grace? They'll inform His Grace of this, I don't think he'll be best pleased."

"I am not a prisoner," Anna replied with a shrug, "He cannot send me to Newgate for taking a walk, Josie. Now, tell me everything you know about Papa."

"I've told you the most of it," it was Josie's turn to shrug, "I done asked the underbutler Mr Reeves why James and Sarah had not yet arrived, and he said that it was because Lord Mosley hadn't yet returned to the house on Berkley Square. That

was the deal, remember? They were to stay there to help your father pack up.”

They walked in silence for a few moments, as Anna fretted, before turning onto a smaller path that led toward the center of the park.

“Is the duke aware that he was still missing?” Anna questioned, wondering why Falconbridge had not mentioned this to her—he’d had plenty of opportunities.

“Lawks if you think that I know what the duke knows,” Josie chuckled. “I know my place, your Grace, and it’s not as a confidant of the duke’s.”

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Anna gave a reluctant smile; she had expected a tad too much of Josie's talent for gathering gossip.

They continued along a path that wound through a copse of elm trees. The park was laid out in a naturalistic style—less fashionable than its showier neighbour Hyde Park—but far preferable to Anna's eye.

"I'm worried about him, Josie," Anna admitted after a moment. "For all his faults, he's never disappeared for so long without word. What if something dreadful has happened to him?"

"Like what?" Josie asked, looking around nervously as the path grew narrower and more secluded. They had lost sight of The Queen's Walk now, and were completely alone.

"I don't know. Perhaps he owed more than he admitted to Falconbridge. Perhaps—"

Anna's words were cut short as two rough-looking men stepped from behind a large oak tree, to block their path. From their rough features and mean eyes, Anna quickly deduced that they did not wish to engage them in polite chat about the weather.

"Well, well," the taller of the two sneered, his eyes roving over Anna's simple dress with a frown of disappointment. "Not much to take from you two, but I reckon that necklace will fetch a decent price."

Josie gave a small squeak of terror and Anna instinctively stepped in front of her to shield her. This was all her fault—if only she hadn't insisted on walking alone!

"Step aside," she commanded, attempting to emulate her husband's authoritative tone.

It did not work, for the men merely laughed seeing straight through her bravado.

"Hear that, Tom? Her Ladyship wants us to step aside," one of the men guffawed.

"We have nothing of value," Anna said, attempting to change tack.

"Let's see that necklace first, love," the shorter of the two grunted, waving his meaty paw at Anna's neck.

She balked, taking a step back from him. The necklace had belonged to her mother, and while it held little financial value, to her it was priceless.

"Unhand her, or you'll feel my whip."

The quartet all turned in unison at the sound of the deep, cultured, and very male voice.

A tall, elegantly dressed young man emerged from a connecting path, his riding crop tapping ominously against his palm.

"This don't concern you, friend," the taller ruffian growled, though he took a half step back his eyes on the whip in the man's hand.

"Any lady in distress concerns me," the gentleman replied, his tone dangerously soft. "Now, I suggest you both find another path to walk. Immediately."

Something in his manner—the absolute certainty that he would be obeyed—caused the men to exchange glances before backing away with muttered curses.

Anna breathed a sigh of relief, as the two men finally turned and fled from sight. Her mother's necklace was saved! And she was saved from having to explain a black eye or cut lip to Falconbridge—she imagined that he'd never let her leave the house again.

"Are you hurt, madam?" the gentleman asked, turning to Anna with concern.

"I—we—are quite well, my lord, thanks to you," Anna replied, her heart still racing from the encounter.

"It is always a pleasure to help a beautiful woman," the man replied, offering her a curt bow. "Lord Gravesend, at your service."

From the corner of her eye, Anna could see Josie swooning at the young lord's manners. Anna hid a smile; though she was grateful to her rescuer, she was not as easily impressed as Josie by his Byron-esque pale skin and ruffled hair.

The gentleman's gaze lingered on her face, his expression momentarily troubled.

"May I have the honor of knowing whom I've had the pleasure of assisting?"

"I am—" Anna hesitated, unsure whether to reveal her new title to this stranger.

"This is Her Grace, the Duchess of Falconbridge," Josie blurted, so impressed by their rescuer that she wished to impress him in turn.

Recognition flickered in Gravesend's pale eyes, before his expression settled into one of polite surprise.

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"Falconbridge's bride? I had heard he had finally taken a duchess." Gravesend bowed again, more deeply this time. "I am doubly honored to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. And may I say, Falconbridge is a fortunate man indeed."

"You know my husband?" Anna asked, worried for a moment that the duke would hear about the incident after all.

"I know of him," Lord Gravesend replied carefully. "Though I confess, I'm surprised to find you walking these paths with only a maid for company, your Grace. The duke is not known for taking risks with his possessions."

The word "possessions" stung, though Anna couldn't deny its accuracy. Wasn't that precisely what she was? A possession acquired through her father's gambling debts?

"Yes, it was foolish of me and I believe he'd be very upset if he was to find out," Anna answered, forcing a helpless tone in the hope that her rescuer might come to her aid once again.

"Your secret is safe with me," Gravesend assured her, his instinctive chivalry warming her to him.

"You are too kind, my lord," Anna smiled at him, feeling a tad guilty for her earlier thoughts about his Byron-like qualities. Who better than a Romantic to come to a lady's aid not once, but twice, in mere minutes?

"May I escort you back to the main path, Your Grace?" Gravesend asked, offering her his arm. "I would hate for your morning to be further disrupted by unsavory

characters."

Anna hesitated only briefly before accepting his offer. As they walked, Gravesend made polite conversation about the weather, the latest gossip about Prinny, and which gatherings he had attended and would attend. Trivial, everyday topics that made Anna feel at ease—it was almost a relief to converse normally with a gentleman, after the intensity of all her exchanges with Falconbridge.

"I will not delay you any longer, my lord," Anna said, once they had reached the safety of The Queen's Walk. "Thank you again for your bravery; I do hope our paths will cross again."

"I will make sure of it," Gravesend answered, nonplussed by her dismissal. "Your servant, your Grace."

He offered Anna and Josie a flourishing bow before disappearing back down the path they had emerged from.

"What lovely manners that young man has," Josie commented, stopping to watch Lord Gravesend's disappearing form. Anna followed the line of her gaze—which was focused firmly on the lord's bottom—and elbowed her with a giggle.

"Yes, I'm certain it's his lovely manners you're admiring," she laughed, as she linked arms with her.

The two women skitted and laughed the whole way back to their waiting carriage. At the sight of them, the footman sprang from his perch to open the door of the barouche, his manner much more deferential than on their departure.

Anna smiled her thanks, refusing to hold a grudge for his earlier comment. She had just experienced for herself the worry of upsetting Falconbridge and could only

imagine it magnified tenfold for a servant.

“Where to, your Grace?” the driver called, once they had settled in their seat.

“Home,” Anna answered, squaring her shoulders.

It was time to start trying to think of Falconbridge House as her home. She was a duchess, she would not cower and hide from her own servants. Nor would she cower from her husband or accept him keeping secrets from her. If the duke wanted her as his wife, then he would have to learn to include her in all his dealings—including the search for her father.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE EVENING WAS not unfolding the way that Hugh had envisioned. He had returned home from The House of Lords late, his mind still filled with debates over abolition laws, only to learn that his wife had taken it upon herself to walk unescorted through Green Park.

"Alone, Thompson? They let her go alone?" Hugh's voice had risen sharply, and his valet had taken a step back.

"With her lady's maid, your Grace." Thompson had corrected carefully before defending his fellow staff. "Her Grace was insistent, despite their protests. They could have kept this from you, but believed that you would prefer to know."

“Offer them my thanks,” Hugh replied, with a curt nod.

He did not want Anna to think he was her jailer, but he could not ignore her reckless disregard for her own safety. London was not Whitby; danger lurked at every corner, especially for women.

When she arrived for dinner, Anna appeared far from contrite. She wore a splendid ruby gown that matched the fire in her eyes, her chin lifted in defiance before he'd even spoken a word.

"My dear," he said stiffly, standing as she entered the room.

He walked to meet her at the doorway, offering her his arm. Her grip was so light that he barely felt it, her gaze fixed straight ahead as if she were walking to an execution rather than dinner with her husband.

Hugh stifled a sigh of irritation—she could not be vexed with him already; he had only spoken two words.

He pulled out a chair for her to sit on and, once she was comfortable, he took his own seat.

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"I have it on good authority that you decided to promenade around Green Park with only Josephine for company," Hugh stated, once the footmen had poured the wine and withdrawn to fetch the first course. "London is not safe for—"

"And I have it on good authority that my father is still missing," Anna interrupted, her voice brittle as she finally turned her blue gaze his way. "A fact that you felt needed to be kept from me."

Hugh stilled, his wine glass halfway to his lips. The accusation in her eyes was genuine, but beneath it lay something he recognized all too well—fear. Thanks to Jack, he knew well what it felt like to imagine the worst when a loved one disappeared.

"Did you know?" she questioned, her voice shaking slightly as her composure cracked. "Were you aware that he has not been seen since—"

She faltered, unable to directly reference the card game that had thrust them together.

"Since the night he lost you in a game of chance," Hugh finished for her, setting down his glass with deliberate care. He would not gild the lily and pretend her father an honourable man, even if he was missing.

"If you want the truth of the matter," Hugh began, spreading his hands in surrender, "I have not spared your father a second thought since the wedding. I had arranged with the proprietor of one of town's more salubrious gaming hells to alert me when he resurfaced."

"And you did not worry when you heard nothing?"

Anna's accusatory and somewhat frightened glare stopped the wicked reply at the tip of Hugh's tongue. He wanted to snap that he did not think Lord Mosley deserved anyone's worry—especially not that of his daughter—but now was not the time to divulge that.

"He slipped my mind," he replied carefully. "Now I am aware that he has not returned, I shall endeavour to pour all my resources into locating him."

The footmen returned with the soup course, forcing a pause in their conversation. Hugh watched Anna's face in the candlelight. There was anger there, but beneath it lay fear, and worry for her father that Hugh both understood and resented. He knew the feeling all too well—it was not easy to let go of worrying about a loved one, even when they had hurt you.

When they were alone again, Hugh leaned forward, seeking to offer assurance even as his own old ghosts pressed close.

"He will be found," he promised, his voice gruff. "You have my word."

"And you will keep me informed of the search?" Anna prodded, not quite trusting him.

"I will not keep anything from you," Hugh swore. "But in return, I ask that you not venture out alone again. I should not like to have to search for two people in the slums of St Giles; one is quite enough."

Something in his tone must have conveyed his sincerity, for she offered him a wan smile before turning her attention to her soup. They both ate in strained silence for a moment or two until his wife offered him an olive branch.

"How was your day at Lords?" she ventured, tilting her head like a curious bird.

Hugh almost snorted with laughter at the staid domesticity of her question. Had anyone walked in just then, they would have assumed them married for decades rather than forced together by Hugh's desire and a deck of cards.

"Productive but dreadfully dull. I don't think you want to hear about the slow turning cogs of The House of Lords."

"Try me," she suggested lightly. "If I fall asleep in my soup, you'll know it's time to change the topic."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he cautioned, before gingerly beginning the tale of the member's bill he had helped sponsor that day.

"I'm supporting the Duke of Thorncastle's efforts to strengthen the abolition laws. The bill proposes harsher penalties for those caught trafficking human beings and additional funds for the West Africa Squadron to intercept slave ships."

Hugh paused, surprised by Anna's attentive expression. He had expected her eyes to glaze over, but she appeared interested. He had a momentary glimpse of what their marriage might have been like had they come together by choice—warm interest in the other's day.

"I expect there was some argument against diverting funds away from the Navy?" she ventured, surprising him further with her political acumen.

"Yes, a few think that the government should not be distracted from the war effort," Hugh conceded. "Though most were in support of funding the cause."

"I should hope so," she declared, setting down her spoon. "What point is there in

having the might of the British Naval Fleet if it cannot be used to save those poor souls from their wretched fate?"

"Quite," Hugh lifted his wine glass in toast to her statement.

As they continued to discuss the particulars of the member's bill, he found himself unexpectedly savoring the moment. How long had it been since he'd shared the details of his day with anyone?

