



The Duchess' Replacement

Author: *Scarlett Osborne*

Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "You will follow my rules, little wife. Unless you enjoy being punished..."

Left at the altar, Sarah needs an explanation. Only, when she barges into the scoundrel's home, it is not him she finds waiting...

Duke Charles never expected his brother's jilted bride to show up on his doorstep. With one look at the defiant little minx, he knows exactly what she needs. Discipline. So he offers her a deal: Marry him instead and follow his rules to perfection.

1. She must not ask about his family.
2. She must not bother him without reason.
3. She must give him an heir.

Yet all it takes is breaking one rule, for Sarah to learn just how pleasurable a punishment can be...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *The Duchess' Replacement* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 114

CHAPTER 1

Sarah leaned toward the carriage window, watching the landscape pass her by. Her one hand rested on the windowsill, while her other covered the butterflies fluttering around her stomach.

“Everything all right, dear?” Sarah’s mother’s voice drifted into her thoughts.

Sarah turned to Charlotte, who, along with her younger sister, Beatrice, was riding along with her in the carriage.

Sarah shook her head. “Yes, Mama. Just a bit nervous.”

Charlotte leaned forward and took her daughter’s hand. “All will be well, my love. From what I’ve heard he is a fine young man.”

Sarah smiled. “I know, Mama.”

“I’ve heard he was carried out of Brooks the other night.” Beatrice said while paging through her book.

Sarah’s mother reared back. “Beatrice! Why would you say such a thing?” She leaned in closer to Beatrice. “And where did you hear such a thing?”

“I heard Eleanor and His Grace talking about it.” Beatrice blinked up at her mother, innocently. “Why? Is that bad?”

Sarah hid her grin. Her sister was two years younger than her, but the chit knew more than she allowed anyone to believe.

Worry settled between Charlotte's eyes as she looked back to Sarah. "Don't worry, Sarah, I'm sure there is more to the story than what she heard." Charlotte said as she nudged her youngest daughter.

Sarah dipped her head. "I'm not worried, Mama. I'm not naive to his reputation. And it's true I haven't known him long, but he comes from a good family, vetted by our own Duke, mind you, so I'm sure all will be well."

Sarah's hands played with the ribbon from her reticule. She spoke with her sister, Eleanor and her husband, Derek, the Duke of Graynor about her upcoming nuptials. While there seemed to be some curious discourse about the family years ago, they've mostly minded themselves and done their due diligence where the family's duchy was concerned.

Eli was a staple in most of society papers, but his grievances were mostly harmless, too much drink and good times. Nothing out of the ordinary for most of the men his age.

Sarah's eyes returned to the passing scenery.

Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, His Grace. Who would have thought that he would become such a pillar of strength for our family? There was a moment there I thought he would leave us all to fend for ourselves after how you girls reacted to his coming." Charlotte sighed a laugh as she covered her heart for dramatics.

Sarah smiled at the memory of the brooding Duke of Graynor coming to claim his title and throwing their world upside down. Luckily for her, and her family, he didn't count on her older sister Eleanor being there and stealing his heart.

Speaking of which...

Sarah turned to her mother. "Have you spoken with Eleanor? Will she be at the church when we get there?"

Charlotte nodded. "Yes. The Duke and Duchess will both be in attendance for your big day."

Charlotte was beaming. Marrying her daughters off was a symbol of great pride for Charlotte. Having one marry a Duke and another marry the brother of one was enough for Charlotte to live off for, well, until it was Beatrice's turn to marry.

Then Charlotte would return to her hunt and make poor Beatrice's life miserable until she, too, was settled.

Sarah looked back outside and pushed out a breath that tussled a loose curl that framed her face. Knowing her older sister would be there alleviated some of her nerves.

She began to chew her bottom lip.

"Sarah?"

Sarah returned her gaze to her mother. She saw the concern in her mother's eyes, how her lips were pinched tight and how her hands were fidgeting in her lap.

"Mama." She reached out and placed a hand on her mother's bouncing knee. "I'll be fine. I promise. You've said countless times how you were practically strangers with Papa when you were first married." Sarah lifted a shoulder to shrug. "I actually find it exciting and romantic."

Beatrice cocked her head in confusion. “Romantic? How is it romantic to tether yourself to someone you hardly know? He could be a killer!”

Charlotte guffawed. “Charlotte! Do not test me or I will take away any and all books you are reading. Honestly. Where do you come up with these ideas!” Charlotte was completely flabbergasted at her daughter’s remarks.

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Sarah chuckled. “Don’t worry, Mama, I don’t read the same books Beatrice reads. I’m more for the damsel in distress and the brave, strong hero who comes to save her.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “Correct and last time you lived out that scenario in your head you tried running away with that Byron boy. Thankfully His Grace stopped you or where would you be now?”

Sarah blushed. Bryon.

Her first love, or at least, her first foray into feelings she didn’t quite understand. She was always a bit embarrassed when she thought of how she acted, trying to run away in the night to be with him. She shook her head of the memory. The ignorance of youth, she laughed to herself.

“It’s no secret I am a romantic at heart. I’ve learned a lot since then. I’m willing to wait for those feeling to develop this time. Eli has been nothing but sweet and generous when he called on me. I’m excited to watch our relationship grow and blossom.” Sarah sighed and felt the warmth of promise settle within her. “It is my biggest dream that we develop as deep as your love with Papa, Mama.”

Charlotte’s eyes lined with tears. “It is mine as well, my dear. Mine as well.”

Beatrice looked outside and nudged Charlotte. “We’re here!”

Sarah followed Beatrice’s nod and saw the church come into view. This was it, the moment she’s been waiting for her entire life. She’s read countless stories about love

and marriage and dreamt about the day when she'd have both.

She may not have love currently, but by the end of today she will have marriage. That's something, right?

"You look absolutely stunning, Sarah." Eleanor enveloped Sarah in a warm hug. Sarah sighed into her sister's arms. She felt safe there and for a moment all her nerves settled and all was right in the world.

Sarah pulled away from her sister just in time to see Eleanor's eye flitter to her husband, Derek. A crease formed in between Eleanor's eyes, she looked worried.

Sarah looked between the two of them. "Is everything all right?" Sarah's heart sank. "Is everything fine with the baby?"

At the mention of her daughter, Eleanor's features softened. "Yes, everything is fine with her. Look, she's here in the carriage." Eleanor pointed to the small baby carriage a few steps away, tucked out of the sunlight streaming through the open door.

Sarah covered her mouth. "Oh goodness, I am so nervous for my wedding I didn't even realize my beautiful niece was right next to you in her carriage."

Sarah bent over the pram to gaze at the little cherub face of her niece. Angela was the spitting image of her father, but luckily for her, she had the unruly curly auburn hair of her mother. She'll most likely be a spitfire, like her mother, as well.

Sarah righted herself and turned to the rest of her family, who was now lined up facing her. Sarah got the uneasy sensation she was standing in front of a firing squad. Tension hung heavy in the air between them.

"Why are you all looking at me like that?"

She went down the line from Charlotte, to Beatrice, to Eleanor, finally landing on Derek. The Duke was not known for being verbose so in this divine moment he just nodded to the aisle and alter behind her.

She turned to look down the aisle where she found the alter empty.

She looked back to her family. "Where is Eli?"

All eyes jump around, looking everywhere but at Sarah.

Confusion and dread swam in her blood but she pushed them away. She's read countless books like this. Of course, she thought.

"He must be running late." She laughed. "Men never know what's going on. Don't you say that all the time, Eleanor? That if you weren't there Derek wouldn't know when to get dressed in the morning?"

Eleanor's face turned a bright pink. "I did not say that!" She exclaimed the same time Derek sputtered and looked at his wife.

Eleanor took a hold of the baby carriage and nodded to the front of the church. "I think it's time we take our seats, don't you dear? Mother," she looked to Charlotte. "Are you coming?"

Sarah watched Eleanor walk away, pushing the carriage, with a grumbling Duke at her heels.

Charlotte stopped in front of her daughter and kissed her cheek. "Remember, all will be well, just trust the process."

Sarah smiled, willing the apprehension to recede back to wherever it came from. "I

know, Mama. I've heard you say that to Eleanor a million times and it all worked out for her. Oh!" Sarah had a thought. "There is a side door up by the alter, perhaps he's just out there until I get up there. Has anyone checked?"

Charlotte opened her mouth and closed it again. She looked down the aisle to Derek and Eleanor who were engaged in a quiet, yet no doubt heated, conversation.

Charlotte looked back to Sarah, who was at the main door looking out at the carriage meant to take her and her new husband to their home afterward.

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“Sarah? Wait here, I’ll go ask Derek. I’m sure that’s where he is.”

Charlotte took a breath, kissed her daughter’s cheek one more time and made her way to the front of the church.

Sarah smoothed out her dress and checked to make sure none of the carefully pinned curls fell out.

She watched her mother reach Derek and Eleanor. Her nerves were making her clothing itch. She began to pace in the back before she realized she had started walking down the aisle.

No sense in waiting for the inevitable “go ahead.” Might as well walk down there and see for myself. I’m certain he’s there.

Sarah’s eyes landed on the alarmingly empty alter and misstepped. She heard a few murmurs and chastised herself for not paying attention. All she needed was her soon-to-be husband finding her splayed out on the alter from tripping on her new dress. She knew she should have practiced walking in it, it was a bit longer in the front than she was used to.

Her vision refocused on the empty alter. She was certain Eli was just getting some air before the ceremony. It was awfully stifling in here.

Sarah pulled at the lace tightening around her neck. but the closer she got to the alter, the more she realized how foolish walking down the aisle was. What wedding has she ever been to where the groom walked in after the bride?

As she continued down the aisle she nodded to friends she knew and offered polite smiles to the strangers who must be here for Eli.

Did the church always hold this many people?

Her foot found the first step in front of the alter and stepped up onto it. Her knees were knocking underneath her skirts as she turned and peered out into the congregation.

Nervous glances and whispers flittered around the open room. Sarah's bottom lip quivered as she tried to smile.

A shadow moved to her right and her eyes caught the movement of a man moving towards the back of the church. She squinted her eyes to see who it was.

The man stopped at the door of the church and turned to face the aisle. Sarah brought a hand up to shield her eyes from the stream of sunlight that came through the door the man had opened. The man looked a bit taller than Eli, a little broader than him as well, but that could be a trick of the shadows.

"Eli?" Her voice was a mere squeak Her throat tightened around the word.

Just then she felt a soft touch on her elbow. She turned her gaze to see the softness of her mother come into focus in front of her. Sarah could see her mother's mouth moving but her words sounded muffled to Sarah.

Heat blossomed across Sarah's cheeks as her stomach swirled. Her mother still sounded as if she were talking through a wall.

What is happening?

Sarah craned her neck to peak around her mother's shoulder.

Where is Eli? This isn't happening. This can't be happening. This is not how my story is supposed to go.

Her heart began to race as the world around her slowed down. She could hear every breath, feel every shift of the people around her. Sensations overwhelmed her body leaving her dizzy.

She felt the tender touch of her mother wiping an errant tear that must've fallen from her eye.