Since Jack's death, he had wrapped his title around himself like armor, keeping even his closest acquaintances at a carefully measured distance. For years, he had haunted the same gaming hells that had destroyed his brother, drinking the same brandies, playing the same games, seeking some connection to the ghost of his brother.

Yet here, in this forced marriage born from those very cards that had destroyed Jack, he was finding what had eluded him in all those dark, desperate nights.

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Connection to something real, something tangible.

Someone, he corrected himself. Someone living and not a ghost that haunted the darkness and shadows of the past.

Throughout the rest of the meal, he watched Anna surreptitiously, startled by the feeling of tenderness she evoked in him. Desire he understood—it was straightforward, uncomplicated, easily sated. But this gentle warmth spreading through his chest as she spoke was something altogether different—it felt almost dangerous.

When the last course had ended, he suggested they retreat to the parlour room—for, despite his apprehension of his own feelings, he did not want the warmth of the evening to fade.

The parlour was not a room Hugh frequented often. He was a little surprised to find it warm and cosy when they entered, a fire crackling gently in the hearth. The servants had evidently anticipated that it might get more use, now that the house had a mistress. A number of decanters sat untouched on the sideboard. Hugh poured two glasses—brandy for himself, a sherry for Anna—and handed hers over without a word.

She accepted it, the edge of her sleeve grazing his fingers. She wandered toward the pianoforte, trailing her hand along the back of a velvet chair as she passed.

"Do you play?" he asked, suddenly aware of how little he knew of her accomplishments. How little he knew of her, if he was honest.

"My mother taught me," Anna replied, her fingers ghosting over the keys without pressing them. "She adored music. I am glad that she did not live to see the painoforte at Mosley Hall sold."

Hugh leaned against the mantelpiece, watching how the firelight caught the gold undertones in her hair. She looked wistful, her gaze not truly on the painoforte, but staring back into the past.

"When did she pass?" he questioned, guessing that her mother's passing had marked an end to any stability in Anna's life.

"She died when I was fifteen," Anna said simply, finally pressing a key that rang out clearly in the quiet room. "Consumption. Father never quite recovered from her loss; he had always gambled, but he lost himself to it after we lost her."

Hugh nodded, understanding all too well how grief could drive a man to self-destruction. He had nearly followed that path himself.

"Would you play something?" he asked, suddenly aching to hear her play.

She nodded, settling onto the bench with an easy grace. Her fingers moved over the keys, tentative at first, then with growing confidence. The melody was sweet and wistful, not the showy piece a debutante might perform to attract suitors, but something nostalgic.

Hugh closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him.

"Is this meant to be you?" Anna's voice broke through his reverie. The music had stopped, and she had risen to examine a portrait that hung in the shadows near the window.

Hugh's heart clenched in his chest. He had forgotten it was there, hidden in the corner of a room he rarely entered. The portrait showed a young man with Hugh's same dark hair and strong jaw, but with laughing eyes that held none of Hugh's guardedness.

"It is not a good likeness," she commented, studying the painting. "Something is off ..."

Something lodged in Hugh's throat; he should correct her, should tell her that she was looking at Jack, not him. He wanted to tell her that his brother had been the charming one, the one with an easy laugh and a ready smile. He wanted to tell her how much he paled in comparison to the big brother he had lost.

But the words wouldn't come. He had banished Jack's ghost earlier, he did not have the strength to resurrect him so soon.

"It was painted some time ago," Hugh said instead, his voice rougher than he had intended.

Anna tilted her head, studying first the portrait and then Hugh's face. Something in her expression suggested she sensed the lie, but she didn't press.

Hugh met her gaze, struck by the gentle understanding in her eyes. He had the unsettling sensation that she could see straight through his carefully constructed facade to the lost, angry boy beneath—the one who had raged at Jack for leaving him alone, for taking the easy way out and saddling him with a title he'd never wanted and responsibilities he'd never sought.

"More sherry?" he offered abruptly, desperate to break the moment of unexpected intimacy.

"No, thank you," she said, returning to the pianoforte. "I should retire soon."

Tomorrow, I would like to begin making inquiries of my own about my father. And we have the Lavery's ball; your mother sent a missive to remind me."

Hugh nodded, watching as her fingers found the keys again, resuming the gentle melody. The tenderness he had felt at dinner returned, stronger now, mingled with a fierce protectiveness that surprised him with its intensity. He wanted this always; this soft, gentle, easy company—this feeling of togetherness, that made him realise just how alone he had been until now.

Once he had finished his brandy, she stopped playing, declaring herself ready for bed. Yesterday, Hugh might have made an innuendo, or a bawdy comment, about following her upstairs, but tonight he did not wish to sully their evening.

Instead, he stood and grabbed Anna's hand before she left, placing a kiss on the back of it.

"Sleep well," he bid, unable to put into words all that he wanted to say.

If she was startled by the intensity of his voice, she did not show it. She merely inclined her head graciously and bid him his own restful night.

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Once the door had shut behind her, Hugh poured himself another brandy. The cosiness of the room had dissipated somewhat with Anna's departure, so he moved himself to his library.

There, he attended to the growing pile of correspondence he had neglected since the wedding. He dashed out several letters to his various estate managers, a note to his man of business who kept an eye over his merchant interests, and finally an abrupt note to his solicitor at The Inns of Court, to say that his will needed updating. For a moment, he wondered if he should send a footman to The Bird's Nest to question if Shatter had heard news on Lord Mosley, but he decided against it—that task was better carried out in person.

The longcase clock in the hallway began to chime the hour: midnight. Hugh stretched, allowing himself to succumb to his tiredness.

He blew out the candles, placed a guard before the fire, then set off for his bedchamber. There, he dismissed a groggy Thompson and undressed himself for bed.

Impatiently he donned a nightshirt, over which he threw on a silk banyan. Then, he crept to the door that joined his room to Anna's, opening it as quietly as he could.

He slipped inside, intending only to check if she was sleeping, but when he caught sight of her, curled up beneath the covers, he paused, overcome with longing.

Longing not for her body—though he couldn't deny that desire stirred in his belly—but for the warmth and peace she radiated. He discarded his earlier intention to steal a glance at her and leave, and instead made for the bed. Carefully, he lowered

himself down beside her, throwing a protective arm over her body, as he settled himself on his side.

I'll just rest a moment, he told himself, as his eyes grew heavy. Within seconds he was asleep, lulled into a peaceful rest by the warmth and comfort of his wife's body beside him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ANNA STOOD BEFORE the looking glass as Josie fastened the last pearl button on her evening gown. Her gaze drifted past her reflection, settling instead on the neatly made bed behind her. She had awoken during the night to find herself wrapped in Hugh's arms, held tightly like some precious treasure.

When morning had arrived, she had woken to find he was gone—not even leaving an impression on the bedsheets, to let her know that she had not dreamed his presence.

Her new husband was a mystery to her; consumed by fiery passion one moment, gentle as a lamb the next. She sensed there were secrets beneath his carefully constructed, haughty veneer. Secrets he would never share. Would he forever remain an enigma that could kiss her with passion one moment and retreat behind cold formality the next?

"You'll mark it," Josie fretted, batting Anna's hands away from worrying the material of the gown that had arrived that morning from Madame Deveaux's.

"Nobody will note a mark or two," Anna replied with a shrug, "Unless they examine my skirts with a magnifying glass."

For a moment, Josie looked as though she was going to suggest that this was not beyond the realm of possibilities. Despite her own anxiety, Anna offered her lady's

maid an affectionate smile.

“Nobody would dare attempt such a thing with Falconbridge by my side,” she reassured her.

“True, he’s quite fearsome,” Josie agreed, flittering about brushing imaginary lint from the gown’s full skirts. “But one never knows who is watching, so try not to fidget and ruin my good work.”

She paused then, as though considering her words, before adding a rather reluctant; “Your Grace.”

“I promise I will try,” Anna swore.

“Try?” Josie raised a skeptical brow. “Well then, I can expect to have the flat-iron ready when you return. Still, your fidgeting keeps me in gainful employment so I won’t grouse too much. Now, turn and show me.”

Anna turned from the mirror to present herself to Josie—an act that seemed a tad ridiculous, for she could already see her in the looking glass. Josie rewarded her efforts with a happy sigh, her brown eyes misty.

“If your mama could see you now,” she declared, fishing a handkerchief from her pocket to blow her nose loudly. “She always wanted the best for you and now, here you are, decked out in silks like a princess.”

“A mere duchess, I’m afraid,” Anna smiled, though she did agree with Josie that the dress was exquisite. The emerald silk gown draped gracefully over her figure, its empire waistline embellished with delicate gold beading that caught the candlelight with each breath she took. The neckline dipped lower than Anna was used to, framed by delicate Venetian lace.

“Are you certain I don’t need a fichu?” Anna questioned, turning to frown at her appearance one last time.

“A fichu?” Josie snorted, “You’re going to a ball, not visiting a convent. You’re the picture of grace and elegance—at least you will be, if you can keep from fidgeting.”

Josie affectionately batted Anna’s hand away from her neckline before marching her out the door with a mixture of well-wishes and muttered warnings about the dire misfortunes that might befall a duchess who rumped new silk.

Falconbridge was waiting for her at the bottom of the grand staircase, impatiently pacing the marble tiles of the entrance hall.

He turned, as he heard her step on the stair..

"You look magnificent," he said, his eyes travelling slowly from the top of her head to the tips of her satin slippers—before returning, Anna noted with amusement, to her cleavage for a second glance.

She should have worn the fichu.

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"As do you," she replied primly. He did cut a dashing figure, dressed all in black, save the white of his precisely tied cravat.

"Tonight, I exist only as the man standing beside the Duchess of Falconbridge," he informed her with a wicked smile. "I shall have to stand two steps behind you at all times, or people will shout at me to stop blocking their view."

She smiled at his playfulness, though inside his words—and the admiration in his eyes—made her giddy.

"Allow me," he continued, taking an emerald green cloak from the footman and wrapping it around her shoulders. He then donned his own coat of black merino before signalling to the waiting staff that they were ready.

Outside a carriage and four awaited them. The duke offered Anna his hand to assist her inside and even though they both wore gloves, she felt a frisson of connection.

She glanced back at him, somewhat startled. His eyes met hers, his grin lupine.

"Don't worry, I shan't rip your dress on the way there," he promised, climbing in after her.

Much like Josie, Anna was not at all reassured by his half-promise.

After all, he'd only promised not to rip her dress on the way there. The return journey, she suspected, was fair game—and somehow, she doubted even Josie's flat-iron could undo his handiwork.

The Lavery's ballroom was a crush; the air a thick roar of conversation and laughter as hundreds of society's finest glittered beneath the bright chandeliers.

The announcement of their arrival seemed to pierce the general hum of conversation, and Anna's grip tightened on Hugh's arm. Every eye in the place turned to look at them—some were so bold as to point quizzing glasses in their direction.

"You're doing splendidly," Hugh assured her, sensing her mounting discomfort.

"I've only taken one step inside," she replied, batting away his Spanish Coin. She did not need to be mollicoddled—though she was enormously grateful for his steady presence beside her.

"You're a duchess now," Falconbridge reminded her, turning his head to offer her a conspiratorial wink. "All that is required of you to impress people is to merely show up."

She gave a laugh at the idea, but as their hosts descended on them—all effusive smiles and enthusiasm—she realised he was entirely correct.

"Your Graces, such an honor." Lady Lavery trilled, fluttering around them like an excited sparrow, as her husband bobbed behind her, attempting to be seen. "How fortunate we are to have you both grace our humble gathering."

Hugh inclined his head with practised precision. "Lady Lavery. A fine assembly."

"Finer now you have arrived," Lord Lavery trumpeted, earning himself a pained glance from his wife for his eagerness.

They moved past their hosts toward the fray, which parted like The Red Sea for them. No wonder her husband had such self-confidence, Anna thought wryly, the whole

world rearranged itself around him.

“I think a glass of ratafia is called for,” Hugh said, once they had arrived at a quiet corner, away from the noise of the six-piece orchestra. He gave a nod to someone Anna could not see and, within seconds, a footman was by their side bearing a tray filled with glasses.

“My lady,” Hugh said, taking a glass and offering it to her.

Anna accepted it quickly, taking a grateful gulp. She coughed a little, startled by the strength of the punch.

“Lord Lavery’s balls are always well attended by the husbands of the ton, as he’s known for being liberal with the *eau de vie*,” Hugh explained, raising his own glass in an amused toast.

“I will keep that in mind.” Anna took another—smaller—sip from her glass, allowing her gaze to wander the room. She recognised a few faces from her brief sojourn into society, though most were strangers to her.

Across the room, she spotted Lady Limehouse, holding court with a few other society doyennes, and in the far distance, she sighted Lord Beaufort.

“There’s Bartie,” she cried cheerfully.

“I don’t think I can match your enthusiasm on that score,” Falconbridge was dry, though his eyes showed amusement at her excitement.

As though sensing he was being discussed, Lord Beaufort looked up, caught Anna’s gaze and gave an eager wave—which she immediately matched.

“I’ll need another glass of ratafia for this,” the duke sighed, as Lord Beaufort began to make his way toward them.

“Hush,” Anna chided, “Balls are supposed to be fun.”

“Our definitions of fun may differ.”

Anna ignored his dark mutterings, turning her gaze instead toward Lord Beaufort. He was by their side in seconds, a conspiratorial smile upon his face.

“Thank goodness you are here, your Grace,” he said, lifting her hand to his lips, “Your shining beauty quite distracts from the malevolent spirit that followed you inside.”

“Good evening to you, too, Beaufort,” Falconbridge reluctantly grinned.

“It speaks,” Bartie turned to Anna, who was thoroughly delighted, in mock surprise. “What do you think the spirit would say if I were to ask you to allow me to be the first name on your dance card?”

“It would say that it may be your last dance, Beaufort,” the duke answered, his eyes not quite matching his jesting tone.

“If it is to be my last dance, then I am glad it will be with the most beautiful woman in the room,” Bartie continued, unabashed. “What say you, your Grace?”

He offered Anna a flourishing bow, then held out his hand to her.

“Just one dance,” she agreed, shrugging helplessly at her smouldering husband.

She took Bartie’s hand and allowed him to lead her to the dancefloor, where a dozen couples were awaiting the orchestra to play. They soon struck up the first chord of

The Country Dance, and Anna joined the line of women, facing the men in the opposite line.

The dance began with light, skipping steps, and Anna found herself laughing as Bartie spun her neatly through the figures with surprising skill. As the couples wove and parted, her gaze drifted down the line to her next partner—and caught sight of a tall, elegant figure she hadn't seen earlier: Lord Gravesend.

He slipped into place opposite her with smooth ease, his expression warm. Their hands met in the center and he gave a broad smile, which she couldn't help but match.

“Your Grace,” he greeted, his words formal but his tone familiar.

“Lord Gravesend,” she replied, glad to see another friendly face amongst the fray.

“I trust you've remained unmolested by footpads of late?” he queried lightly, as they moved through the steps.

“Entirely unmolested,” she agreed, with a self-conscious laugh. “I have learned my lesson about venturing out alone in London.”

“A wise decision for a woman of your beauty,” Gravesend observed, the compliment causing Anna to blush.

“I really do wish to thank you for the kindness you showed me,” she stammered, wishing to deflect any flirtation, then scolding herself for believing him flirting at all. Gravesend was a young buck; he probably dropped compliments at the feet of every lady he danced with.

“As I said, I seek no reward,” Gravesend answered, interrupting her internal

anxieties. “Though perhaps—another night—you will promise to share another dance with me?”

Before she could respond, the music drew them apart again. Another partner took the place of Gravesend, and the dance continued until Anna was at last reunited with Bartie. Lord Beaufort kept up a steady stream of conversation as he escorted Anna back to her waiting husband, though as they neared, he gave a giddy laugh.

“I fear I have awoken the beast,” Bartie whispered, as he handed Anna over to Falconbridge.

Hugh’s bearing was rigid and haughty, his dark brow drawn into a frown of vague annoyance—he looked every inch the forbidding duke he was rumoured to be.

“I have returned her in one piece,” Bartie called, convivially, as he handed Anna over to her husband.

“My wife is not a vase, Beaufort,” Hugh drawled, taking Anna’s hand in his. “Though I thank you for treating her with the appropriate delicacy.”

Bartie gave Anna smile, bowed with exaggerated flair to Falconbridge, then melted back into the throng, leaving them alone once more.

Anna glanced at her husband; his posture had eased fractionally, the fearsome frown now vanished, and the tight set of his jaw had relaxed somewhat. He looked almost approachable—almost.

Sensing her eyes upon him, Hugh gave her a sidelong glance.

“Tell me,” he said, in a casual tone that sounded a little forced to Anna’s ear; “How do you know Gravesend?”

“We were introduced at one of the balls I attended with Lady Limehouse,” Anna lied, wondering if her new husband was omnipotent. She had conversed lightly with all her partners during the set; how strange it was that he had honed in on Gravesend, of all people.

Perhaps he can read lips, she thought wildly for a moment, before giving herself a shake. She did not need to ascribe any unbelievable powers to her husband; she found him intimidating enough as he was.

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Falconbridge's expression shifted—not quite scowling, but dark and serious.

“You should not associate with him,” he said, his tone firm.

Anna blinked. “Why ever not?”

“I have my reasons,” he replied, with the finality of a locked door.

Anna's spine stiffened with annoyance; he could not dictate to her as though she were a member of his household staff, expected to follow his word without explanation.

“You forbid me to walk alone, you forbid me to speak with certain people; am I permitted to breathe without your say-so?”

He did not rise to the bait.

“I expect to be obeyed on this matter,” he said, his tone making it clear that he would brook no argument.

Anna stared at him, stunned into silence. Finally, he had decided to claim his first marital right as a husband, yet the one he had settled for was obedience. It felt somewhat humiliating.

“My, don't you both look the picture of wedded bliss?”

Edwina arrived before them with a rustle of silk and bombazine. She wore a feathered turban upon her head, which bobbed with a cheeriness that Anna felt almost mocking.

“Mother,” Falconbridge said stiffly in response.

If Edwina noticed her son’s bad mood, she did not let on. Instead, she looped her arm through Anna’s and declared that she wished to spirit her away to mingle.

“I’d ask you to join us, dear, but you appear to have found new employment as a brooding sentry, and I would hate to interrupt your post.”

With a wink, she whisked Anna into the crowd, leaving Falconbridge to glower alone in peace.

“He can be difficult at times,” Edwina confided to Anna in a whisper, as she led her through the crowd. “But his heart is in the right place.”

Anna bit her lip to stop herself from retorting that as far as she could see, the duke had no heart. Instead, she nodded silently in agreement, her expression passive.

“He does have one,” Edwina smiled, interpreting Anna’s silence with the same startling gift of omnipotence her son possessed. “He is a curmudgeon, I’ll admit, but a lovable one. He wasn’t always this imperious and bossy. That came after Jack.”

“Jack?” Anna asked, caught off guard.

Edwina blinked. “He hasn’t told you?”

“Told me what?”

The dowager duchess hesitated for a beat, long enough for Anna to note her discomfiture.

“Jack was Hugh’s brother,” Edwina said quietly. “My firstborn son, my angel. He

died over a decade ago. A hunting accident...”

Edwina trailed off, silent for a moment, her fine-boned face a picture of pain.

“It was all very sudden. He had inherited the title at nineteen when my husband died. He was dead by twenty-two.”

Anna’s breath caught as she recalled the portrait that had seemed like a poor likeness of Hugh. Of course, it hadn’t resembled him—because it wasn’t him. It had been Jack. But why hadn’t Hugh told her?

“I am so sorry for your loss. I did not know—Hugh never told me,” she stammered.

Edwina sighed and took a glass of ratafia from a passing tray.

“Yes, well. Hugh doesn’t speak of it. Not to anyone. I think he decided that grieving was an indulgence unbefitting of a duke. He seems to believe that if he can just control everything and everyone, then the worst will never happen again. Very annoying, but as I said, his heart is in the right place. Ah! There is Lady Limehouse. Come, she has been seeking to speak with you all evening.”

Anna allowed Edwina draw her away, into the chattering tide of the ballroom toward Lady Limehouse, but her thoughts remained elsewhere. The man she had married—that highhanded, mysterious creature—was suddenly more complicated than she’d imagined. Was he motivated by a grief so deeply buried that he could not even acknowledge it when asked by his wife? The wife he had decided he wished to save, without being asked, without consideration of the consequences.

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Anna could see the wound now, raw beneath the hard exterior, and she could even pity the boy he must have been—stripped of a brother, thrust into a title, believing he should endure. But she had not asked to be another fixture in his world of rigid order and command. She might understand his hurt, but she would not be ruled by it.

If the Duke of Falconbridge wished to have her for his wife, then he would have to reckon with the fact that she was not a fragile thing to guard, but a woman with her own mind, her own demands. Because if he thought love was obedience, he was in for a very long marriage indeed.

Anna endured the rest of the evening wearing a smile so false it made her jaw ache. At midnight, when Hugh suggested they might leave, she agreed easily.

They rode home in silence, both tense and coiled, but refusing to acknowledge it. Once inside Falconbridge House, Anna bid him a cool goodnight. Though her body hummed with need for him, she could not bear to lose control again in front of a man who refused to let his guard down before her.

It was all give and no take, she mused, as Josie assisted her with the many ties and stays of the elaborate gown she wore.

“I can manage from here, Josie,” Anna smiled, once she had been freed from the garment.

“I’ll take this back to my room, sponge it and hang it down there,” Josie agreed with a half-yawn, too tired to even attempt to pretend that she wanted to stay. Anna felt a stab of pity for her; Josie had not had to contend with many late-nights in Whitby.

Once alone, Anna removed the last of her clothes and donned one of her old night-rails. She took herself to the cosy chair by the fire to brush out her hair, still fuming at the inequality she was expected to accept from the man who had insisted she marry him.

Would he come to her tonight?

She stilled as she realised that she did not have to passively wait for him to appear. The door between their room opened both ways.

Emboldened by indignation, she stood and swept across the plush carpet to his chamber. The door handle pushed down easily beneath her hand.

Inside, she found Hugh in a state of half-undress; shirt loose, braces fallen to his hips. He looked up as she entered, his expression closed.

“Is something wrong?” he questioned calmly, his blue eyes tracking her approach.

“Yes,” she answered, refusing to be intimidated by his maddening restraint. He could at least have the decency to look surprised at finding her in his private chambers.

“I’m afraid that I cannot put whatever ails you to right, if you do not elaborate,” he said, his composure as rigid as his posture.

He wanted a response, something he could control and fix. She would not oblige him this time with an answer he could counter.

Hugh watched carefully as she closed the space between them. This close, she could see the evening stubble that darkened his throat and chin. He looked less like a duke and more like a man. A man caught somewhat off guard. A man she could unravel.

Anna lifted her hand to brush her fingers along the stubble-roughened line of his jaw, trailing them down his throat, to the strong beat of his pulse.

His hands moved to draw her to him, but despite the desire in her belly, she resisted his pull.

“No,” she breathed, standing on tip-toe to whisper against his ear. “I’m in charge this time.”

Before he could reply, she brought her lips to his, allowing herself for a moment to sink against his warm strength. His hands cupped her bottom, pulling her against his hardness. Anna growled in frustration and longing; it was difficult to feel in control when his touch made her feverish.

She pulled his shirt from his waistband, tugging it up with impatience. He obliged her by lifting the garment over his head, revealing a broad chest, neat waist, and lean stomach. Her hands roved his bare skin, her touch eliciting a sharp inhale of breath from him.

Emboldened, her fingers moved lower, to the row of buttons at his waistband. She looked up, momentarily uncertain of her plan.

“Dear God, don’t stop,” he groaned, the agony in his voice thrilling her.

She hesitated, both afraid and wanting to commit to memory this moment: the Duke of Falconbridge undone, desperate, utterly hers.

Her hand slipped inside his trousers, bold but tentative, fingers wrapping around his hardness.

“It feels silky,” she whispered, glancing up at him with surprise.

“Be my guest and feel away,” he replied, with a pained, breathless laugh.

He kissed the top of her head, then his hand covered hers to guide her.

“Harder,” he whispered against her hair, once she had found a rhythm.

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She brought her lips to his chest as her hand pleased him, exploring his skin with her mouth, relishing the taste of him.

An instinctive, primal part of her urged her to her knees; she wanted to taste all of him, just as he had tasted her.

“Anna—” Hugh’s voice broke, caught somewhere between protest and plea as she sank to her knees. “You don’t have to—”

“I want to.”