I'm crying.

Sarah's eyes widened at the realization. Suddenly, reality crashed down on her. The congregation full of friends, family, and well known dignitaries were all whispering behind fans, their eyes alight with the thought of scandal in the air.

Sarah was left at the alter.

Sarah's legs gave out beneath her, but thankfully her mother's strong arms were there to stabilize her.

"Mama?" Sarah managed around the tears.

Charlotte looked over her shoulder to Derek.

"We need to get her out of here." Charlotte's words were rushed and full of authority. Sarah had the wayward thought that she never really heard her mother speak with such direction. She was usually frivolous and dramatic.

I don't understand what is happening.

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Before she could blink, Derek was at her side, half carrying her down the aisle and out of the church. He placed her into the carriage, where she slumped to the side, resting her head on the inside of the carriage. Her body jostling as her mother and Beatrice filed into the carriage behind her. Once more their voices were muffled around her.

Her eyes stared, unfocused, as her mind replayed the looks of shock and embarrassment that were now forever seared into her memory.

She was left at the alter.

She was ruined.

“I thought you said you looked into him and his family!”

Charlotte’s harsh whisper drifted in from the hallway.

Sarah couldn’t hear Derek’s reply, but his cadence was low and sure. She may not know what he said, but there was still some feeling left in her body that told her Derek would get to the bottom of it.

At least one of the Mallory girls found a knight in shining armor.

The thought unleashed another round of sobs that left her body feeling brittle and broken. Just when she thought she had cried her last tear another wave of embarrassment, longing, confusion, and torment swept over her.

How did this happen? What did I do to deserve this horror?

Sarah's door opened and she watched her mother's shadow along the wall as she walked towards the bed.

"Sarah, love? I brought you some tea. You should drink something, dear."

Sarah laid with her knees tucked up close to her body. The thought of unfolding to reach for the tea cup felt too exposing so she stayed tucked into her little ball.

Charlotte sighed as she sat on the bed next to her. She reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Sarah's face.

The touch took her back to the moment before she walked down the aisle, when she made sure her hair was still tucked up. The pieces of her heart that managed to survived this long shattered into pieces with the rest of their brethren.

She whimpered into her pillow.

"I'm so sorry, my love." Charlotte cooed. "Don't worry, we will get to the bottom of this. Derek promised Eleanor he would find out at once where that sorry excuse for a man was."

A tear fell down a familiar path on Sarah's face to join the others that had fallen onto her pillow.

"It's all I ever wanted, Mama." She spoke into her pillow.

"What was, my dear?"

Sarah sniffled. "Someone to come to my rescue. Like Derek is doing for me know.

But he's Eleanor's. Why can't I have someone like that?"

"Oh my sweet." Charlotte leaned over and covered Sarah's curled up body with her own. "You will get it, I promise. Just trust-"

Anger erupted within Sarah's veins.

"No! Do NOT say 'trust the process,' Mama!"

Charlotte jumped back, shocked at the sudden outburst of emotion from her once almost comatose daughter.

Sarah took a few breaths. Within moments her body went from feeling as if it were sinking through thick sludge to feeling as agile as a cat. She bounded from her bed. A new, limitless energy flooded her body.

She was angry.

Sarah caught a glance of herself in the mirror. Her hair was an absolute mess, half of it was still pinned up, while the other half was hanging haphazardly around her face. Her eyes were red and puffy. Her once beautiful and perfectly cared for dress was now wrinkled and hung misshapened on her frame.

The realization of what that man did to her, to not only her reputation but to her overall well-being smacked her in the face.

Anger turned into white-hot rage.

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“I’m done.” She spat. “I’m not waiting for someone to rescue me any more. I’m going to find out what happened myself.”

Charlotte sat shocked as she watched her daughter run from one side of the room to the other collecting her shoes and an overcoat.

“What... what do you mean? Sarah.” Charlotte reached out, but Sarah stepped around her outstretched arm. “What are you doing? Where are you going?”

Sarah paused at her bedroom door.

“I’m going to the man himself. I will get an answer as to why he left me standing at the alter. I will rescue myself.”

CHAPTER 2

Charles slammed his tumbler down on the sideboard. Whisky splashed out of the glass onto his hand.

“Dammit.” He brought up his hand and sucked the spilled drink off his wrist. He glanced at the clock. He hasn’t seen his brother since he saw Eli’s retreating back leaving the house this morning. Charles thought he was going to the church, but it turns out his bloody brother had other plans.

Charles threw back the rest of his whisky. He was right when he threatened to drag Eli to the church himself. It was the only way he could have ensured the bloody bastard would have gone through with the marriage. The damned fool.

The girl's face flashed in his mind. Big, blue eyes, rounded and confused as she tried to see who was walking out of the church's door. He could no longer watch the poor girl stand there in front of everyone while his brother was god knows where, doing god knows what.

Fortunately for Eli, Charles could not find him. Not for lack of trying. Charles sent his men to Eli's favorite haunts and they all turned up empty.

Disgrace and disgust bubbled up within him.

"That stupid, son-of-a--"

His words were cut off by loud banging coming from the hallway.

"What the dueces was that?"

Another loud bang thudded followed by a female voice raging at who mostly likely was his poor butler, Samuels.

Charles charged into the hallway to see what the commotion was and stopped dead when he recognized the slight frame.

"I'm sorry, Miss, His Grace is not to be disturbed." Samuels voice rang out amidst the banging.

Charles approached his butler who had his arms out trying to hold back the tiny tyrant from entering his house.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not here to see His Grace." She all but spat the title. "I want to see his brother, Eli. I demand I see him at once."

If there was any doubt who it was, her voice confirmed it.

The girl. Lady Sarah.

He was never formally introduced to the girl while his brother was courting her but he overheard several of their conversations. She normally had a jovial timber to her voice that had just a touch of velvet underneath it.

It was not surprising she did not sound so jovial in this instant.

Her eyes were just as big as they were in the church, but this time instead of confusion and embarrassment they showed fire and vitriol.

“Samuels.”

At the sound of his name, the butler turned, looking helpless.

“I’m sorry for the interruption, Your Grace. She is insisting on coming in.”

The girl’s eyes flashed and narrowed. “She is right here and can speak for herself.”

Charles rolled his lips to stop from smiling.

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No. The broken girl from the church was long gone and in her place was a boiling hot woman who knew what she wanted and right now she wanted answers.

Charles dipped his head towards Samuels, signaling for him to step aside. Samuels looked between the two before retreating a step and opening his arms, allowing the girl to walk in.

Charles took in the vision in front of him. Her hair was a mess, her eyes were puffy and red, and tear stains still marked her cheeks. Yet, there was a raw energy pulsing off of her that drew him in.

Charles weighed his options. Normally, he's not one to entertain such behavior, but the poor girl has been left at the alter in front of a majority of the town thanks to his basted brother. The least he could do is listen to her.

Plus, this could be interesting and considering the day he's had, he could do with some entertainment. Might as well see what the girl has to say.

Without a word he tilted his head towards the girl and turned to walk back to his study. If she wanted answers she'd have to follow him.

He wasn't surprised that after a few moments the shuttered sound of unsure steps followed his.

He walked to his sideboard to refill his tumbler of whisky. Something told him he'd need more to get through this conversation.

Charles turned to see her pacing a path into his carpet. Her shoulders were raised, her back was straight and she had the look of determination on her face. The only sign of nerves were her hands that she was wringing in front of her as she paced the study.

Charles walked to a chair that faced her path and sat. She followed him into his study, if she wanted to waste time pacing that was on her. He was comfortable in his favorite chair, with his favorite drink, he could sit here all night.

Her eyes landed on spot he just vacated by the sideboard and she stopped moving. Her eyes flew around the room until they landed on him. It was as if she was so lost in her own thoughts that she temporarily forgot where she was and why.

She licked her lips, a motion he was thankful he did not miss, and straightened her spine. With a small cough she cleared her throat. She reminded Charles of a puppy learning how to bark for the first time.

“I would like to see, Eli... please.” Her voice was small, but sure. A calm had settled over her but he could still see nerves dancing along her skin.

Charles had to admit she had courage. It must have taken a lot for a jilted woman to come to the house of the man who abandoned her in front of the entirety of polite society.

He rested his tumbler of whisky on his thigh, while a finger traced the rim of the glass. Her eyes flicked down to watch the movement.

Interesting.

Charles cocked his head to the side.

“Seems a bit late in the night for a visit, Lady Sarah.” He nodded towards the

standing clock. “Usually this time is reserved for more scandalous meetings.” He raised an eyebrow in her direction.

The full on blush that covered her cheeks reminded him of bright red strawberries in the middle of the summer. Instantly his mouth filled with saliva and his brain questioned if she were just as sweet. He shifted in his chair.

Blasted, he must be tired. Usually he can keep his more improper thoughts at bay, but there was something about this defiant temptress standing in front of him, with all bark but no bite, that was calling out to his more baser instincts.

She cleared her throat again. “I assure you, Your Grace, there is nothing untoward in my being here.” She sniffed.

Charles’s eyes swept over her. If he looked past her rumbled outfit and messy hair, she was the embodiment of propriety. The elocution and decorum lessons were on full display in front of him. Once more his mind delighted in the thought of peeling back those pretentious layers of propriety and elegance to find the true woman underneath it. There was a fire in her eyes that told him it would be a delicious endeavor.

When he didn’t respond she huffed and continued.

“The only scandal that brought me here tonight is your brother’s actions this morning.” She took a step closer to him and his eyes narrowed. She stopped, no doubt intimidated by his expression.

Sarah bristled. “I demand to know why he broke his commitment to our engagement.”

Her voice broke at the end of her demand, her chest rose and fell with each breath.

Tears lined her eyes, making them sparkle in the low light of his office. One tear escaped and rolled down her face. His fingers itched to reach out and trace the trail.

Charles licked his lips at the thought of her, on her knees, with tears running down her cheeks for an entirely different reason.

“Your Grace?” Her voice broke through his fantasy.

Charles’s vision cleared and refocused on her standing in front of him.

He took a quick sip, allowing the burn to ground him back into reality.

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“Lady Sarah,” he sighed, “why bother yourself with the details? What done is done. My brother is no good to anyone.” He sighed and rested his head on the back of the chair. “Consider yourself lucky.”

“Lucky?” She cried out. “I am ruined! No one will want me because of what he did! I deserve an answer.”

Her petulant behavior was cute at first but it was growing tiresome. He liked his women to have a bit more bite to them. He usually doesn’t misjudge women. He rubbed his eyes. He must be tired.

Charles took another sip to which she groaned and stomped over to the chair opposite him and sat down.

“The Duke of Graynor assured me that your family was a respectable and kind family. If this is how you-”

Charles sat up. “Do not believe everything you hear about my family.” His voice was cold as steel.

Sarah looked up from where she sat. “Obviously.” She deadpanned.

Charles sat back, studying her. She was an interesting creature. One minute she was reserved, only to be quick witted and mouthy in the next.

Charles shook his head. “The truth of the matter is I cannot give you a reason, because I do not know the reason. I don’t even know where my brother is, haven’t

seen him since he left this morning.”

Her shoulders sank at his admission.

For reason beyond his comprehension he felt the need to give her some words of solace. “But I know my brother, and I trust his answer would give you no respite. I stand by my earlier statement, what is done is done. I suggest you find a way to move on. It’s a lesson I have had to teach myself in regards to my brother. He is no good to anyone.”

Charles looked out the window into the darkening night. “I’m sure another scandal is in the making right now and this will all be forgotten in a few days.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes. “That’s it? Just move on? You can offer no other insight other than ‘just move on’?”

She blinked a few times, then pointed in the air in a gesture of wait. “Maybe something happened to him? If you haven’t seen him since this morning, perhaps there was an accident with the carriage.”

Charles laughed, mockingly.

Sarah looked at him questioningly. “Why are you laughing? What if something truly happened to him?”

“I’m laughing at you.”

“Excuse me?” Sarah’s hand flew up to cover her chest in horror.

“He left you at the the altar and you are still giving him allowances.” Charles rolled his eyes. “Where is the woman who nearly knocked over my butler demanding

answers?” Charles curled his lip in a sneer. “I would much rather talk to her than this hopeful optimist who can’t see the bullet she dodged with his actions.”

Charles stopped and leaned forward, scrutinizing her. She shifted under his gaze. “It’s a shame. Someone as gullible as you is actually what my brother craves. I assume he’ll be quite annoyed with his decision to let the likes of you go.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “How dare you. I may be an optimistic, or a romantic, but I know my worth. I thought I could come here and speak with him or someone,” she snarled, “who had some modicum of decency who could ease my mind. But I see now that this family has no such decorum.”

She stood with such force the chair wobbled from behind her.

Charles raised his hand but his demeanor remained unaffected by her sudden movements.

“All my carriages are accounted for. The one he used to go to the church has been returned without him in it. No foul play, I’m afraid.” Charles rubbed his chin. “Although, one can’t give up hope, I suppose.” Charles chuckled at the thought of his brother lying helpless in a ditch somewhere. Definitely would make things easier for him to discipline Eli.

“You honestly have no regard for your family?” Sarah spat. She shook her head in disbelief as she marched towards the door.

“My brother has been making a mockery of our family for years. I have little patience for spoiled brats. You’re not the only one whose name is at stake thanks to his selfishness.”

Charles bit his tongue. He hated allowing anyone to see him, or his family, as

anything other than strong and formidable, but if anyone could relate to the exhaustion his brother caused, it would be this woman before him.

Charles watched as some of the fight drained from Sarah's frame. She was extremely responsive to those around her.

"I'm sorry. I've only had to deal with him this once, I could not imagine being repeatedly let down in this manner over and over again. While I'm not looking forward to dealing with the fallout, my ruination will no doubt be something I fear I won't overcome, but at least he is out of my life."

Charles only grunted his acknowledgment of his life sentence cleaning up his brother's mistakes.

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She shifted her feet, seemingly unsure of her next move. Dark smudges began to appear under her eyes. “Thank you for your time, Your Grace. I apologize for disrupting your household at such a late hour.”

She turned and opened the door.

Before she could move, the door slammed shut with the push of his hand. She turned to find him standing directly in front her. With the door at her now at back, he completely took up the space around her.

“What if I can offer you a way out of ruination?”

Sarah’s breath stuttered. She took a step backwards and hit the door. One arm, seemingly the size of a tree trunk, was planted by her head, the soft material of his sleeve gently grazed her cheek.

Her chest rose with every breath causing her chest touched his. He was standing much too close to her.

She steeled her back and forced her eyes to rise and meet his.

Instantly she regretted it.

Alarm bells sounded in her mind as his dark green eyes burned into hers.

“What do you mean?” Her voice sounded foreign to her. Breathy and weak, it held none of the bravado she walked in here with.

His eyes darkened and he placed his other hand on the other side of her body, fully enclosing her between the door and himself. Her hands that were hanging at her sides pushed into the door, hoping for it to give and open.

His answered in a low rumble. Each word enunciated and dripping in seductive tones.

“What if I can offer you a way out of ruination?”

Sarah swallowed. Her mind was racing, exhaustion made his words sound muffled and confusing. She could feel beads of sweat form on her hairline but he was standing so close she couldn't reach up to swipe them away even if she wanted to.

She licked her dry lips, a movement his eyes followed with interest.

“I'm sorry, Your Grace, I don't understand what's happening. What could you offer me that would save me from such a life?”

Sarah chastised herself. Why was she even considering continuing such an absurd conversation?

Nothing about this man seemed kind or compassionate. He'd been toying with her ever since she walked into his study. He was much too large of a man, with sharp features, and brooding eyes. Nothing about him screamed willing to help his fellow man, or woman.

Yet, with all of that literally standing right in front of her, she felt her shoulders relax a bit against the door. She hated to admit it, but she was curious for his answer.

Charles dropped one hand from the door and brushed a strand of hair from her face. The fingers left a trail of fire along her cheek as he tucked the hair behind her ear. She shivered from the contact.

Something flashed in his eyes and he leaned in closer.

Her body instinctively reacted by leaning in closer as well. She no longer cared about why she came here. Propriety and social standards were gone the minute she stepped out of her house in search of answers. This man seemed to know how to help her and the time of heroes was over. She was going to save herself.

His cheek brushed against hers and he leaned in to whisper, his hot breath sending electric shocks down to her very core.

“Marry me, instead.”

CHAPTER 3

Sarah kept her eyes ahead of her and focused on just putting one foot in front of the other.

It was surreal to be back in the same church, walking the same aisle, but other than that everything else was different.

The pews were empty save for her mother, sister and a man and woman on the groom's side. No flowers were strung from the rafters, no candle lit the aisle. And the biggest change was the tall, brooding, strange man standing at the alter watching her every step towards him.

His stare weighed her down. Was he afraid she would run? Leave him at the alter the way his brother left her? She'd be lying if she said she hadn't thought of it. Even Beatrice suggested it when she first told her family of their arrangement.

But both families needed this. He was saving her reputation and she was helping clean up another mess his brother created. This was an arranged marriage, nothing

more.

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It's been three weeks since her last wedding, if you could even call it a wedding. These past weeks have been a whirlwind of last minute planning and endless conversations with her family.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw her mother worrying her handkerchief as she sat next to a wide eyed Beatrice. Her mother's emotions these since her announcement ranged from relief, to grief, from elation at his family stepping up, to terror that the family is a part of some secret society that lured women in to their doom.

And she questions where her daughters get their flair for the dramatics?

This wedding was so quickly thrown together that Eleanor and Derek weren't able to make it back from their estate to join them.

The thought of having her older sister here to witness this fever dream made her palms itch. No. It was better this way. The less people here to witness the mess her life had become the better it was for her. Her reputation was ruined, she no longer believed in fate or love or anything else as frivolous as romance.

She joined the Duke at the end of the aisle. There was a small part of her brain that was still conscious of her actions that told her to pay attention, that one day her grandchildren may ask her about it. Unfortunately, the numbness that settled into her bones on the day of her last wedding attempt only solidified these past few weeks dulling any emotion she once had. It took too much strength to keep her wits about her.

The priest cleared his throat.

Sarah dragged her eyes up to his. “Excuse me?”

Her voice cracked from misuse and hours of crying. She didn’t even care her hoarseness echoed throughout the church.

“I asked if you will have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy state of Matrimony.”

A bubble of laughter escaped her lips. She looked up to her soon-to-be husband and quickly sobered. Dark green eyes zeroed in on her causing her heart to race. Her new husband certainly knew how to use intimidation to his advantage.

Licking her dry lips, she refocused on the priest. “I will.”

As soon as the words left her mouth, her brain clicked off again. The cool sheath of numbness surrounded her until she felt someone tugging at her arm. She looked to her right where the Duke stood.

“It’s done,” was all he said.

“Oh.” She looked back to the priest. “Do we kiss?”

The priest looked to the Duke in unsettling confusion.

“I mean, not you and me.” She laughed nervously. “Obviously not you and me. I mean, me and him.” Sarah’s hand waved in between her and the Duke. “The Duke and me, I mean, His Grace and I. Me. The Duchess. Ha! I’m a Duchess, I suppose.”

Her mind whirled. What was she doing? She had lost all control of her mind, body and mouth. Embarrassment rose high in her cheeks as she realized the absolute fool she just made out of herself.

Her eyes dropped. A wave of nausea from grief washed over her. There had to be a crevice somewhere for her to crawl into.

She felt the Duke shift beside her. Strong hands landed on her arms as she was turned to face him.

A big hand took her chin and tipped it up ever so carefully. Sparkling green eyes peered down into hers.

She was expecting to see derision, regret, even fear for his own life. After all, she was raving like a mad woman.

Instead, she saw compassion. It was fleeting, but she knew what she saw.

His eyes were soft and concerned for a just a moment. It was enough to settle her.

The Duke leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. It was the briefest of kisses, one that most definitely would look like it held no emotion.

Yet, when his lips chastely touched hers a calmness settled within her.

He pulled away and his eyes moved to look at someone standing just behind her.

She turned in time to see her mother approach her. “Mama?” Sarah’s voice sounded distant even to herself. “Mama, I’m married.”

Charlotte’s lips thinned into a tight smile. Sarah could tell her mother was willing her unshed tears not to fall.

“Don’t cry, Mama. This is a happy thing, remember?”

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My goodness. Is that my voice?

Even though her voice was devoid of all emotion, she could admit that a small part of her did feel relieved she actually went through with this hasty marriage. Her reputation was salvaged for the most part. There was no more wondering, or worrying, when her day will come. It came. It went. She was now married.

She looked up to the man that was now her husband. The finality of the act was settling in and Sarah could feel that nervous laughter bubble within her again.

God in heaven, what did I just do?

Thankfully, before she could say anything, Charles took her by the elbow and escorted her to his waiting carriage.

“Wait!” It was the first time her voice reached above a whisper since she got to the church.

Panic coated her skin in a cold sweat. “I didn’t get to say goodbye to my mother.”

Charles looked into the empty cab before nodding and signaling her to go say goodbye.

Sarah picked up her skirts and trotted to her mother who was standing in the church’s doorway with Beatrice.

Sarah wrapped her arms tightly around her mother. “Goodbye, Mama. Thank you for

all that you have done for me, especially these last few weeks.”

“Sarah. I can’t help but think we made a grave mistake. You don’t know this man. I feel like I just fed you to the wolves.” Charlotte pulled Sarah away and held her at arm’s length. “We’re still waiting to hear back from Derek. What if he finds something scandalous in his background?”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “He didn’t find out anything when I was supposed to marry Eli-”

Beatrice snorted. “And look how well that turned out.”

Both Sarah and Charlotte’s attention snapped to Beatrice who simply shrugged at their shock. “I’m just saying what we’re all thinking.”

Charlotte scowled at her youngest. “We were not all thinking that.” She turned back to Sarah. “Although, she’s not wrong. We knew that boy had selfish tendencies and even Derek didn’t see it as an issue. Obviously, we were wrong. What if he’s wrong about the whole family. I mean, there have been rumors-”

Sarah hugged her mother again, cutting off her words. When she pulled away she kissed her mother’s cheeks.