That stopped him. He looked down at her, eyes wild with raw and reverent desire. His polish and control had disappeared, leaving in its place pulsing, masculine need.

She leaned in, lips brushing the tip, tasting salt and skin. When she took him into her mouth, his whole body shuddered and he swore an involuntary epithet.

She explored him carefully, learning the rhythm that made him groan, the pressure that made his hips buck. She wasn’t practised, but she was determined to unravel him.

“Christ, Anna...” he called out her name like it hurt, his hips bucking, his thighs rigid with tension.

His hands gripped her hair, pulling her closer, as he spilled into her mouth.

He held her there for a second, his entire body shaking. In that moment, she felt

gloriously powerful.

She pulled back slowly, lips swollen, breath unsteady. She rose, calm and quiet, smoothing her night-rail as she stood.

He pulled her toward him again, into an exhausted embrace. His head rested against hers, his mouth pressed against her hair.

“What am I to do with you?” he whispered into her ear, his tone almost anguished.

“Nothing,” she shrugged; tonight she had been the one to act.

His thumb brushed her lower lip, his eyes searching hers. "I would very much like to return the favour."

Anna felt desire stir in her belly, but she resisted.

"Not tonight," she stated, stepping back from his embrace with resolve. "Tonight was about proving a point."

He watched her retreat, desire and respect warring in his expression. "And what point was that, precisely?"

At the door, she paused, glancing over her shoulder. "That you are not the only one with power, your Grace."

She left then, cherishing the look of astonishment on his handsome face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DRAWING ROOM of White's hummed with chatter, as Hugh nursed his second

glass of brandy. The afternoon sun filtered through the club's famed bow-window, casting a warm glow on the members celebrating the narrow passage of Thorncastle's abolition bill. Hugh was present only in body, for his mind insisted on repeatedly wandering back to the night before—to Anna.

"To progress," the Duke of Thorncastle, seated opposite him, interrupted his reverie with another toast to their success. As the bill's passage had come down to just two votes, Thorncastle was rather elated—and already a little inebriated.

"And to Graystone," Hugh added, for word had broken that morning that the duke had finally succumbed to his injuries.

The two men clinked glasses, downing the amber liquid within with appropriate gravitas for their fallen peer.

"Do you know," Thorncastle leaned in, his voice lowered. "The more that I think on it, the more suspicious I become of how Graystone met his end."

"Then try not to think on it," Hugh advised, his voice a warning. It would not do for their friend Lord Nathan Lewisham—the newly minted Duke of Graystone—to be plagued by rumours about his brother's death, upon his return to England. Grieving a brother was difficult enough without that, as Hugh well knew.

"He was a ruddy fine whip," Thorncastle mused, the alcohol buffering his ego from the harshness of Hugh's reply. "It makes no sense to me."

"Who would have cause to want Graystone dead?" Hugh countered, "The only person set to benefit is Nate, and—apart from being away on the continent fighting a war—he did not want the title."

"It's just odd," Thorncastle surrendered, with a hopeless shrug. "That's all. If Nate

wasn't to inherit, then I would suspect the young Lord Lewisham had a hand in the accident. There's something unlikable about the lad."

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“It might be the company he keeps,” Hugh scowled, recalling Lewisham’s connection to Lord Gravesend.

“Look at us, two old men, disapproving of the younger set,” Thorncastle laughed, as he signalled for the footman to top-up their glasses. “We have both been domesticated, old friend.”

“I didn’t want to say, but now that you mention it, you have gone a little soft around the middle since you leg-shackled yourself,” Hugh quipped.

This was a lie; Thorncastle remained as fit and trim as ever. Though, something about him had fundamentally changed since he had married his duchess less than a month ago. The rakish edge that had defined him for years had mellowed into something Hugh couldn't quite name. Contentment, perhaps.

“They do say men fall into love and into fat at the same time,” Thorncastle was entirely nonplussed by Hugh’s ribbing—in fact, he looked rather pleased with himself.

Hugh blinked at the casual ease with which his old friend—who the ton had once dubbed The Devil of Thorncastle due to his rakish ways—mentioned the word love.

“How fares married life for you?” Thorncastle queried, perhaps sensing Hugh’s unease.

Hugh looked down at the glass, swirling the amber liquid inside thoughtfully.

“I would say it is not what I had anticipated, but that would make it sound like I put some thought into the act,” he confessed, ruefully.

“Yes, Bartie informed me that he was there when Cupid’s arrow struck,” Thorncastle raised his brows in amusement. “You did always like to act first and think later—even during our Eton days.”

“My wife is less impressed by my decisiveness,” Hugh returned his gaze to his glass, despondent.

“Marriage is a partnership,” Thorncastle advised, his tone gentle. “Decisions must be made together.”

“Even when I know best?” Hugh countered, a little indignant.

“Lud,” Thorncastle pressed a hand to his brow as though pained. “We will be burying another duke soon enough, if you attempt to tell your wife you know what’s best for her.”

“I merely worry about her safety and wellbeing,” Hugh groused—what was wrong with a husband wishing to protect his wife?

“Then tell her that, that at least sounds romantic,” Thorncastle cast him a look of half-despair, though his expression softened as he took in Hugh’s irritable state.

“Love does funny things to a man,” he noted. Then he raised his glass in toast, his eyes dancing with devilment.

“You should spend less time with your cousin,” Hugh retorted, pushing back his chair to leave. “Bartie is filling your head with romantic tosh. Enjoy the rest of the brandy, Thorncastle.”

With a stiff nod, Hugh left his—highly amused—friend to finish the decanter alone. He swept from the club to his carriage, instructing his driver to take him home.

Inside Falconbridge House, Hugh was greeted by bustling activity and noise, instead of its usual austere silence.

One of the maids hurried past, bearing a vase of fresh flowers, followed by another maid headed in the opposite direction, also bearing a floral arrangement.

“Reeves,” Hugh called in a slight panicked voice, as he spotted the underbutler descending the stairs, bearing a painting in a gilt frame. “Has someone died?”

“No one is dead, Your Grace,” Reeves answered breathlessly, as he reached the bottom step. “It’s just Her Grace rearranging a few things around the house. She asked us to move some of the paintings.”

Hugh raised his brows in disbelief; what was wrong with the paintings? The walls had always been adorned with depictions of horses, ships, hunting scenes, and naval battles—respectable, expensive, and masculine paintings. He had never given them a second thought; they were simply there.

Like a lightskirt to a redcoat, Hugh followed the sound of Anna’s lilting voice to the parlour room. He paused at the threshold of the door, watching unseen as his wife directed two footmen on the placement of a landscape where a particularly gruesome depiction of the Battle of Blenheim had once hung.

She was radiant; her cheeks pink from exertion, her hair escaping its pins as she gestured animatedly. She looked so at home in this space that Hugh felt almost like an interloper. Sensing his gaze, she turned, her blue eyes wary.

“It looks well,” Hugh offered, gesturing to the new painting.

“I decided to make a few changes,” she replied, tilting her chin defiantly, as though she expected an argument.

The two footmen departed swiftly, anticipating an awkward exchange. Guilt prickled Hugh’s conscience; did she expect to battle with him at every turn? Did she think that he was so controlling that he would argue with her over a few aesthetic changes?

He glanced around the room, his eyes taking in the few new feminine touches she had added. New cushions adorned the couches, a pile of periodicals and books rested on the end table, a basket of sewing sat on the Queen Anne chair beside the fireplace; the long disused parlour now looked homely.

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“It looks much better,” Hugh said firmly, before adding. “Not to say that you need my approval to make changes. This is your home after all.”

She nodded in agreement, her eyes finally meeting his.

“I would like it to feel more like home,” she said, her simple statement sounding to Hugh’s ear rather loaded.

“I would like you to feel more at home,” he replied, clearing his throat awkwardly. Dash it, why was it so difficult to put into words what he wanted to say?

His gaze travelled from the cheerful landscape to the pianoforte, atop which sat a fresh vase of flowers. He frowned then, as he noticed something was missing.

“The other portrait?” he questioned anxiously. He did not care a fig about the expensive Turner piece she had removed but the portrait of Jack was priceless—to him, at least.

“I thought it a shame to hide it away in a room you rarely visit,” she answered, her tone even but her words, once again, heavy with meaning. “I had it moved to the library.”

“Very good,” Hugh answered, his racing heart returning to a steadier rhythm now he knew that it had not been consigned to the kindling pile. He shifted a little, under her watchful gaze. She was waiting for him to tell her about Jack—heavens only knew why, for she had obviously unearthed the truth of the story herself.

Well, most of it. Only Hugh knew the true tale.

“Jack was my older brother,” Hugh said stiffly. His words sounded wooden, though he reasoned that was because he’d not had much practice saying those words over the last decade. Jack. Brother. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d said that in a sentence to anyone.

“He died many years ago,” he finished, feeling rather silly for stating what was blatantly obvious. If Jack had not died, Hugh would not be standing before her as the Duke of Falconbridge.

“You don’t like to talk about him.”

Her soft words were delivered not as a question but as a statement. Nervously, Hugh lifted his eyes to meet hers and found they were brimming with warmth and understanding. He suddenly yearned for her comforting touch—longed to hold her close, bury his head in her hair and whisper the heavy secret he had carried for so long.

"No," he said, after a heavy pause. "No, I think I should like very much to speak of him. Just, perhaps not all at once."

He prayed silently that she would take the hint, for his throat felt tight and if he wasn’t two-and-thirty years of age and holder of one of England’s most powerful titles, he could have sworn that he might cry.

"Of course," Anna said, her voice gentle as she took a step toward him. "I will not force you. Only when you are ready."

Hugh inclined his head graciously, unable to voice a reply to her kind offer. Inwardly he wanted to laugh aloud at his pompous declaration to Thorncastle, that he knew

what was best for his wife. Anna was omnipotent; in less than a week of married life, she had unearthed his deepest wound and gently forced him to confront it.

Anna moved closer still, until she stood just before him, her face upturned to his. She rose onto her tiptoes, one small hand coming to rest upon his chest.

“Thank you for telling me,” she whispered, before placing a kiss upon his lips.

Hugh stilled, shocked that his vulnerability had not pushed her away but had drawn her to him. The kiss was gentle at first, tentative, a peace offering of sorts. Anna’s fingertips pressed against his waistcoat, and Hugh felt the warmth of her touch even through the layers of fabric.

Something broke loose within him; passion mixed with the heady relief of baring his pain to another. Of showing someone a portion of his battered soul and finding not revulsion, but compassion. His arms encircled her waist, drawing her closer as the kiss deepened. She responded eagerly, her arms encircling his neck, her passion matching his.

A low sound escaped Hugh’s throat as he gently pushed her backward, until her shoulders met the wall beside the newly hung landscape. His body pressed against hers, propriety forgotten as desire overwhelmed him. His hands roved her body, caressing her curves beneath the fabric of her dress.

He longed to possess her completely; to feel himself inside her. He wanted, he realised with shock, to join their two bodies as one.

“Anna,” he groaned, as her fingers tangled in his hair.

“Don’t stop,” she whispered against his lips, unaware that she was in grave danger of ceding her virginity to him, upright against a wall, like a common tavern wench.

He pulled back slightly, breathing hard. Her eyes were dazed, her lips reddened from his kisses, her hair half-undone around her flushed face.

"We shouldn't," he managed, even as his aching cock protested his words. "Not here."

A sharp knock at the door confirmed his suspicions that the parlour-room was not the correct venue in which to finally consummate their marriage. They sprang apart, Anna smoothing her hair as Hugh adjusted his cravat.

"Yes?" Hugh called, his voice rough.

The door remained closed as Reeves spoke from the other side.

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"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but the Dowager Duchess has arrived and requests an immediate audience."

Hugh shot Anna a look of mingled frustration and amusement.

"My mother's timing is impeccable," he murmured, as he assisted her with fixing her rumpled dress. He smoothed his own hair, straightened his coat, and braced himself for Edwina's arrival.

His mother appeared a few minutes later, her eyes wide as she took in the changes to the parlour room.

"Redecorating?" she queried, her eyes swiveling between the two.

"Just adding a few touches," Anna answered, waving an airy arm around the room. "To make the place feel more homely."

Edwina nodded her approval, her gaze taking in every new feminine addition to the room.