“Trust the process, Mama.”

Charlotte frowned. “Have I ever told you how much I hate when you girls use my own words against me?”

The corners of Sarah’s lips tipped up in the corners. The smile felt odd but she took it as a slight victory that she had ability to form a smile at all.

“It wouldn’t have stopped me from saying it either way.” She looked over her shoulder to where her husband stood waiting. “I must be going, Mama. I love you.”

She turned to hug Beatrice. “I love you, too, dear sister. Try not to give Mama too much trouble.”

Beatrice smiled. “I’m not allowed to make promises I can’t keep.”

A small laugh escaped and Sarah had the sorry hope that that wasn’t the last time she laughed.

She took a moment to look at her mother and sister before turning and making her way back to the carriage.

Sarah had a shiver of familiarity as she walked towards the carriage and her waiting husband. He was staring at her, just as he did when she walked down the aisle.

Emerald eyes watched her every step as if he were a hunter afraid of scaring his prey. Sarah tilted her head and held it a little higher. Now that the ceremony was over and she was officially married she felt a bit lighter.

She no longer felt the weight of dread hanging over her. She was a Duchess now and that had to count for something.

Charles reached out his hand to help her into the carriage. She nodded as she took his warm hand and stepped into the carriage.

He followed after her and sat opposite her in the cab. He reached out of the window and tapped the roof, signaling the driver to move.

The carriage jostled to a start. Sarah watched as her mother and Beatrice disappeared

from sight. Soon she couldn't even see the church.

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She took in the changing scenery from the busy city to the quiet dirt roads of the country. “Are we going to your country estate?”

Charles remained quiet, his gaze trained on the passing trees.

Sarah chewed her bottom lip She was never one comfortable with silence.

“It’s a beautiful day. For sure I thought it would be another day of rain like we’ve been having. Perhaps we’ve hit a bit of luck after all.”

Charles continued to sit, watching the outside pass them.

Sarah pulled at the lace cuff around her wrists. Surely he heard me.

She began to tap her fingers against her lap. She thought the ceremony would be the hardest to get through, little did she know she’d be cooped up in a carriage with him for God knows how long without a drop of conversation.

Nerves danced up and down her spine causing her to shift in her seat. She opened her mouth again, but quickly closed it when she saw Charles looking at her.

The brief moment of compassion he showed her at the church was long gone and from the looks of his expression that may be the only time she’d ever see it.

His eyes were darkened and a crease formed above his eyes.

Sarah sat straighter and audibly swallowed. Without a word he told her he was in no

mood for a discussion.

An itch began to form at the base of her spine. She wanted to lash out and question his authority. It was the same itch that drove her to his residence that fateful night. However, the stress from the month paired with the swaying motion of the carriage lulled her body to relax against the back of the seat.

There was no point in trying to start a conversation with him. Not with him sitting stick straight, and her barely able to keep her eyes open all of a sudden.

She snuck a peek at her husband as her eyes drifted closed. He sat tall in his seat, his broad shoulders seemed to take up the entire side of his bench. His long legs were still, not stretched out in relaxation, but bound beneath him. It was almost as if he was readying himself for an attack on the carriage. His green eyes were shuttered, giving away no emotion or inkling of what he was truly thinking. There was not a single trace of familiarity found amongst his features. It was as if they were strangers sharing a carriage ride home.

And, yet, he is now my husband.

CHAPTER 4

The carriage halted and the carriage door swung open. Charles bounded from the cab without looking back to help his wife out. Sarah stood crouched in the doorway, holding her skirts, and watched her husband disappear into an inn.

A footman appeared and helped her down. She nodded her thanks.

“Why have we stopped here?”

“We have another half day travel to reach the country estate.” The footman gestured

to the inn behind him. “His Grace stays here at the Greyside Inn when he travels back from London.”

“Ah.” Sarah looked up at the exterior of the inn that looked more like an elongated house than an inn. Not that she had much experience with staying at inns, she never had the need. However, from the stories she read they always seemed more elegant and decadent than the modest building in front of her.

She entered through a creaky wooden door and saw her husband exchanging a coin purse with a man. Sarah tucked her head and walked further into the galley. She joined Charles just as he turned towards her.

“Are we staying the night?” Her voice was cautious as she took in her surroundings. People were milling around, some laughing, some sat in solitude, all were looking at her.

“We are.” Charles said, still refusing to meet her eyes.

Sarah nodded. The realization of having her wedding night in an inn began to weigh heavily on her. She was nervous about the endeavor so as it was. To experience it in an unfamiliar home was one thing, but at least she knew the bed would be comfortable and it would be an environment she would become accustomed to. But, here, in a common inn? It did not lend itself to the ambiance of romance one would be hoping for on a wedding night.

She watched as her husband directed a footman up the stairs with a piece of her luggage. Sarah gathered her skirts and followed. The steps groaned beneath her feet and she had the fleeting thought her foot would crash through the next step.

Charles abruptly stopped in front of her, causing her to crash into his back.

“This is my room. Yours is across the hall.”

She looked between the doors. “Are we not sha-”

Charles’s door shut with a thud with Charles on the other side of it.

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Sarah was left alone in the hallway, staring at the closed door.

The footman opened her door and placed her bag just inside the door. “Your room is ready for you, Your Grace.”

Sarah broke her stare and turned towards the footman, plastering on her best smile. “Thank you.” She breezed past him and into her room and closed the door behind her.

She leaned against the door and took her first cleansing breath of the day. Her eyes fluttered shut and a small smile broke free.

No, it was not the wedding she always imagined. There were no flowers, no big gathering. Heavens, she didn’t even know her husband and she wasn’t particularly fond of what she did know of him. But she was finally married. It was done.

She wasn’t looking forward to having a wedding a night with a man she barely knew, so she was relieved when she learned they’d be spending the night in separate rooms.

Sarah opened her bag to make sure she had the appropriate things for the night ahead. Her thoughts drifted to the man across the hall. She couldn’t help but question if the Duke ordered separate rooms on purpose.

Perhaps he was being a gentlemen and planned on wooing her, easing her into their marriage? Maybe all the romance books she read didn’t saddle her with high expectations of what love was after all.

There are many different ways to love. Perhaps the Duke had the chance to revisit

how he treated her and found it callous, as it was, and is offering her some time to come around to this new arrangement?

She sighed as she sat on the bed. “Maybe he is a gentleman after all.”

There was a knock on the door.

Sarah opened and found a young girl on the other side.

“His Grace wanted me to remind you that dinner will be served soon. Would you like me to bring it up to you, or will you take it downstairs?”

Sarah peered over the girl and looked down at the galley below. Men were huddled over tables drinking and carrying on with each other. It did not seem like a suitable place for a woman to be.

“Will His Grace be joining me?”

The girl quirked her eyebrow. “His Grace always eats in his room. He’s already been served.”

Sarah’s heart sank.

“Oh. For some reason I thought...” Sarah shook her head and waved her hand. “It doesn’t matter what I thought. Thank you for you letting me know. If you could, could you please bring the meal to me.”

The little girl dipped her head. “It will be my pleasure, Your Grace.” Sarah watched as the little girl skipped down the steps and disappeared behind swinging doors.

Her eyes landed on the door across from hers.

Sarah shut the door. Her mind kept replaying the day in her mind to try to understand her new husband.

He watched her like a hawk coming down the aisle, but then he kissed her to save her from her nervous rant when custom didn't require him to. He didn't speak on the way to the inn, but he seemed just as uneasy with their pairing as she did.

Were the separate rooms for her, or him? Would he come to her? Or was he giving her space?

Would he expect to consummate, regardless of them having separate rooms? At first she thought he was being chivalrous, but now she didn't know what to think. After a few hours of waiting, her nerves were wearing thin.

With every squeak of the hallway, every phantom voice that drifted in from below, she expected it to be her husband on his way to knock on her door.

She crossed the room and sat at the small vanity that was set up for her and rubbed her temples.

Sitting in the chair she began to unpin her hair. Her hair was not as elaborate as her first wedding, but it did take quite a few pins to keep her hair in place.

There was a slight knock on her door.

“Come in.”

She continued taking out her hair. “If you could, just put it on the table next to the door. Thank you so-” Her words died on her tongue as she turned towards the door.

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Standing in the doorway was not the young girl with her food, but her husband.

He stood, backlit from the lights in the hallway. His shadow cast forward in front of him, creeping towards her. Her heart rose into her throat.

By God, he was formidable.

“May I come in?”

Sarah managed to only dip her head, but it was enough for him. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Sarah’s heart raced. Did he come to consummate? Her eyes flickered around the room. Will this be how I lose my virginity? In some small room in a dusty inn?

Her eyes widened as he moved towards her bed and sat down.

He tilted his head towards her. “Are you all right, Sarah?”

“Yes.” The word came out just above a whisper.

A smile spread across his face before a low rumble of a chuckle rolled out of him.

His laughter only made her more nervous. She tightened the hold on her chair, her knuckles going white from the pressure.

“Christ, woman, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost. I’m not going to force myself on

you if that's what you're worried about."

A rush of air escaped Sarah's lips and her shoulders dropped from relief. She hadn't realized how tense she was until she heard his confession.

"You wouldn't?"

His chuckle turned into a roaring laughter. "Good Lord, no. What do you take me for?"

Sarah sat staring at the oddity in front of her. Truth was, she didn't know how to answer that. She's only had a handful of encounters with her now husband and each one did not do his personality any favors.

Instead of pushing that narrative she settled on lifting a slender shoulder in a shrug.

"Well, I can't have you thinking that." Charles said while shaking his head.

She gestured towards the bed. "Then why are you sitting on my bed?"

Charles looked down at the bed then back up to her. "Because there was no where else to sit, but I see now where you may have gotten your original idea."

Charles stood and held his hands out. "Better?"

Standing at his full height, Sarah took in his larger than life frame. She actually wished he would sit back down but he walked over to the fireplace and leaned against the small mantle.

"I wanted to talk with you and set some things straight in regards to our marriage."

Sarah cocked her head, but before she could question him, he held up a finger.

“One, you will mind your business when it comes to my family. I will not entertain any discussion about them so don’t try to start one.”

Sarah snapped her mouth shut. If there was anything that got her blood boiling it was being told not to do something. Once again she opened her mouth to question but he took a step towards her while putting up another finger.

“Two, you will not disturb me unless there is true emergency. I’m a busy man with a lot of responsibilities and I can’t be bothered to oversee and handle every little nuisance that comes your way. Which brings me to number three.”

He was moving closer to her with every rule, slowly stalking towards her like a lion hunting its prey. Sarah’s heart rate jumped. With every step he took she instinctively leaned away, causing her back to push against the vanity.

“You will fulfill all your duties as Duchess. I’m not partial to lavish balls and dinner parties, as it is essential as our role in the peerage to hold such events. I expect you to do the necessary planning to handle such tasks.”

Sarah swallowed. So far what he was asking her wasn’t unheard of. Other than his first rule, which she made a mental note to find a way around, he wasn’t asking anything she wasn’t expecting. She tried to get her body to relax, but he kept moving forward and his gaze felt as if it was penetrating her soul.

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She licked her dry lips. “Is that all?”

Charles moved his head ever so slowly from side to side. “There is one more thing you will do for me.”

His voice was soft and low and slid over her skin like fine silk. He came to a stop in front of her, forcing her to crane her neck to look up at him.

“You will give me an heir.”

It felt as if all the air was sucked out of the room. Sarah’s eyes widened and her heart stopped.

He slowly lowered himself into a crouch in front of her. He pulled at her chair so she was sitting, facing him. She felt trapped. Her mind was screaming at her to move. He was too close, he was too much, this was all too much for her sensibilities.

Charles raised a hand and in direct contradiction to the hardness of his veneer, he softly touched her cheek as he brushed a curl from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

In this close proximity, his green eyes commanded her body and she felt herself leaning into his gesture while she held his sight.

“In order to do that, we will need to consummate the marriage.”

Sarah nodded slowly, her body willing her mind to catch up to what he was saying. His voice had activated something deep within her and her body began to hum. But

her mind was still processing what he was telling her.

Her heart jumped when she realized he was leaning in as well. This was it. They would consummate the marriage tonight. She was so enraptured by his presence she no longer cared it wasn't in the confines of his country estate.

She could do this. She would do this. Confidence and curiosity swirled in her veins.

Her breath caught in her throat as he closed the distance between them. Her eyes fluttered shut, waiting for the touch of his lips to hers.

A touch that never came.

Instead, she felt his lips graze the shell of her ear.

“You have ten days to prepare yourself.”

Sarah's eyes flew open in time to see him stand and walk to the door.

“I told you before, I don't forcefully take anything or anyone, without warning. And when I do take someone, I'm not gentle. You've been warned, Sarah. I suggest you take heed and prepare accordingly.”

Sarah stared at the closed door. Her breath was coming out in short bursts.

What have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 5

The carriage jolted Sarah awake. She blinked her eyes open, trying to remember where she was. Her eyes settled on the ominous dark form sitting across from her. Oh,

right.

She must've fallen asleep on the way over. After Charles left her room last night she found it hard to sleep. His parting words weighed on her mind causing her restless night.

Sarah looked out the window and saw they had arrived at the country estate. "We're here." Sarah cringed at her obvious remark.

Charles grunted in reply and moved to get out of the carriage.

Well, at least he acknowledged me.

Flashes of the morning came back to her. She was awoken by one loud knock on her door. By the time she answered it, no one was there, but Charles's bag was sitting next to his door waiting for someone to retrieve it. She assumed that that was her wake up call. Luckily for her, the young girl from last night helped her dress and prepare for the ride to her new home.

She tried making conversation once they were in the carriage but she was met with stone silence and averted gaze. Last thing she remembered was being lulled by the steady rocking motion of the carriage.

Sarah gathered her skirts and moved to step out of the carriage. She was surprised when the extended hand there to help her down belonged to her husband.

She looked up to thank him but his body had already turned from her and was walking inside.

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Sarah swallowed her hurt pride and followed him through the open door.

“Samuels, you remember my wife, Sarah?”

Sarah blushed at the memory of her practically barreling over the older butler to get into the house to speak with Eli. Heavens, that seemed like ages ago.

She tilted her head at his welcome.

“Sarah, this Mrs. Bates, the housekeeper. She’ll be the one who will be the most help to you with regards to the household. I’m sure she’ll introduce you to your maid at some point.”

Sarah peered up at her husband. His words were rushed and he sounded bored with the whole conversation. She grimaced at his rude behavior.

“It’s lovely to have you here with us, Your Grace.” Mrs. Bates looked around the same age as Charlotte which caused Sarah’s heart to squeeze. She could really use her mother right now. For as emotional and flighty her mother could be with some things, she had a way of helping Sarah put things in perspective when she really needed it.

And, heavens knew she needed that right now.

Sarah smiled warmly at the woman. “Thank you, Mrs. Bates. I am very happy to be here and can’t wait to get to know everyone.”

Sarah turned to Charles who was walking away from her. She glanced quickly at Mrs. Bates who had a resigned look on her face before she picked up her skirts to chase after him.

She didn't want to all out run after her husband, but, heavens, he had long legs. His long stride ate up the distance between the entrance and his study door in no time.

Unfortunately for her when she reached the door he had already shut it.

She raised a hand to knock but Mrs. Bates called from the entranceway.

“Your Grace? Would you like me to introduce you to the rest of the staff?”

Sarah looked back at older woman, who was wringing her hands in front of her.

Sarah returned her gaze to the closed door in front of her and dropped her hand. She straightened her posture and brushed the wrinkles off her dress. She was a Duchess now with responsibilities to tend to.

She would become acquainted with the staff and her duties, but she will make it a point to discuss with her husband his behavior. If he thinks he's the only one with rules in this marriage, he had another think coming.

Mrs. Bates had taken Sarah all over the country estate. She met almost every one who worked in the house and directly on his property. All seemed like pleasant and responsible workers. Sarah hated to admit, but she was impressed.

She expected the people to be as standoffish and rude as their employer. Her husband never gave off the allure of being someone people would be happy to work for, but everyone she met spoke of Charles with genuine respect and admiration.

He must treat his staff with great care to receive this type of loyalty.

If only I received the same care from him.

“Lizzie will be your maid, Your Grace.” Mrs. Bates’s voice broke through Sarah’s reverie. “She would be down here to greet you but she is upstairs preparing your rooms. Would you like to see your go to them now, Your Grace?”

Sarah nodded in agreement and followed Mrs. Bates up the stairs and down a hallway leading to her suite of rooms.

Mrs. Bates opened the door where Sarah’s maid was just finishing arranging the pillows on her bed.

The slight young woman looked about her age, with a fair complexion and a pleasant air about her.

“Lizzie? I’d like to introduce Her Grace, Duchess of Stoleton, your mistress.”

Lizzie bowed her head, “Your Grace.”

Sarah smiled. She reminded Sarah of Beatrice. She reached out her hands and she walked to Lizzie, taking a hold of her hands when she reached the girl. “Lizzie, it is so nice to meet you. I just know we’ll get along smashingly.”

Sarah looked around her room. It was filled with soft colors and minimal furniture, but it would do for now.

“This truly is a beautiful home and estate.” Sarah said as she crossed to the window that overlooked the garden and a small pond.

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“Thank you, Your Grace. We are very proud of it. His Grace is always working so hard, we make sure we keep it in tip top shape for when he comes he so he has nothing to worry about. It’s a shame what-”

Mrs. Bates’s words were cut off from a quick gasp from Lizzie.

Sarah turned her attention to the two women who were now looking at each other.

“What is it? What is the shame?”

Lizzie’s eyes dropped to the ground. Miss Bates’s waved her hand in front of her face as if to wipe away the words she just said.

“Oh, I was just going to say it was a shame that he had no one to share it with but now he has you.”

Her smile was a bit too wide and Sarah had the sneaking suspicion that was not what Mrs. Bates was about to say. She wanted to press the issue but who was she to interrogate the woman? Perhaps in time, after she’s known her for a bit longer, she can bring it up again.

“Oh. How nice.” Sarah noted. “Well, am I to assume dinner will be soon? I didn’t realize it was so late in the day. I’m feeling a bit famished.”

Mrs. Bates smiled more genuinely. “Oh, yes, Your Grace. The cook has whipped up quite the feast for your welcome. Lizzie? Why don’t you help Her Grace get settled into her room and I’ll let the cook know you’re ready for dinner.”

“Thank you, Miss Bates.” Sarah escorted Miss Bates of the room as her stomach growled.

She covered her stomach with her hand. “My goodness, I didn’t realize how hungry I was. Please let His Grace know I will be down for dinner shortly.”

Once again, tension settled between Miss Bates and Lizzie and Sarah’s eyes bounced between the two women.

“What is it now?” One thing Sarah could not abide was secrets.

Miss Bates took a breath. “It’s nothing, Your Grace. It’s just we’ve come accustomed to His Grace working so much, he rarely eats dinner in the dining room.”

Sarah’s heart sank. She had not seen him since this morning when he left her to fend for herself in a house full of strangers, but she just assumed they would at least dine together as married couples were wont to do.

“Where does he dine? Perhaps I could join him there?” It didn’t bother Sarah how desperate she sounded. He laid down ground rules for her to follow and she would do what he asked of her. However, she found it ridiculous that he could impose such rules thinking those would be only times he would interact with her.

Lizzie stepped forward. “His Grace usually eats in his study, Your Grace. I’m sure you’d be much more comfortable in the dining room. Or, if you’d like, since you’re still getting settled, we could bring a tray up here to you. Isn’t that right, Mrs. Bates?”

Lizzie looked at Miss Bates earnestly and Sarah found herself following Lizzie’s example.

Miss Bates nodded. “I don’t see why not. If that’s what Your Grace wants.”

She looked at Sarah expectantly.

Sarah looked around the room. A large lump formed in her throat. She didn't want to show them how scared and utterly overwhelmed she was. She was the Duchess now and yet , she felt woefully unprepared for the tasks at hand.

She pulled at the cuffs of her shirt. "Yes, actually, I wouldn't mind if you brought a tray up here. I am quite tired from all the excitement these past few days."

Mrs. Bates stepped outside the room while Lizzie turned back to fluffing the pillows.

"Lizzie?" Sarah asked. "Would you mind leaving with Mrs. Bates. I would like some time to myself to settle in."

Lizzie looked up to Mrs. Bates before turning to Sarah. "Of course, Your Grace. I'll let the staff know you'll be eating your dinner in your room. If there's anything else, please just call for me."

Sarah nodded and walked to one of her bags that sat on a bench. She went through the motions of opening it and pulling out various clothes and laying them next to the bag. Once Lizzie closed the door Sarah threw the shirt she was holding onto the ground.

"Bloody hell" She cursed.

Sarah swatted the hot tears that began to fall.

"Stop being so foolish, Sarah." She trudged over to the full length mirror and looked at herself. "You can do this. This is what you wanted. Your name is not ruined. There will be no scandal to hurt Beatrice's chances in her season."

Sarah sniffed and wiped her nose with a handkerchief from her vanity. She dabbed

her eyes. “All good things, girl. Just like mama says, ‘Trust the process.’”

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A low knock sounded from her door.

“Your Grace? It’s Lizzie. I have your food.”

Sarah let Lizzie in, who placed the tray on a side table by the door.

“Would you like me to help you get ready for bed tonight, Your Grace?”

Sarah nodded her head. “No, thank you, Lizzie. I always make sure my traveling clothes are manageable.”

Lizzie dropped her eyes.

“If I need help I will send for you, though. Thank you, Lizzie,” Sarah said, gesturing to the food. “I appreciate your help. It’s just been a whirlwind of a few days and I’m still trying to catch my breath.”

Lizzie offered a small smile. “We are very happy to have you here, Your Grace. I hope you’ll like it here.”

Sarah glanced over Lizzie’s shoulder and out in the hallway where she could have sworn she saw a lurking shadow.