"Very good," she smiled, as she took a seat on the sofa. "Start downstairs first, then tackle the upstairs rooms. There is a bedchamber just off the ducal suite which would be perfect as a nursery."

Hugh stifled a smile as he watched Anna's eyebrows disappear into her hairline. His mother was not known for great tact or diplomacy when it came to pushing her personal agenda.

“I believe that is my cue to leave,” Hugh decided, meeting Anna’s look of outrage with a sweet smile. “I know when my opinion is not required.”

“He’d have every room decorated with naval vessels if he had his way,” Edwina concurred to Anna, her expression one of vague horror. “Men; if it’s not ships, it’s carriages.”

“We are a simple species,” Hugh agreed solemnly. He humoured his mother only slightly, for the mention of nurseries had put the image of Anna increasing with his child into mind. He felt a sudden stab of primitive desire at the very idea, and could only conclude that men truly were of an antediluvian disposition as compared to the fairer sex.

Hugh gently excused himself to retire to his library but once outside the confines of the parlour room, he changed his mind on his destination. He called for his carriage to take him to Pickering Place and a half-hour later, he found himself seated in Daniel Shatter’s office.

It was a room he knew well. It was the room he had sat in a week after Jack’s funeral and learned that his brother owed a small fortune in gambling debts. Shatter had offered—rather magnanimously—to purchase all Jack’s vowels, if Hugh swore to repay them in time. With some interest, of course.

It had taken Hugh a year to repay the loan; a year of righting neglected estates, investing profits in merchant activity, and winning handsomely at the card tables.

Hugh had never asked why Shatter had offered to help him. Perhaps he had recognised Hugh’s tenacity to win. Perhaps he had calculated the benefit of having a duke in his debt. Perhaps he had guessed just how Jack’s life had ended, and had felt a modicum of pity for Hugh.

Hugh never asked and Shatter would never tell, and because of that a grudging respect of sorts had grown between the two men. Not friendship—Daniel Shatter did not keep friends—but an acknowledgment of sorts that they were equals.

“A drink, your Grace?” Shatter asked, gesturing to his well-stocked drinks cabinet.

“Not this evening,” Hugh declined, “I merely wished to enquire after our mutual friend. He has not appeared since we last spoke.”

Shatter shrugged his broad shoulders to indicate that he too knew nothing of Lord Mosely’s current whereabouts.

“I can’t tell you where Lord Mosley is, your Grace,” he finally answered with a sigh. “But I can tell you where he isn’t. He’s not in any gaming hells around the city, he’s not running up anymore debts. Perhaps he’s learned his lesson and returned home to lick his wounds?”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Hugh prayed aloud, to which Shatter raised two dark brows in amusement.

“Chance and I are on intimate terms, your Grace; you’ll forgive me if I don’t wager on Mosley having reformed.” Shatter replied dryly, before returning his gaze to the ledgers strewn across the table.

Presuming himself dismissed, Hugh departed for home, fully intending—despite Shatter’s cynicism—to send a footman to Whitby in search of Lord Mosley. Strangers things had happened than a lost cause reforming, he thought with a wry grin.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DESPITE MANY ATTEMPTS at cajoling Anna into pledging to bear her son twelve children, the only pound of flesh Edwina had managed to extract was a promise that they would attend Lord and Lady Hargreaves' musicale that evening. Which is why Anna now found herself—at the interval of an excruciating set—standing on the veranda of the Hargreaves' Belgravia mansion, taking the night air to steady her nerves.

Hugh—like most of the menfolk—had vanished the moment the Hargreaves' three daughters began their shrill assault on the pianoforte. Ostensibly, he had slipped out for a quick cheroot, though given that he had not returned, Anna presumed he had gone all the way to the South Americas to fetch it.

In truth, she did not mind the reprieve from his all-consuming presence.

She had not meant to kiss him in the parlour. She had certainly not meant to let herself be pressed against the wainscoting like some hapless tavern wench. And though she had not meant for it to happen, she could not pretend she that had not enjoyed it.

A blush stained her cheeks and she was glad for the night air that cooled her feverish skin.

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From across the garden came the muffled sounds of two guests enjoying each other's company with an enthusiasm more suited to a brothel than a musicale. Their unrestrained passion might, Anna thought wryly, be less a result of romance and more a desperate response to the auditory assault inflicted by the Misses Hargreaves.

She took a measured sip of her ratafia, holding the glass a moment against her still-bruised lips.

"An angel bathed in moonlight," a voice called.

Startled, Anna turned.

Lord Gravesend stood at the open French doors, the lamplight behind him casting his tall frame in shadow. His words and air of arrogance put Anna to mind, for a moment, of Hugh on their first meeting.

"My lord, I was just taking some air," Anna replied, ignoring his outrageous compliment.

"Alone?" Gravesend observed, as he took a step toward her. His voice sounded alarmingly husky to Anna's ear.

"My husband is partaking in a cheroot," Anna answered firmly. Invoking the image of Falconbridge was sure to put a stumble in his step.

"How careless he is with you," Gravesend's wry smile flashed white in the dimness. "If you were my wife I would never leave you unattended."

“I am not your wife, my lord,” Anna answered pointedly, setting her ratafia glass down upon the stone ledge. She lifted the hem of her skirts to depart but Gravesend’s hand shot out to encircle her wrist.

Anna stilled, her heart pounding in her chest. Did her erstwhile rescuer intend to steal a liberty?

“Falconbridge made certain no one else could have you,” the young lord said his tone laced with pity as he released her from his grip. “For a man so intent on having you, I was surprised to see him in The Bird’s Nest, gambling on his wedding night. Though, His Grace does love to chase a win; I was present the night that he won your hand. I regret that I was unable to prevent your father falling for his dastardly scheme.”

Anna stood riveted to the spot as his words washed over her. That Gravesend had borne witness to the most pivotal moment of her life and she had not, felt akin to a bodily assault.

“His Grace likes to back men into a corner before he ruins them,” Gravesend continued, his pale eyes gleaming in the darkness. “Anyone could see that your father was in too deep—that he could not control the compulsion. A gentleman would have called time, but your husband pushed him and pushed him, until...”

Anna closed her eyes, allowing his sentence to remain unfinished. They both knew how the tale ended; Anna’s hand to the duke, her heart broken by her father.

Suddenly, she knew just why Falconbridge had forbade her from associating with Gravesend. He did not want her to learn from an eye-witness his perfidy.

“Do you know where he is?” she whispered urgently, as the sound of the Hargreaves girls warming up for the second round drifted across the night air. “My father, do you know where he is? He has not been seen since that night.”

Gravesend paused long enough for Anna to ascertain that the young lord was as clueless to her father's whereabouts as she.

"I shall endeavour to find out," he swore.

"Thank you, my lord," she inclined her head graciously. The notes from the painoforte became more insistent and Anna turned her head to the door.

"I must return," she said, touching a distracted hand to her hair.

"I would offer to escort you inside, your Grace, but I do not think it wise." Gravesend quipped.

He was correct; it would not do for her to be seen emerging through the French doors with a man who was not her husband. Nor would it do for her husband to see her accompanied by a man he had forbidden her to speak with.

"If you learn anything of my father—"

"I will send for you at once," Gravesend assured her.

Anna smiled wanly at the young man before returning inside. The room was far more crowded than when she had left; the absent men-folk had reappeared to show their faces for the second half of the performance.

Anna spotted Hugh at once, for he towered over most of the other guests. Beside him stood Edwina—even from across the room, Anna could tell they were discussing her whereabouts. Nervously, she cast an eye over her shoulder, just in time to see Gravesend slip through the French doors. When she turned her gaze back to her husband, she realised that his eyes were on her.

His expression was unreadable, as his gaze slipped from Anna to the young lord a few paces behind her.

Anna knew a moment of guilt for defying his orders but she quashed it quickly. She was not Falconbridge's servant, she was his wife. The wife he had acquired through the most dubious means, if Gravesend was to be believed.

“Oh, Anna, there you are!”

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Edwina's satin-gloved hand rose high in the air as she sighted her daughter-in-law, her smile of excitement contrasting sharply with her son's impassive expression and set jaw.

"Hugh has returned for the second-half," Edwina whispered, as Anna reached their side. "As have all the other husbands. I've never known so many men to takesolong going for a cheroot."

"Men are seldom where they say they'll be, or who they say they are," Anna answered glibly.

She turned her back on her husband, ignoring his penetrating gaze, and allowed Edwina to lead the way back to their seats. As the Misses Hargreaves resumed their shrill mockery of harmony, Anna sat still, her expression serene—her thoughts anything but.

The carriage ride home was fraught with tension. Anna tucked herself into one corner of the compartment, unwilling to allow her thigh even brush against her husband's. The more she tried to ignore his presence, the more it filled her awareness. He was the moon and she was but the tide, drawn toward him despite herself—happy to dash herself against the cliffs at his command.

"I spoke with an acquaintance regarding your father earlier."

Finally he spoke, after long minutes of silence.

Anna tilted her head to indicate that she was listening, her breath catching with

nerves.

“Lord Mosley has not been seen in London, since the wedding,” Hugh continued, his eyes watching her carefully. “He has run up no new debt, that my connection knows of.”

Anna nodded, both relieved and made more anxious by his words. If her father was not gambling and indulging his vices, then where was he?

“Do you think he is dead?” she whispered, voicing the worst of her fears. She thought on Gravesend’s testimony; that when last sighted, her father was a broken man. Broken at the hands of the husband seated opposite her. Destroyed men did desperate things.

“No,” Hugh’s answer was delivered so confidently, that Anna felt a moment of relief.

“Someone would have discovered his body,” he continued, when Anna cast him another searching look.

“Of course,” she inclined her head graciously, both galled and gladdened by his blunt honesty.

“I have sent a rider to Whitby, to see if he has simply returned to his estate,” he finished, shrugging his wide shoulders. “Perhaps your father learned his lesson.”

“You were glad to teach it to him,” she stated, tilting her chin as his gaze swept over her.

“I find no pleasure in another man’s misery,” he replied, his voice low, deadly. “But I do not regret plucking you from his careless grasp.”

Blood flowed through Anna's veins; anger mixed with unspent desire. He was so cool, so powerful, so utterly composed—she longed to undo him. She longed for him to express even some of the tempest that raged within her whenever he was near.

The carriage drew to a halt, killing the acerbic retort at the tip of her tongue. Hugh opened the door to assist her out. When her slippered feet landed on the footpath, he did not release his grip on her elbow.

Silently, purposefully, he lead her inside. Through the front door, the dimly lit entrance hall, and up the stairs to her bedchamber.

“Josephine your services are not required this evening,” Falconbridge informed Josie, who had materialised from the dressing room at the sound of their arrival.

Josie blushed, unable to meet Anna's eye, and scurried away quickly.

As the door clicked shut, signaling that they were now alone, Anna whirled to face her husband.

“Your arrogance knows no bounds,” she whispered, mortified that Josie thought herself dismissed on account of their passion.

“My arrogance?” the duke remained his usual cool, composed self—but his voice held a note of anger, that terrified Anna a little. “This from the woman who not only disobeyed my only order but did it flagrantly in front of me.”

“I am not your subordinate,” Anna scowled, not denying his accusation. Her finger—of its own accord—reached out to prod his chest. Like the rest of him, it was rock hard, unyielding.

“You do not get to issue arbitrary orders and expect me to fall in line,” she continued,

prodding him again. She knew that she was provoking him but she wanted some sort of reaction from him—something to prove that he was not made of stone.

Hugh's hand came down and engulfed hers, before pulling her against him. He brought his face close to hers, his breath ragged, his eyes burning.

“I am trying to protect you.”

A moment of silence followed his rasped words. Both were utterly still as he held her in his arms, like two predators waiting for the other to make the first move.

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If asked later, Anna could not honestly say who yielded first. All she knew was that his lips were upon hers, hungry and demanding. Her hands threaded through his thick hair as he pressed himself against her.

Trembling with want, she trailed a path from the nape of his neck to the front of his chest where, with trembling fingers she sought to free the buttons of his waist coat.

Urgency filled her every move—and his. He palmed her erect nipples beneath her gown, growling with annoyance to find them encased beneath gossamer and silk.

Their mouths never parted as they each undressed the other with clumsy, hurried hands, until they were both stripped bare. They sank to the carpet, limbs entwined, where Hugh covered her body with his own.

His mouth left hers, trailing hot kisses down her neck which made her want to weep with need. When he at last caught one of her taut nipples in his mouth, she gave a cry of relief.

His hands roved the rest of her body, his fingers caressing a path along the soft virgin skin of her inner thigh. He nudged her legs apart, though she needed no encouragement to open herself for him.

“You’re so wet,” he whispered huskily into her ear, as his fingers caressed her slick crease. He moved then to the pearl of her pleasure, teasingly it gently with his thumb.

“Please,” Anna gasped, her reserve completely stripped. She wanted him, needed him, to sate the burning ache between her legs. Her hips arched, inviting him to take

what was his; to plunder her completely.

He uttered an epithet as, in acceptance of her invitation, he placed himself between her legs. She was pinned down on either side by two bronze arms, bronzed from the sun, sinewy with muscle. She was powerless against him, she realised; though his sheer size and strength did not frighten her, it thrilled her.

“Christ,” Hugh uttered, as he rubbed the thick, hard length of his desire against her wetness.

Anna shivered, both with need and the cool draught which curled around them.

Above her, Hugh stilled.

“You’re cold,” he whispered, rolling off from on top of her to reach for his coat, discarded on the floor beside them. He covered her with it, his hands briskly rubbing her arms to warm her.

“It was but a draught,” Anna protested but he paid her no heed.

Instead, he assisted her to her feet in what would have been a most chivalrous manner, were it not for the fact that he was utterly naked and sporting an enormous erection.

“Hugh,” Anna stuttered as she finally found her voice. “What—?”

He turned to gaze down at her, his expression almost pained.

“Not like this,” he answered, his voice gruff. “Not in anger, not on the floor like we are rutting animals.”

Not when you hate me.

He did not say it aloud, but Anna could guess. And she could guess because she wasn't entirely certain that she didn't hate him.

They had reached the bed now, and he removed his coat from her shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor. He worshiped her naked form with his eyes for a moment, his expression pained. Then he reached for her hand and guided it between her legs.

"Touch yourself if you need some relief," he advised, his tone wry. "That's my plan."

With a surprisingly gentle kiss to the top of her head, he left for his own chamber. The door clicked shut behind him.

Anna stood alone, trembling with cold and something far more dangerous. Her body ached with want, her skin tingling where he had touched her—but it was her heart which troubled her most. Just that afternoon it had been filled with hope but now it felt scorched, it burned. Perhaps it was hatred she felt. Or perhaps it was just the rage of desire denied.

She couldn't tell the difference anymore—and that frightened her most of all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HUGH WOKE WITH a start, his body tense and unsatisfied. He had spent the night restlessly turning, sleep finally claiming him only to deliver dreams of Anna. In them, he had not hesitated—he had claimed her fully, right there on the carpet of her bedchamber.

Sleep, he thought wryly as he rolled from his bed, was the only place he might ever claim Anna's body as his.

Dawn had long since broken; he was late for his session at Lords. With Thompson's assistance, he bathed and dressed quickly, his mind replaying the evening before. Gravesend hovered at the forefront of his thoughts, and he wondered what exactly had passed between the young lord and Anna. Something had shifted in her after they spoke.

He made his way to the dining room, expecting it to be empty—and stopped short. Anna was seated at the far end of the table, her golden hair swept up like a halo.

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"Good morning," she offered by way of greeting. Her tone was cool but at least she was speaking to him.

"This is unexpected," Hugh noted, as he took his seat.

A footman poured coffee for him, then quietly withdrew, closing the door behind him.

"I wished to speak with you," she said, her fingers fidgeting with the white tablecloth.

"About Lord Gravesend, I presume?" Hugh guessed, meeting her cool gaze with one of his own.

"Yes." Anna took a fortifying sip of tea, while Hugh wished that his coffee was laced with something stronger. "I do not understand your objection to him. He seems perfectly amiable."

It was almost a pity that the question was so reasonable, for Hugh's visceral response to Gravesend was anything but. He knew his feelings about the lad were based on a hunch and a word of caution—from Bartie of all people—but he knew too that his gut instinct was correct.

"Gravesend is not to be trusted," Hugh said simply, setting down his fork.

"So you have said," Anna noted, "But that is not an explanation. I require more than vague pronouncements, Hugh. Why should I not speak with him?"

Hugh leaned back in his chair, studying her. He could see the determination in the set of her jaw, the stubborn tilt of her chin. She would not be put off with half-truths.

"Because he has a vendetta against me, and he will use you to exact it," he said finally. "He bears me ill will for reasons of his own making, and I fear he means to hurt me through you."

Her expression softened slightly. "What reasons?"

"I exposed him cheating at cards," Hugh said with a shrug. "It may not sound like much, but men don't take kindly to having their reputations ruined."

"Nor do women," Anna was dry. "Has he threatened you at all? Has he expressed these plans of revenge to anyone, or..?"

Anna allowed her questions to trail off unanswered. She lifted her tea again to her lips, her eyes regarding Hugh shrewdly over the rim.

"He is not the type to openly threaten," Hugh set down his coffee cup, a little irritated that she did not believe him. "But his intentions are clear; his sudden interest in you is no coincidence."

"He was there the night you won my hand from my father," she answered, after a slight pause. "He told me that he was there to witness it. Perhaps that is why he has taken a sudden interest in me? You made me interesting."

Hugh felt a cold weight settle in his stomach as he envisioned Gravesend whispering in Anna's ear during a private tête-à-tête. He opened his mouth to defend himself, but Anna continued before he had a chance.

"He also claimed that you spent our wedding night gambling at The Bird's Nest. Is

that true?" she added, delivering her final blow as swift and calm as any pugilist.

The question hung in the air between them. Hugh hesitated, caught between the truth that would damn him and a lie that would insult her intelligence.

His silence was answer enough.

"I see," she whispered, her lips pressed thin. "I do not know who to believe anymore. My father abandoned me. You purchased me like chattel. You claim that it is you who speaks the truth and not Gravesend, and yet you would lie to me too. Tell me this, your Grace, who can I trust?"

She stood abruptly, trembling with indignation.

Hugh rose as well, fighting the urge to reach for her. "You can trust me to protect you, Anna. Whatever else you may think of me, believe that."

"Protect me?" A bitter laugh escaped her lips. "From whom? The man who might tell me the truth about my husband?"

"Gravesend is dangerous—"

"And you are not?" she challenged. "A man who won my hand in a card game, who spent his wedding night at the card tables instead of with his bride?"

"I did not want to take you until you were ready," Hugh reminded her—he had told her as much. Surely she could see that this is why he had sought distraction in a gaming hell.

He had not wanted to force her into his bed. He had wanted her willing, he had wanted her ready...

He had wanted all of her, heart included.

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The realisation struck him like a physical blow; his yearning a name. Love.

"You keep secrets," she continued, unaware of his inner tumult. "About my father. About Gravesend. About yourself. How can I believe anything you say when you hide so much?"

"Anna—"

But she was already moving toward the door, her skirts swishing with her haste. "Please excuse me, your Grace. I have some urgent engagements this morning."

She left before he could form a response, the door closing firmly behind her.

Hugh sank into his chair, the food before him forgotten. The weight of his many foolish choices pressed down upon him. Every misstep had brought him to this moment—alone, aching, and afraid that Anna was forever lost to him.

With a muttered curse, he pushed away from the table and strode from the room. He needed to clear his head before his session at Lords.

He made for the library, where he hastily poured himself a tot of whiskey for his frayed nerves. He then retrieved his notes from his desk, shuffling through the papers absently, as he tried to recall just what would be debated in Parliament that day.

Above the mantel, Jack's portrait stared down at him accusingly.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Hugh muttered to the painted face. "Not everyone

has your charm with women."

The portrait offered no absolution. Perhaps his seeking absolution from a painting was the first sign of madness, Hugh thought with despair.

He hastily arranged the papers into a neat pile and called for his carriage. Only the stultifying atmosphere of The House of Lords had the power to quiet his racing mind.

After several hours spent listening to a debate on agricultural reforms, Hugh was in dire need of a drink. He made for White's, where the familiar comfort of leather chairs, mahogany paneling, and masculine hush offered a momentary respite from his troubled thoughts.

"Falconbridge," Lord Beaufort materialised the moment the footman set down a decanter of brandy. "Do you know, you're just the man I was hoping to see."

Hugh lifted his glass in greeting; he wasn't feeling particularly sociable, but Bartie's inane chatter could usually be managed with the odd nod or murmur of "I see".

"I...," Beaufort began, uncharacteristically uncomfortable. "There's a matter I thought should be brought to your attention."

Something in his tone made Hugh sit straighter. Bartie did not opt for gravity when given a choice.

"Go on."

"It concerns your duchess," Beaufort continued, lowering his voice. "There are rumors circulating. Whispers that she has formed an attachment to Lord Gravesend."

Hugh's grip tightened on his glass. "What sort of attachment?"

"That they have been seen in intimate conversation. That they exchange notes." Bartie shifted uncomfortably. "That she may be contemplating an indiscretion."

"Who is saying this?" Hugh demanded, his voice dangerously quiet.

"It's all over the clubs. I believe it started with Lord Percival, who claims to have heard it from Gravesend himself."

Of course. The snake would not dare approach Hugh directly, but he would happily poison Anna's reputation among the ton. Gravesend was attempting an Old Testament approach: a reputation for a reputation.

"It's nonsense," Hugh said firmly. "My wife is beyond reproach."

"I knew as much," Bartie nodded, looking relieved that Hugh seemed disinclined to shoot the messenger. "I thought you should hear it from a friend rather than overhear it in passing. I did tell my source that Gravesend might hold a grudge against you, after all that funny-business in The Bird's Nest."

"Perhaps you might circulate the rumour, Bartie, that I have every intention of calling the cad out," Hugh stated, as he softly placed his empty glass upon the table.

Although he felt vindicated that his suspicion about Gravesend was correct, the victory was Pyrrhic. If he had been honest with Anna—from the off—she would not have been so vulnerable to Gravesend's manipulations.

The carriage ride home was interminable, his mind racing with possible confrontations. He would have to speak with Anna directly, warn her of the damage Gravesend wished to exact on her reputation. Would she believe him? Perhaps he should have brought Beaufort along as assurance, he thought wryly.

The house was quiet when he entered, and after a cursory check of the drawing room and parlour room, Hugh made his way upstairs.

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He had just reached the top step when a call from below caused him to swivel.

"Your Grace!" Josie called, her voice high with distress. Anna's maid had clearly just come through the front door, for she still wore her cape and gloves . "Thank goodness you're here!"

"What is it?" Hugh demanded, a premonition of danger making his heart race. He raced down the stairs to where Josie stood, her breath short from exertion.

"It's Her Grace," Josie wrung her hands. "She received a note this morning, after you left. From Lord Gravesend. He claimed to have news of her father."

Hugh felt the blood drain from his face. "Where is she?"

"She asked me to accompany her to Green Park. We were to meet him by the fountain."

Hugh stifled a curse of annoyance; had he not expressly forbade Anna from walking alone?

Tears welled in the maid's eyes, as she continued her tale.

"When we arrived, he insisted on speaking with Her Grace alone. I was to wait nearby. After a few minutes, when neither returned, I grew worried and searched for them."

"And?" Hugh prompted, though he already knew the answer.

"They were gone, Your Grace. Both of them." Josie's voice broke and she dissolved into floods of tears. "I searched everywhere, then when I realised that he had taken her, I rushed straight back to inform you."

Hugh stood frozen, the implications crashing down upon him. Gravesend had Anna. He had lured her away with promises of information about her father.

And Hugh knew, with cold certainty, that the young lord had every intention of thoroughly ruining his wife.

He swore an epithet, so violent it caused poor Josie to jump.

"Apologies," Hugh absently offered, running a distracted hand through his hair. He had to find Anna, and quickly. Luckily, he knew the one man in London who could assist him.

"Do not speak of this to anyone," Hugh urged Josie, squeezing her arm in reassurance. "I will find Anna before that knave has any chance to harm her."

"God speed, your Grace," Josie whispered, wiping away an anxious tear from her cheek.

Without another word, Hugh departed through the door he had only just come through, calling for his carriage.

Hugh arrived at The Bird's Nest to find the gaming hell half-awake, its windows still shuttered against the day. A yawning footman let him in without comment, clearly recognising trouble when he saw it. Hugh cut through the main hall and strode toward Shatter's office without waiting for permission.