“I hope so, too, Lizzie.”

Lizzie tilted her head before closing the door behind her.

Dinner smelled delicious but Sarah's stomach wouldn't even let her consider eating a single bite. Her stomach had been spinning all day. Her head and heart ached from the emotional upheaval she's been through.

She didn't expect Charles to be charming or even that romantic, but she relied so heavily on her mother's theory that love can blossom out of the most unlikely places. Unfortunately for Sarah, in order for any relationship to blossom with her husband they would have to be in each other's company. Outside of the carriage ride, she's seen her husband a grand total of once and that was at the inn.

And even then it was only to give rules about what she was allowed to talk about and her responsibilities as Duchess.

It was also when he gave her ten days to wrap her mind around consummating the marriage in the hopes of producing an heir. A shiver ran down her spine at the memory of his words.

"And when I do take someone, I'm not gentle. You've been warned, Sarah."

Sarah picked up her night shift and sat on the edge of the bed. Her hand cramped around the material from how hard she was clutching the shift.

Charles did not seem like a man that would be gentle.

Sarah heard a creak from a floorboard outside her room. Her heart rate picked up and she looked at the door.

Was he standing outside her door?

Sarah shook her head. She was becoming paranoid. Not having answers was playing tricks on her mind. It was most likely a maid or Samuels.

Still, she walked over to the door and locked it. She backed up until the back of her knees hit the bed and she sat, still staring at the door.

Sarah felt in way over her head. Nothing in any of her romance books prepared her for marrying a brute. Her books were all filled with undying love proclamations and grand scale gestures. There were soft touches, and seductive whispers in corners. Sarah's focused on the space between the floorboards and the bottom of the door. She watched as a shadowed moved slowly from one side of the door to the other, footsteps moving farther away.

Sarah's heart sunk further in her chest. She doubted she would get soft touches and words of affirmation or love from Charles. A love story like that doesn't come with the paramour giving his love a deadline for consummation.

Sarah didn't wipe the tears that began to fall. She let them. For tonight she was going to grieve the life she thought she'd live. She needed to come to terms with letting go of a life full of romance and love, one that she gave her happiness and security.

She laid down on top of the covers, still clutching her night shirt, and curled into a ball. Her body rocked back and forth as the tears fell and coated the duvet. She fell asleep thinking of what might have been and what she could not have.

CHAPTER 6

Sarah walked into the dining room the next afternoon. She spent all day with Mrs. Bates going over schedules and meeting more of the household staff. She was exhausted but she was feeling more confident in her role of Duchess.

The one thing she was not feeling better about was Charles. She had not seen him all day. His noticeable absence was grating on her nerves. Not only was it incredibly rude but she couldn't help but notice the staff take notice of his avoidance of his new

wife.

Samuels held out the chair for Sarah to sit in.

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She looked at the empty chair across from her.

“Thank you, Samuels.” She said as she unfolded a napkin and placed it in her lap.

“Tell me, will His Grace be joining me tonight?”

Samuels cleared his throat. “No, Your Grace. I fear His Grace has been locked away in office all day. He is a-”

“Very busy man.” She sighed. “Yes. I know. It’s all I hear.” Sarah didn’t try to disguise the frustration in her voice.

Last night was exactly what she needed. She got all of her tears out and now she was left with pure annoyance and angst. Before she came down for dinner she had a brief moment of hesitation. She considered eating in her room again, but she’d be damned if she was going to hide in her room like some lost and hurt lamb.

Her mother raised her better than that.

“No worries, Samuels.” She brushed the notion off. “I will visit him in his study after I eat.”

Sarah had to bite her lip to hide her smile. The abject horror written across Samuels face along with the tension that rolled off of him was amusing.

She quirked an eyebrow. “Am I not allowed to visit my husband, Samuels?”

Watching him fidget and squirm gave Sarah a rush of excitement.

Mayhap their loyalty to him isn't out respect, but fear.

Sarah snorted to herself. That seemed more likely the case. She had originally thought everyone spoke highly of her new husband out of respect but the way the poor butler was shifting in front of her, it was more likely they were afraid of him.

Not to mention the peculiar way Lizzie and Mrs. Bates reacted her to questioning about eating with him in his study last night.

Well, lucky for her, she was particularly good at standing her ground and engaging with bullies. She finally felt some semblance of control settle within her.

Sarah leaned towards to where Samuels stood.

"Don't worry." She whispered. "I will tell him that you fought me tooth and nail but you finally gave in because I used my feminine wiles on you and you're no match for me." She winked, hoping to break the tension.

To her satisfaction, Samuels breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, Your Grace. I remember our first encounter. You are not someone to be trifled with."

Sarah let out a laugh that echoed through the empty dining room.

"If I'm not being too forward, Your Grace. It is nice to see you smile. You looked quite worrisome at the church."

Sarah looked up to Samuels. "You were at the church?"

Samuels nodded. "Mrs. Bates and I were in attendance on behalf of His Grace."

The familiar scene flashed before her eyes. She remembered seeing a man and a

woman in the pews opposite her mother and sister.

“Ah. You’re right.” Sarah settled back into her chair.

“Yes. I’m feeling a bit more settled now than I was then.” Sarah chuckled. “For the most part.”

Samuels nodded and excused himself to see to other duties.

Sarah acknowledged his departure and returned to the plate in front of her. She told herself she would enjoy the moment.

Spending the day acclimating to her new role, speaking with the servants, having a good meal brought a sense of familiarity she so desperately needed.

It also gave her the resolve to march right up to that study door and demand entry.

As soon as she finished with dinner, it would be time for her husband to know his wife was not just a trophy he could set somewhere and take out when needed.

She had opinions and her own set of rules she needed implemented as well.

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Charles sat at his desk, pouring over his ledger. He'd have to find a new supplier for meat, prices were going up and he was going to start losing money soon.

Charles put down his pen and rubbed his eyes.

A knock at the door had him sighing. "Come in."

A second passed and the door didn't open.

Charles looked at the door and quirked an eye brow. Did he imagine it? He looked at the clock. It was past dinner time. Maybe his brain was telling him it was time to take a break.

Another knock came, this time a little softer.

"Come in!" He bellowed.

He sat back in his chair impatiently waiting for the door to open. He rested an elbow on the arm of the chair, his fingers restlessly rubbing his chin.

The door creaked as it was pushed open ever so slowly. The anticipation was irritating him.

"Well, in or out. What do you want?"

Just then a dark blonde head popped through the door.

Sarah.

His eyes narrowed on her as she slowly stepped into his office. She was unsure of her place with him and that's how he liked it. There have been too many times in his life where he was not in control of the narrative and he vowed he'd never give that power up again.

Once fully inside she closed the door and looked around the room.

He cleared his throat and her vision snapped back to him. She took a deep breath and a look of determination coated her features.

It stirred something within him.

Charles hid his smile behind his hand. He liked to be challenged. It brought more satisfaction when he, undoubtedly, got his way.

"How long are you going to avoid me?" She huffed out in annoyance.

Charles pursed his lips.

"I don't recall avoiding you. In fact, I haven't seen you. How could I avoid you if I haven't seen you?" Charles kept his voice light and nonplussed.

He was delighted that he could actually witness her temper rising within her. A beautiful red flush crept high on her cheeks as her eyes widened. She threw her arms out wide, signaling to the room.

"That's exactly what I mean Charles. I haven't seen you because you've been holed up in here for two days!"

She continued her march towards his desk. She slammed both hands down on his ledgers and leaned across his work.

“Do you know how it feels to be married to a stranger, come to his home, and be left to fend for oneself in a new role with no support from said stranger, other than one introduction to a butler and housekeeper?”

Her chest was rising and falling with each little puff of angst she dispelled. She was a firecracker when she was angry. He couldn't help but think about all the ways he could get her to explode. Charles shifted in his seat hoping to cover the swell in his trousers.

“I am not going to seek you out, Sarah. If I need you, I'll find you. I would expect the same of you.”

Feeling more in control, he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

“This is a marriage of convenience, remember?” He said lightly. “I saved your name, and in turn, you helped keep Eli in somewhat good standing.”

Sarah clucked her tongue. “Marriage of convenience, indeed. Nothing about this feels convenient.” She chided.

Charles lazily lifted a shoulder. “Your opinion on the matter of convenience makes no difference about its validity. Truth is that's exactly what this is.”

Charles tightened his jaw before he dropped his hands to his lap.

“And another truth is, you’ve made a grave mistake, my dear wife.”

Her eyes flickered when he said “wife,” causing his lips to twitch but he refused to smile.

“Two days in and you’ve already broken a rule of mine.” He tsked.

Sarah straightened. Her lips formed into a tiny, perfect ‘o’ and it pleased him greatly.

Charles pushed away from his chair and stood up to his full height, relishing how her eyes widened even more when he was fully standing.

She licked her lips. But with a little shake of head her indignation returned.

“What are you talking about?” Her voice had a slight shake to its timber, but for the most part she was doing an excellent job at keeping her emotions at bay. “I have not broken any rule. How could I? This is the first time I’m seeing you.”

Charles stalked around his desk and came to stand in front of her. Her body shifted as if to take a step back, but her lips tightened into a thin line and she held her ground.

Satisfaction rumbled through Charles.

She tilted her head to meet his eyes.

He didn't lean down, he only lowered his eyes. "I told you you were not to bother me unless there is an emergency."

This close to her he could see tiny flecks of gold in her hazel eyes. Eyes that were currently staring back at with him with no good will.

"This," he took a step closer to her, causing her to crane her neck to keep eye contact, "is not an emergency."

She continued to stand still. No movement was between them, just their breaths crashing into each other.

"How was I supposed to know you were all right? You could have been dead in here and no one would have been the wiser. Isn't that an emergency?"

Charles allowed one corner of his lips to tip up.

"Plenty of servants have seen me, all you had to do was ask. Samuels has been in many times, one to even tell me that you had asked about me for dinner."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I should have known he would tell you."

Charles chuckled. "My dear wife, I know all that happens in and around my house and don't forget it." His voice was low and rumbled deep from his chest.

She must have felt the vibration because her eyes dropped to his chest before they roamed their way back up to his.

"What is my punishment?"

Four words. Four simple words, spoken just above a broken whisper, ignited a fire so hot it threatened to consume Charles right there on the spot.

A wide, devilish grin spread across his face.

Every fiber of Sarah's sanity was screaming at her to run but she was frozen in her place. She was completely enraptured by dark green eyes that were becoming darker the longer she stared into them.

Whatever animal growled within his chest when he spoke called to something deep within her and her body was at war with her mind.

He had yet to answer her question, but with him hovering over her, overwhelming all of her senses, she couldn't even remember what she asked him. She most likely couldn't even tell someone her name if she were asked.

"So anxious for a punishment, are we?"

Sarah's eyebrows burrowed. "What-"

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Her words were swallowed by his mouth that had crashed down onto hers. If she was transfixed by his eyes, then she was completely lost to his kiss.

She's been kissed before, but it was mostly mashing her mouth against Byron's while his novice hands fumbled around her waist.

There was nothing inexperienced about the way Charles kissed.