Daniel Shatter looked up from his ledgers with a startled expression, as Hugh

slammed through the door.

“Your Grace,” he said slowly, pushing back his chair. “This is an unexpected pleasure.”

“I need information,” Hugh said, wasting no time. “Lord Gravesend has taken my wife.”

Daniel’s expression darkened at once. “Taken her?”

“Lured her to Green Park with lies about her father and disappeared with her. I believe he means her harm.”

“I’ll put some scouts on it,” Shatter said immediately, his tone calm. “From Seven Dials to Southwark—if Gravesend so much as breathes, we’ll hear about it.”

“I’ll check the gentleman’s clubs as well,” Hugh said, thinking aloud. “Gravesend’s not the type to work alone.”

“You might start with a known friend,” Shatter suggested, lightly. “Gravesend is rarely sighted without young Lord Lewisham in tow. If anyone knows of his whereabouts, it’ll be him.”

Hugh nodded in agreement; he should have thought of that himself, but his mind was too scattered with worry.

“You don’t happen to know where Lewisham keeps rooms?” he asked, quelling the rising despair he felt.

“Won’t stray too far from behind his mother’s skirts to keep any,” Shatter grunted, as he poured two large brandies for them both. “He’s in residence at Graystone

House—and so is the new duke. He was once your friend, wasn't he?"

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Shatter referred of course to Nate. Hugh's heart gave a leap of hope.

"He still is," Hugh called over his shoulder, as he raced out the door.

Graystone House stood in silence, looking out over the gardens of Charterhouse Square. Black crepe was tied in thick rosettes along the railings and over the brass knocker, a sign to any visitors that those within were mourning.

Hugh did not wait for his footman to approach the door with a card to seek an audience with Nate, as was usual. Instead, he banged the brass knocker himself, his boot tapping an impatient tattoo as he waited for someone to answer.

After a few moments, a butler appeared, wearing a black armband and offering a low bow.

"Falconbridge," Hugh said, thrusting his card at the astonished man. "I seek an audience with Graystone, at once."

"His Grace is in mourning," the butler stuttered but was unable to protest any further, for Hugh pushed past him calling for his friend.

"He's in the library, your Grace," the butler called, desperate to exact some control on the chaos Hugh had brought. "If you'll just follow me, quietly."

He led the way through dark halls which smelled of beeswax and polish, until they reached a door. The butler gave a knock that somehow managed to sound apologetic.

“Come in,” a voice called.

Hugh pushed open the door to find his old friend seated in a high-back chair, facing a roaring fire. His head turned as Hugh offered a greeting and Nate quickly rose to his feet, once he realised the identity of his unexpected guest.

The war had carved a maturity into Nathaniel’s face since last Hugh had seen him. His cheekbones were sharp as glass, his chin dark with stubble, and shadows smudged beneath his eyes. He looked, Hugh realised with a start, haunted by the ghosts of the battles he had fought.

“I am sorry for your loss, Nate,” Hugh said, crossing the room to his friend who—he noted with alarm—now walked with a stiff gait and a pronounced limp.

“You of all people understand what a loss a brother is,” Nate—or Graystone as he was now styled—inclined his head graciously at Hugh’s condolence.

Hugh reached out his hand and Nate clasped it, in a strong soldier’s hold, and the two men briefly embraced.

“It’s good to see you, if unexpected,” Nate continued, turning an amused eye to the door where the disapproving butler still hovered. “That will be all, Ronson.”

The butler disappeared and once he was certain they were alone, Hugh told his friend the sorry tale of his marriage, his altercation with Gravesend, and Anna’s disappearance.

“I am not acquainted with Lord Gravesend,” Nate said apologetically as Hugh finished. “I am not acquainted with anyone, after five years on the continent. Though I will call for a horse at once and accompany you on your search.”

“Five years of war has not changed you,” Hugh noted warmly. Nate had always been steadfast, brave and loyal, even as a boy.

“I wouldn’t say that,” the new duke gestured ruefully to his leg.

“You have one connection still, who might be able to shed some light on the matter,” Hugh continued, choosing his words carefully now. “Your brother, Edwin.”

“Edwin, useful?” Graystone raised a dark brow in amusement. “I suppose there’s a first time for everything. He’s in one of the parlour rooms, I believe, sleeping off a sore head. He’s taken the Irish approach to mourning.”

Hugh noted his scathing tone, filing it away for a later date. All was not well between the brothers Lewisham, as Thorncastle had suggested, but now was not the time to discuss it.

Graystone led the way to the parlour room, where heavy velvet drapes were drawn against the late- afternoon light. Lewisham was sprawled across a chaise longue, shirt undone, one stocking half off his foot, a brandy decanter clutched in his hand with the same reverence as a penitent might hold rosary beads.

“I gave orders that I was not to be disturbed,” Lewisham croaked, as the light from the open door spilled across the room.

“I will take but a moment of your time, my lord,” Hugh said dryly, as he crossed the room in three strides and hauled the young lord to his feet by his lapels.

“Unhand me, at once,” the lad squeaked, both confused and terrified by the sudden turn of events.

“I will,” Hugh answered evenly, “Once you tell me where I can find Gravesend.”

If the situation were not so serious, Hugh might have found some entertainment in the brandy-sodden lad's confusion. Lewisham glanced from Hugh to Nate, beseeching his half-brother to help him.

“Tell him where your friend can be found,” Nate instructed, with a lazy shrug.

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“Cheapside,” Lewisham stuttered, as he realised that the cavalry would not come to save him. “He’s taken a room at a boarding house there—The Grand, I believe. He asked a few of us to join him at five o’clock for a lark of some sort.”

A lark? Disgusted, Hugh released the young man from his grip, shoving him so hard that he went careening back into the chaise, spilling brandy all over the rug.

“My apologies, you can send me the bill,” Hugh addressed his friend, as a dark stain spread across the pale carpet.

“I never liked it anyway,” Nate gave an amused grin, then his expression turned deadly. “Come, there’s no time to waste.”

He turned and Hugh followed him, desperately hoping that they would be in time to save Anna.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ANNA LAY ASstill as she could manage on the coarse straw mattress. Her wrists ached from the tightness of the ropes binding them, a gag cut into the corners of her mouth, though all this was tolerable when compared to the fear she felt. She tried not to think of what might come next when Gravesend returned. Lord only knew what the madman had planned for her.

Despite her current discomfort telling her otherwise, Anna still could not quite believe that Gravesend had kidnapped her. His note asking to meet at Green Park to discuss news of her father had seemed innocent enough. Perhaps, if she had not been

so determined to be angry with her husband, she might have felt some vague suspicion when he insisted he needed to speak out of earshot of Josie. Gravesend had thusly manhandled her into a waiting carriage, even waving a pistol at her when she had put up a fight.

She now found herself tied like a hog and deposited in some cheap boarding house room in Cheapside, all because she had refused to believe that her husband wanted to protect her.

She scoffed inwardly at her own stupidity. Well done, Anna.

To quell her nerves she began to pray that someone—anyone—would find her, but she soon gave it up as a lost cause. The boarding house was far from respectable and she doubted that anyone within its walls might feel inclined toward saving her. The landlady had barely raised a brow when Gravesend had stumbled through the door reeking of brandy, dragging Anna in his wake like a sack of coal. Any woman with decency would have demanded an explanation. The proprietress had merely jerked her chin toward the stairs.

Perhaps Gravesend paid well. Or perhaps she had seen worse. She tried not to imagine what scenes the woman had seen that were worse than her current predicament.

Anna swallowed around the cloth in her mouth and tried not to weep.

She had been so determined to mistrust Hugh, yet now she could see how right he had been. About everything, even the danger her father's reckless behaviour posed to her. Though she still would not concede that he had gone about marrying her the proper way. She might be tied up and potentially might be murdered, but that didn't take away from the fact that he could even have made an attempt at courting her.

The door creaked open.

Gravesend entered with the swagger and scent of a man who had bathed in alcohol. His waistcoat was unbuttoned, and his cravat hung askew. Anna could not believe that she once thought the sweating lord a member of the Romantic set.

“Well,” he drawled, closing the door behind him and leaning against it, as if this were a lover’s tryst and not a grotesque parody of one. “You look positively tragic, Your Grace.”

Anna maintained a dignified silence, almost glad of the gag in her mouth. She could think of a few choice things she would like to say about this appearance.

He crossed the room in unsteady strides and leaned down to untie the gag.

“If you scream, I shall be most displeased,” he informed her as his fingers tugged at the knot.

Anna nodded, though the second the cloth fell from her lips, she drew a deep breath and let out a piercing shriek for help.

Gravesend reeled back, momentarily stunned, before lifting his arm to slap her sharply across the cheek. The sound cracked through the room like a rifle shot.

The pain was not hard enough to knock her senseless, but enough to sting, to humiliate. The shock of it silenced her far more effectively than the gag had. Any sense of bravado that Anna might have clung onto fled quickly; Gravesend truly meant to do her harm.

“You little bitch,” he hissed. “That was unwise.”

Anna tasted blood—her lip had split—but nevertheless she met his gaze.

“Why?” she gasped, wriggling at the rope that bound her wrists. “Why do this?”

Gravesend straightened and ran a hand through his hair, which had begun to curl with sweat.

“Why?” he repeated, as if surprised by the question. “Because your husband saw fit to tarnish my reputation. He humiliated me. He took away a lucrative source of income from me. We were not all born to inherit profitable estates like he. Now, Falconbridge will watch you fall, and be forever tormented by knowing your ruin is his fault.”

Anna blinked—what did he mean by watch her ruin?

“Hugh will never believe you,” she countered, surprised by the faith she felt for the husband she had just this morning disparaged.

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Gravesend smirked, amused at her stupidity. “Men rarely believe their wives are faithful when the evidence says otherwise. When our audience arrives you’ll be compromised, Your Grace. And the ton loves a scandal. Especially when it involves a pretty face and a fallen woman.”

“You’re mad,” she whispered. “He’ll kill you.”

He looked at her for a moment—truly looked—and something flickered in his expression. Something darker. More resolved.

“Well,” he said, glancing at the fob watch he drew from his waistcoat pocket. “It’s nearly five. Our audience should be arriving any moment.” He clicked the watch shut with a decisive snap. “Might as well put on a proper show and be hung for a sheep as a lamb, if you think I will die for this.”

With a grunt, he tossed the watch to the floor and lunged.

Anna screamed again, twisting with every ounce of her strength. Her bound hands flailed; she kicked, bit, thrashed. She was no match for her opponent but she was determined to put up a brave fight. Gravesend struggled against her show of force, but eventually he pinned her to the bed, his weight too heavy to hold off, his breath foul with spirits.

Anna had just about given up hope, when the door burst open.

The noise startled Gravesend enough that he lurched back, just as Hugh strode into the room like a demon, his coat billowing behind him.

“Get away from her,” he snarled.

Behind Hugh stood another man—a stranger to Anna—with a soldier’s bearing and a cocked pistol in his hand.

Hugh crossed the room in three strides and wrenched Gravesend away, sending him sprawling to the floor with a crack of bone against floorboards. The second man strode forward, aiming his pistol at Gravesend’s sweating face.

“I have him covered, Falconbridge. See to your wife,” the man said calmly, as though he said things like this every day.

Anna drew in a shaking breath as her husband knelt beside her, his hands already at her bindings.

“I’m here,” Hugh said, his voice raw. “I’ve got you. I’m here.”

This time, Anna did not fight the tears. She let them fall freely, as she fell into the arms of her husband.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, frantic now to let him know just how sorry she was for not trusting him.

“As am I,” Hugh whispered, wiping her tears away with his thumbs. A frown creased his brow as he noted her split lip. “We must get you home at once and checked over by a doctor.”

“It’s just a little cut,” Anna protested, not wanting him to worry. “He only had a chance to deliver one blow, before you arrived.”

Hugh exhaled a ragged breath and leaned his forehead against Anna’s. He then pulled

her into his strong arms and delivered a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“I am glad to hear you remain mostly uninjured,” he whispered softly, stroking her hair. “Let’s get you home and into a hot bath, you can tell me the rest when you’ve rested.”

She nodded, allowing him to assist her from the bed. Her limbs ached from being forced into the same position for hours, but otherwise she was well.

The sound of footsteps rushing down the hallway caused them all to freeze and glance toward the door.

“Beg your pardon, your Grace,” a man called, removing his hat as he sighted Hugh. “Is that Lord Gravesend? My master requested he be brought straight to him.”

“Who is your master?” Hugh asked.

“Mr Shatter, your Grace,” came the response.

Anna watched in fascination as Hugh shared a smile of amusement with his friend, who still stood guard over a dazed Lord Gravesend.

“Do you trust Shatter to mete out the appropriate justice?” Hugh’s friend asked softly, the pistol in his hand still pointing squarely at Gravesend’s chest.

“Shatter will deal with the physical retribution, Nate,” Hugh decided, “He never did get a chance to punish Gravesend for cheating the house. If he survives that, I shall see that social justice is delivered; Lord Gravesend will never be received in polite society again.”

Nate nodded with satisfaction, dropping his pistol and tucking it back into his coat

pocket. “If that’s the case, take your wife home, Falconbridge. I can oversee matters from here. Anna, I do hope we will meet again under more civilised circumstances.”

“As do I,” Anna stuttered, Nate’s manners so flawless that if it weren’t for the sting of her lip and the aroma of boiled cabbage, she would swear they were in a ballroom and not a decrepit boarding house.

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Without another word, Hugh threw his heavy coat over her shoulders and bundled her from the room.

“I’m taking you home,” he said firmly. From his possessive tone and the strong grip on her shoulders, Anna could guess that he would never let her out of his sight again.

Anna soaked in the warmth of the bath until her skin began to wrinkle. The heat had helped soothe her aching limbs, but it did little to calm the tangle of thoughts in her head. She was home. She was safe. Hugh had held her gently on the ride home, arms wrapped around her as though she were made of porcelain. He had not spoken much, merely kissed her hair and cradled her against his chest. So careful. So honourable.

Too honourable, she suspected, to come to her now.

As the heat began to recede from the water, Anna gingerly stepped out of the bath to dry herself. She toweled herself off, donned her familiar old nightgown, and set about brushing her hair. She sat by the fire awhile, as she waited for her hair to dry, contemplating her next move.

The house had fallen into silence, its candles long since extinguished. Anna glanced at her bed, unwilling to succumb to sleep. She wanted to speak with Hugh, to speak with him properly. Not only that, but she wanted to make love to him. To finally become his wife.

He would not come to her bed, she realised, while he believed she was convalescing. Not while he believed her fragile. Not while he still thought her unwilling.

She rose, wrapped herself in a woollen blanket, and padded barefoot across the room. When she reached his door, she hesitated for the barest of moments, then pushed it open.

Hugh stood before the fire in a long nightshirt, his dressing gown—a silk banyan—flowing open at the collar. The firelight cast shadows across his face, which was tilted toward the flames, as though deep in thought. When he looked up and saw her, something within her broke.

She ran to him.

He caught her at once, arms closing around her with desperate strength. She buried her face in his chest and let out a soft, shaking breath.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, hoping that those two words could convey just how sorry she was. She could not believe that she had been so careless with the feelings of the only person in the world who truly cared for her.

“No, I’m sorry,” he echoed, echoing her. “You were right, Anna. I’ve kept too many secrets from you. I wanted to shield you, but in trying to protect you, I pushed you into danger.”

He pulled back slightly and led her to the fire. They sat before it, the blanket slipping to her shoulders, her hand held tightly in his.

“I wish I could go back and do it all differently,” he said softly. “If I could start our marriage again, I would do everything right. Court you properly. Tell you the truth.”

“What truth?” she asked gently.

He hesitated, pain flashed across his handsome face and for a moment Anna could

sense him retreat from her.

She waited, not wanting to press him. Then:

“Jack didn’t die in a hunting accident; my brother took his own life.”

She stared, stunned. No wonder he had hidden his grief from her—from the world—she could not imagine a more terrible pain.

“He left a note,” Hugh continued, voice low. “He’d lost everything at the tables. Debts I hadn’t known existed. He couldn’t face the shame, so he shot himself in the woods near our home. I found him shortly after. No one else knows, not even our mother.”

“Oh, Hugh,” she breathed, tears springing to her eyes. What a burden to carry for so long all alone. But he wasn’t alone now, she reasoned, he had her. She reached out for his hand, squeezing it hard in a desperate attempt to convey her love.

“I’ve kept his secret for over ten years,” he continued, his thumb brushing her knuckles. “When I first saw you I was struck by how beautiful you were—and then I learned of your perilousness of your situation from Bartie. It was madness but I felt I had to save you. I had to savesomeone. I just went about it the wr+ong way—I’m sorry.”

Anna reached for him then, cupping his cheek with trembling fingers.

“Today, I finally understood how vulnerable being my father’s daughter makes me. I see now what you saw,” she confessed, glad to tell him at last that hehadsaved her.

She hugged him then, wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing him with all her strength. He was no more made of stone than she, she could not believe that she

had once thought it.

“There is good news,” he murmured, as the embrace ended. “My footman returned from Whitby. Your father is there; repentant, according to the report. He claims to have seen the error of his ways.”

“I shall believe that when he proves it,” Anna said dryly. She had learned a lesson on trust these last few weeks. It should only be bestowed upon those who earn it—like her husband. Her heart filled with love for the man before her; devilishly handsome, slightly-misguided, ever high-handed, but a good man. Trustworthy.

A silence stretched between them, as they held each other tentatively. Anna realised she would have to be the one to break the invisible barrier between them, once and for all.

“Hugh?” she said, cheeks flushing as she lifted her eyes to his.

“Yes, my love?”

“If I asked you to take me now... would you?”

His eyes darkened, desire flickering to life.

“I have never wanted anything more than to make love to you,” he said softly, reverently.

He took her hand and led her to his bed. She stood before him, trembling as he untied the laces of her nightrail and let it fall to the floor. His eyes swept her bare form, not with lust alone, but wonder.

“I love you,” he whispered, bending to kiss her. “I love you so fiercely I scarcely know myself.”

The kiss turned hungry, hands roaming her skin with increasing urgency. He lifted her onto the bed and followed, stretching out beside her as he shed his clothing and drew her close.

He rained kisses down her neck and gently teased her nipples with his mouth, until she was slick and wet with wanting. She could guess, from the press of his erection against her, that he was wanting too.

“Take me,” she demanded, wriggling her bottom away from him to spread her legs in invitation. She did not care that it was wanton, her only desire was to feel him inside her.

“I will not last long,” Hugh warned, with a pained laugh. “Not after imagining this for so long.”

Anna smiled, drawing him down to her. “Then you must make it count.”

He was between her legs in an instant, the tip of his member pressed against her wet lips. For a moment, Anna knew a moment of panic, as she wondered how on earth she was supposed to accommodate his frightening girth. Hugh noted the flash of fear and kissed her lips softly.

“I’ll be gentle,” he swore. “Do you trust me?”

She nodded, “With my life.”

He entered her slowly, his size stretching her with an ache that whispered it would soon give way to pleasure. There was a brief gasp of pain as he breached her maidenhead, but he stilled, eyes on hers, giving her time.

She gave a sigh of contentment as the pain abated and she adjusted to the feel of him within her. She had not expected this sense of joining as he filled her—the perfect rightness of their two bodies becoming one.

And then he began to move; deep, rhythmic thrusts that stole her breath and made her clutch at him, gasping his name. She clung to his back, urging him ever deeper and deeper, lost in the dizzying rhythm of their shared need.

When her climax overtook her, it was sudden and all-encompassing; a shattering wave that left her trembling. She arched against him as a low, urgent pleasure rippled through her—unfurling, unstoppable, and utterly consuming.

Assured of her pleasure, Hugh groaned her name, driving into her once more as he

reached his own release. He shuddered as he spilled inside her, filling her with his heat, his body taut with the force of it

They clung to each other afterward, still breathless.

She pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “I love you,” she whispered, and he smiled against her skin.

“And I you,” he murmured, his voice low and sure. “Now sleep, Anna. You are safe. You are mine. And, as I will be expecting to repeat that at least three times before sunrise, you will need your rest.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Anna whispered, with a delighted giggle.

“Yes, we established that already,” Hugh growled, as he pulled her closer to him.

And in the arms of her demanding duke, Anna finally slept.

EPILOGUE

THREE MONTHS LATER...

After years of tension, worry, and uncertainty, Anna’s life had finally settled into something that felt whole.

Even her father had improved. Since the night Hugh had “won” her, Lord Mosley had stayed away from the tables. Their relationship was fragile but it grew stronger with each month that passed in which her father did not break her trust.

Anna had everything she never dared hope for—even things she had never dreamed to hope for, like a duke for a husband.

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She almost felt a little guilt that she was about to shock her husband senseless.

“You’ve made us pass Bond Street three times,” Hugh said, glancing out the window with a frown. “We’ll have to stop to change horses if we do another circiut.”

Anna smiled, nestled in her blue velvet cape with the silver fox fur at the collar — the one she knew he liked, because he had once whispered that he dreamed of her naked beneath it.

“I asked the driver to go slowly,” she said mildly.

“Why?”

“Because I wish to speak privately. Without footmen hovering.”

He raised a brow. “My dear, I believe you are about to shock me.”

“The first part will be good news, I can’t guarantee that the second part won’t shock.”

She drew the carriage curtains shut. The bustle of London faded away, replaced with intimate dimness.

“I’m increasing,” she said softly, nervously.

Hugh went very still.

“Are you certain?” he asked at last, his voice low and thick with wonder.

She nodded.

He exhaled, then groaned — not with displeasure, but joy so full and fierce it was nearly overwhelming. “God help me,” he muttered, “I must find you a new maid. A new nurse. A physician. No, two physicians. You mustn’t walk anywhere unaccompanied. Or lift anything heavier than a tea cup. No riding. No—”

“Hugh,” she interrupted, laughing. “You cannot wrap me in cotton wool for nine months.”

He gave her a look of sheer exasperation. “I can try.”

Her husband had changed so much over the last few months, but his first reaction was still to protect.

“Well, then,” Anna said, her tone mock-thoughtful, “If you’re going to turn into a protective tyrant, I suppose we must stop making love.”

That shut him up.

Completely.

“I mean,” she continued, reaching for the silver clasp at her throat, “if you are to become the Duke of Do’s and Don’ts, surely such pleasures are off limits?”

The silver fox fur slipped from her shoulders. The cape opened.

She wore nothing beneath.

Hugh stared.

“Anna.”

“You told me once you dreamed of me naked beneath this cape,” she said, tilting her head innocently. “That you dreamed of making love to me in a moving carriage. This might be our only opportunity but, if you’re concerned I’m too delicate...”

Hugh gave a groan of pure hunger as desire won out against reservation. He dragged her into his lap, hands already roaming beneath the soft weight of the cape.

He kissed her with open-mouthed need, then trailed lower, his lips closing around her nipple. She gasped, rocking against the bulge in his breeches. Her fingers worked fast, undoing his fall of his breeches, freeing him.

His cock sprang free, thick and hard with desire. She rose onto her knees and, with a shared look of wicked delight, sank down on him slowly, gasping as he filled her.

Hugh gripped her hips, groaning aloud. “Christ, woman.”

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They moved together, the carriage rocking in time with their rhythm. Her fingers twisted in his cravat as she rode him harder, the velvet brushing against her thighs, her back arching as he took one breast in his mouth again.

When she came, it was with a soft cry muffled against his throat — and he followed with a sharp curse and a shudder that shook them both.

For a long moment, they simply held each other. Breathing. Smiling. Entwined in love and heat and shared pleasure.

“I love you,” Anna whispered as leaned back to look into his eyes, her heart so full it might burst.

“And I love you,” he solemnly replied. “And I love the child we created together already.”

His hand stroked her hip, his eyes wondering at her still flat stomach.

“As much as I love you,” he continued, as he lifted her from his lap, tucking the cape back around her solicitously. “I think you are fit for bedlam.”

She gave a squeal of protest at his words, which he silenced with a wave of his hand.

“I married a woman who seduced me in a public carriage while pregnant,” he said dryly. “It’s safe to say I’ve joined you in your madness.”

She smiled, rested her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes as he pulled her

against him.

This wild, beautiful madness they shared was love, she was sure of it.

And love, she thought, was the one wager she'd gladly lose again and again.