With one hand he pulled her waist into his body while his other hand pulled her in from the back of her neck. He took advantage of her mouth, open from shock, by thrusting his tongue into her mouth.

She had one errant thought before her body's reaction to the kiss stole her conscious thought. That single thought was, He was right. He wouldn't be gentle.

His one arm snaked around her waist pulled her up so her feet dangled just above the floor. He sharply turned and placed her on top of his desk. Without breaking the bruising kiss, he willed her legs open by using his one knee to nudge them open so he could stand in between them.

He cradled her head within his hands, angling her head just right so he could deepen their kiss.

Their tongues danced around each other. His challenging her timid responses to his more calculated movements.

A moaned escaped her lips and reverberated into his mouth. She heard a sharp inhale

and his grip around her face tightened.

With one hand still holding the angle of the kiss, his other trailed down her neck to her chest, leaving gooseflesh in its wake. It stopped on top of her breasts and grabbed ahold of one.

His massage was a bit rough but it only excited Sarah more. He was unleashing something she didn't realize was hidden within her.

Sarah's body reacted by arching into his. She felt like a reckless wanton woman but she didn't care. Whatever spell this man cast over her she was grateful for it.

Her hands reached up and found purchase in his luscious dark locks. Her nails raked along his scalp causing him to take in another sharp inhale.

Knowing she caused this intimidating man to lose his breath sent an electric shock throughout her body. Her body came alive under his touch. She wanted more.

Her legs wrapped around his body, pulling him in closer. She began to think she didn't need to wait the rest of the ten days, she could do this now.

She could give herself to him in this moment and they would officially be husband and wife. And, more importantly, she would want it.

Before this moment she was confused about their arrangement, but no man can kiss a woman like this and not want a relationship from her.

The thought blossomed hope within her heart and her body tightened, once more, around him.

Charles slowed their kiss and pulled away.

Sarah sat for a brief moment, not wanting to open her eyes to reality. She wanted to stay in the dream a little longer.

Sarah reluctantly opened her eye, expecting to see his flush face, and the same longing she felt displayed in those green eyes.

Instead she was met with a stern look as if she were a wayward child being punished.

Punished.

Charles took a step back, breaking her hold on him. Her legs dangled from the desk and her hands felt achingly empty as they fell to her lap.

She wrapped her arms around her middle, he had taken all the warmth from her when he stepped away from her.

“Stopping here is your punishment.” His voice held no emotion other than mild annoyance.

“You may go.” He nodded to the door.

Sarah’s cheeks burned in embarrassment. Any word she thought to speak caught in her throat. Which was fine because she couldn’t decide if she wanted to rage against him or cry out in shame. If she spoke it would be just a jumbled mess and she had made too much of a fool of herself already.

She stood up and righted her hair and dress. Shame crept into her movements. She hunched her shoulders and dropped her eyes to the floor. Her legs willed her to run out of the room, but something reminded her that she had promised herself no more hiding.

This was her house, this was her husband. If she were going to have any sort semblance of a normal life her, she had to make a stand sooner or later.

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He may have won this round, but she would not give him the benefit of watching her run from him.

With new resolution she relaxed her shoulders and lifted her head. She turned to her husband and a movement caught her eye.

She may be naive with some things, but thanks to the books she read she knew she wasn't the only one affected by their kiss. He might have a better poker face than her, but, thank heavens, God gave men a noticeable tell when it came to arousal.

Sarah raised a slight eyebrow at Charles.

He didn't move to hide his arousal, or apologize for it. He continued to stand there, seemingly unaffected.

Sarah had to credit his sense of control. Something itched in the back of her mind that had the butterflies fluttering around her stomach again.

He matched her expression and raised an eyebrow, daring her to acknowledge what she saw.

She clucked her tongue and turned back towards the door.

"I'm retiring to my room if you need me." She said with a sway of her hips.

"Sarah?" His voice, demanding.

She stopped and only dipped her head to the side to acknowledge him.

“Next time I will not go so easy on you.”

She nodded in acknowledgement and walked out the door hoping beyond all hope he did not see her slight stumble from her weakened knees.

CHAPTER 7

Sarah made her way down to the dining room for breakfast. She had a pleasant night sleep the night before. She barely remembers preparing for bed, only that as soon as her head hit her pillow she fell into a blissfully deep sleep.

Sarah passed the study on the way to the dining room and her body instantly hummed.

She traced her lips with her finger. She could still feel the pressure of his lips on hers and she couldn't help the rise of elation when she thought of it. While she still didn't know where she exactly stood with her husband, she still firmly believed no man could kiss a woman like that and not want to be involved with her.

Sarah was determined to build something, anything, with him. Even if she had to misbehave to do it.

Sarah blushed at the threat of another punishment.

“Next time I won't go easy on you.”

His words echoed in her head, causing her knees to go weak all over again. She stopped to gather her wits before she walked into the dining room and the servers saw her flushed face. All she needed was the staff to think something was wrong with her.

Maybe there is?

Sarah walked into the dining room and stopped dead in her tracks. Expecting to find only a servant or two next to the table, she saw her husband sitting at the head of the table.

She looked at the servers who were looking straight ahead, pretending not to be as shocked as she was that he was sitting there.

She chewed on her bottom lip before taking the opportunity for what it was. She was just saying how she was determined to turn their relationship into something more and here was the perfect time to do so.

“Good morning, Your Grace. It is nice to see you.” Sarah sat across from him, unfolding a napkin onto her lap. “Did you sleep well?”

Charles looked up from his plate with a sly grin.

“Worried about my sleeping habits, wife?”

Sarah wrinkled her nose, not catching the double entendre of his comment.

“Well, of course. I wouldn’t want to find out that you weren’t sleeping well.”

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Charles sighed. "I slept just fine, thank you."

Sarah sat, waiting.

Charles picked up a piece of bread and put a slab of butter on it.

Sarah pursed her lips. "I slept fine, thank you for asking."

Charles looked at her. "I didn't."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know. It was quite rude. It's only polite to inquire about someone who has inquired about you. Especially if that someone is your wife."

Charles furrowed his brows. "Is it now?"

Sarah nodded, primly. "It is."

Charles picked up the piece of bread and took a bite "I'll take that under advisement."

Sarah sighed. "It is also impolite to talk with your mouth full."

Sarah watched as Charles's throat worked against his cravat as he swallowed. Unfortunately, for her, her husband apparently had eagle eyes and caught her staring.

"My apologies, my dear. You'll have to forgive me. I'm not used to having polite company around."

Sarah was suddenly aware of herself and others in the room. Her hands dropped to her lap and she fidgeted with her napkin. “No need to apologize, Your Grace.”

Sarah closed her eyes, hoping the blush she felt wasn’t on full display to her husband.

She opened her eyes and found her husband staring at her, a look of triumph on his face.

Bloody hell and my damned fair complexion.

She needed to change the subject off of her and her husband’s ability to affect her so easily.

“I have met a majority of your, er, well, our staff, I suppose, and they are quite pleasant. Do most of them stay here or do they accompany you back to the London home as well?”

Charles popped a piece of fruit in his mouth and considered his wife. Sarah sat straighter under his watchful eye. He had the uncanny ability to make her feel as if she were under interrogation.

It is no wonder he is known to be a ruthless, yet successful, man She had no doubt he mostly like won a majority, if not all, the arguments he takes part in. All he’d have to do is look at someone and she could imagine them crumbling under the weight of his stare.

He dipped his chin. “Samuels comes with me to whichever home I’m at, as you are aware.” He rose an eyebrow no doubt recalling their first encounter together.

Sarah blushed at the memory. It seemed no one there suffered from memory loss with the amount of times people recall that interaction.

“Mrs. Bates is normally just here, but now that you are here she will most likely travel to London, if you so desire.” He pointed his finger in the air. “Oh, and your maid, what is her name? Linda?”

“Lizzie.” Sarah supplied.

Charles waved his hand. “No matter. She’ll accompany you, as well.”

Sarah scowled. “It does matter. Her name is Elizabeth, Lizzie for short. I’ve learned her family has been a part of this household for years and I feel it would be pertinent for you to be aware of her name. It is the least you could do.”

Charles set down his fork and leaned back in his chair. His eyes darkened, causing her to shift under the weight of his stare.

She couldn’t feel she made misstep with the direction of the conversation.

“Is that so?”

Sarah rolled her lips. She nodded first before she was finally able to squeak out a “yes.”

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He nodded his head in concession. "I suppose you're right. Her family obviously has proven their loyalty, which is more than I can say for most." A grimace flashed across his face before he righted his position and smiled nonchalantly. "I shall make it a point to remember her name if it serves you."

Sarah breathed a sigh relief. "It does. Thank you, Your Grace."

Sarah felt a small smile form on her face. It wasn't much, but she could feel some semblance of a bond forming between them. The thought pleased her entirely.

It was just one breakfast, and a simple conversation, but she had built lasting relationships on less.

Feeling more relaxed, she picked up a strawberry and took a bite into the juicy fruit. "Do you have any plans for after breakfast?"

Charles's expression changed, a smile played on his lips while his eyes focused in on her mouth. "Why do you ask?"

Sarah nodded thanks to the maid who was pouring her tea. "I thought we could spend some time together."

Charles's smile widened. "What a brazen little thing you are."

Confusion washed over Sarah. "Brazen? How do you mean?"

"Did you enjoy last night's discussion so much so that you'd like a repeat?"

Sarah set down the strawberry and wiped her hands, leveling a glare at her husband. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Charles furrowed his brows, “Did I?”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “I meant would you like to go for a walk, or perhaps play cards. We could use the time to get to know each other better. We will be spending the rest of our lives together, might as well learn about who we have tied ourselves to.”

Charles thought for a moment.

He took the napkin from his lap and wiped his mouth before rising. He pushed his chair and walked towards his wife.

He crouched down at her side and took her hand.

Sarah’s heart began to race. His soft was touch and his facial expression was endearing. She really was beginning to think she was breaking through whatever schism that was between them.

He brushed the back of his hand so gently across her cheek before reaching around and cupping her neck. He drew her in and rested his forehead to hers.

She sighed in contentment, her eyes fluttering shut. It was such a sweet gesture that her heart swelled with possibilities.

“Unless you want to learn what’s it really like to be tied up I have no use for this conversation.”

Sarah’s eyes flew open in shock.

“Excuse me?” He couldn’t have possibly said what she thought he said.

Charles stood up and tucked his hands in his trouser pockets.

“You heard me. When you’re done acting the prude and pretending this is anything but a marriage of convenience, come find me. Until then, I think we’re down to eight days, if my calculations are correct.”

Charles turned to leave but Sarah lunged, reaching out to grab him by the elbow.

“How dare you!” Her voice echoed in the empty dining room.

Charles looked at her hand then met her eyes.

“Did you misunderstand something I said? I thought I said it quite plainly.”

Sarah took a deep breath. Pure uninhibited rage coursed through her veins. “I am not just a body for your to parade around as your trophy during events and then for you to use at night for your will. I am more than that.”

Charles turned fully back to his wife. His eyes raked over her body causing nerves to bubble up from within her.. She hated that her body began to heat under his scrutiny. Her clothes started to feel too tight, her lungs weren’t getting enough oxygen, and her mind began to whirl with flashes from last night.

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“Trust me, my love, if I were to use you at night, you would not be complaining.” His voice was like velvet and conjured scandalous images that caused her cheeks to heat.

“I doubt that.” Even she was unconvinced by her statement.

Charles smiled wickedly. “I guess we’ll just have to wait those eight days to find out, won’t we?”

Sarah swallowed the ball that formed in her throat. There were no words she could summon on the spot that would adequately put this man in his place. Instead, she raised her hand and aimed for his face.

Just before she made contact his hand whipped out and caught her wrist.

He swiftly pulled her towards him, causing her to lose her footing and stumble into his hard chest.

She inhaled a sharp breath as he pulled her so close they were standing nose to nose. His eyes were nearly black as they stared into hers.

“Are you looking for another punishment, wife?”

Sarah cursed at her body’s reaction to his brute force. Her mind was screaming at her to shove him away, to react, but her body wanted to see how far she could push him.

What pull did this man have over her that it had her questioning her sanity? She should be appalled not aroused.

He dropped her hand and allowed her to settle before he took a step back.

She stood there trying to catch her breath as he chuckled, turned, and walked out of the room.

Charles returned to his study and poured himself a whisky. He didn't care it was still morning, every time he saw, heard, or thought of the woman who was know his wife, he needed a drink.

He's been drinking a lot lately.

Charles was not known for subtly or generous ways. He is a formidable businessman who gets his way. He's worked too hard to build up his family name and he has just become accustomed to people doing his bidding without question.

It's how he ran his household, his duchy, everything he's ever been in charge of.

However, one slight of a woman stumbles into his study late one night and now he is questioning everything he knows to be true.

Her words challenge him, more so, entice him, which was dangerous.

He knows of the family she came from. Prim, proper, the daughters were raised to be the quintessential wife in polite society.

Charles took a swig of his whisky, letting the burn drain into his throat.

She comes from the type of family that would turn their backs on people with stories like his.

That is exactly why she needs to remember their arrangement is one of convenience,

nothing more, nothing less.

Charles heard voices from the garden. He stalked over to the window and peered out. He found Sarah talking with one of the gardeners. Micheal? Jimmy?

Charles grunted. Should he know his gardeners names? He shook his head. No. Their job is to maintain his land. His job is to make sure he has land for them to maintain. Their names don't factor into that equation.

Still, he couldn't help but be enthralled with how familiar Sarah seemed to be with the gardener. She only just met the lad within the last forty-eight hours and already she was laughing, seemingly enjoying his company.

A tingle tickled the back of Charles's neck. He raised a hand to rub the tension that was settling at the base of his neck.

He took a larger pull of whiskey as her laugh once again drifted in through the open window. It was light and airy and full of joy.

Charles leaned into the window to try to hear.

What could they possibly be talking about that was so funny?

Old insecurities snuck up on him. Did the gardener tell a joke about him and his family? His blood began to sing with the familiar buzz of irritation. He thought he had quelled all the suspicions about his family. Perhaps he didn't?

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His eyes refocused on the conversation in the garden. Sarah was smelling a bouquet of flowers the gardener allowed her to pick. Her smile lit up her face and she looked truly relaxed and carefree.

Charles allowed himself to ponder what it would feel like to feel that way. A small forgotten voice sounded from deep within him.

Perhaps you can have that again?

Charles shook his head to dispel the thought. No. He could not go back. He would not put his family in jeopardy again by trusting the wrong people.

If his wife wanted to make friends with the gardeners that was her prerogative. After all, the house responsibilities now fell to her. It would make sense she would know the staff by name.

But he would remain as he always was, in charge and left alone. The sooner his wife remembered that, the sooner his life could get back to normal.

Until then, he at least had the next eight days to come up with all the ways he would teach her that lesson when the final night came.

And one thing Charles was good at, was teaching people lessons they would never forget.

CHAPTER 8

Sarah raised her hands above her head for a quick stretch. After breakfast she escaped to the Duke's library to lose herself in some books.

The books in this particular library were not something she would normally read. Mostly they were mystery or a spy novel. While they were intriguing she kept drifting off, imagining the main character, obviously male, developing feelings for the wayward girl who got in his way.

Unfortunately, that was never the case in these books, though. Yet, she kept reading them because it helped distract her from her current situation with the Duke.

She sighed further into the cushions. Just when she thought she figured out even a small portion of the man, he unleashed another side of him to deal with. Several days in and she still had no idea where she stood with the man.

One thing was for certain, though, lounging around here all day wasn't going to help.

"Lizzie?" Sarah called out. "Have you seen Mrs. Bates? I was thinking of going into town later and I had some questions about some of the shops."

Lizzie came in from the hallway, carrying several blankets she was taking to the guest rooms upstairs. "Last I saw she was the upstairs hallway dusting the..." Lizzie cut herself off.

Sarah looked up from the book splayed on her lap. "Is everything all right, Lizzie?"

Lizzie blushed. "Yes, Your Grace. If you want her I can go get her for you."

Sarah waved her off. "No need. I need to stretch my legs. I think I'll go searching for her."

Lizzie shuffled her feet and quickly looked at the staircase behind her before returning her eyes to Sarah.

“Really, Your Grace.” She said earnestly. “If you’re going to venture into town later you might want to rest up before you go.”

Sarah laughed. “Lizzie, don’t be absurd. It’s a short walk, it’s not a voyage to a far off land. I think I’ll be all right if I don’t stay resting until I leave. Plus, I’ll no doubt take the carriage in case I decide to buy some things.”

Sarah brushed past Lizzie and made her way towards the staircase.

Mrs. Bates was approaching the top of the steps, coming from the opposite direction of Sarah’s rooms.

Sarah met the housekeeper when she reached the tops of the steps, with Lizzie just a step behind Sarah.

“Good morning, Your Grace. Is there anything I can do for you?” Mrs. Bates’s cheeks were red from her work. Damp tendrils of hair had fallen from her tight bun at the back of her head.

Sarah smiled. “Ah yes, I was just coming to see you. Lizzie said you were up here cleaning.”

It was then Sarah noticed the direction in which Mrs. Bates came from.

Sarah’s eyes narrowed as she looked down the darkened hallway. “You know, I just realized when you gave me the tour the other day, you showed me my rooms, but you didn’t show me that part of the house.” Sarah pointed to the hallway just past Mrs. Bates’s back.

Mrs. Bates's smile didn't move. "Oh, it's just more rooms, Your Grace. Nothing to see there. They are used for guests and the like."

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Sarah's eyes remained on the hallway just past Mrs. Bates. "If that's the case then there's no harm in taking a peek then."

Mrs. Bates didn't move her spot in front of Sarah.

Sarah cocked her head in question. "They are a part of my household, are they not?"

Mrs. Bates and Lizzie exchanged a look and Sarah sighed.

Not one of their 'looks' again.

Sarah was losing patience with the two of them. She stepped around Mrs. Bates and began walking down the hallway.

"Please, Your Grace," Mrs. Bates spoke quickly. "His Grace would not like it if he found out you were in those rooms."

Sarah turned and frowned. "What? Why ever would he be upset if I were in those rooms?"

Lizzie stepped forward. "Don't take offense, Your Grace. He doesn't like anyone in those rooms." Her voice was just above a whisper. "Mrs. Bates cleans them without him knowing. I would hate for her to get in trouble."

The girl fiddled with her hands in front of her. This conversation was obviously causing both her and Mrs. Bates stress.

Sarah swallowed. She looked back at the deserted hallway before looking back at the two women. Mrs. Bates had been nothing but kind and considerate with her and Lizzie was one of the sweetest girls she had ever met. Sarah would hate to get either one of them in trouble with Charles. Perhaps there was a perfectly good reason why he didn't want people in this part of the house.

Although, with Charles, it could be a plethora of reasons all revolving around, "because I said so." And an excuse like that always grated on Sarah's nerves.

The two women stood anxiously waiting while Sarah ruminated. She was learning that if she wanted to get anything of worth from the women she had to bide her time.

"All right then. I don't want to get any one in trouble. I'll leave it... for now." Sarah raised an eyebrow, challenging the women. "However, this is my home now and I would like to know everything about it since it is my duty to see to it as His Grace has stated."

Mrs. Bates and Lizzie both let out a collective breath as their shoulders relaxed.

"Would you like a spot of tea, Your Grace? Or perhaps you're ready for lunch?" Mrs. Bates offered. Her jovial and cheerful disposition returning.

"Some tea would be lovely, Mrs. Bates, thank you."

She followed the two women back down the steps, her shoulders itched with the want to turn her head and get one more look down the hallway.

Sarah pursed her lips. Whatever could he be hiding back there?

Sarah spent the rest of the day with Mrs. Bates and the cook going over the protocol for house events. They have never had a dinner party since Charles claimed the title.

It was his preference to keep his social responsibilities to outside of his homes. However, now that Sarah was there, they assumed they'll be opening the house up for events with peers.

The thought of Charles sitting at a table with other Dukes and the rest of the peerage made Sarah laugh. He most definitely was not the welcoming sort. She wondered if they could even get people to accept the invitation.

After lunch, Sarah left Mrs. Bates and the cook to their duties. She had wanted to go into town this afternoon but she remembered the correspondence she had been putting off. She was curious how Eleanor was getting along in motherhood and she promised her mother she would write as soon as she was settled in.

Sarah didn't feel settled in, but after spending most of the day with Mrs. Bates and the cook, she felt a modicum of normalcy.

She reached the top of the stairs and her body stopped. Instead of turning right to go down the hallway to her bedroom she found herself looking to the left. The forbidden wing was beckoning her.

A thrill of excitement skittered along her skin like electricity. She felt like she was in one of her books.

Sometimes when life was too much she often would imagine herself in one of her books. It helped her acclimate to her surroundings. After all, her books always had a happy ending. No matter what situation was the heroine found herself in she got out of it.

Surely, nothing terrible will come out of this if she has a little look in those rooms

Sarah smiled. Here, the lost and scared damsel, curious about her captor's quarters

finds herself alone and takes the opportunity to snoop around.

.With that thought Sarah ventured down the abandoned hallway.

Her steps were quiet against the plush carpet that ran the length of the hallway. She couldn't tell the color of the walls due to the heavy curtains that kept out the light. Her hand closed around the smooth handle of the first door. Her heart jumped with the handle turned.

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Sarah cringed at the creak of the door. She looked back down the hallway from where she came. No one was there.

With a deep breath Sarah slipped inside and quietly shut the door behind her. After her eyes adjusted to the low light she found herself standing in a small room. By the looks of the covered furniture Sarah assumed it was a study. There was a small desk by the window with two chairs which sat one side of the desk, while a taller chair sat behind it. A small table, covered in a blanket, stood by the door. There was what looked like an oversized chair pushed into the corner.

Sarah stepped further into the room. Her fingertips grazed over the covered furniture. There was no dust on her fingers when she inspected them. Mrs. Bates must come in here often to keep it frozen in time and spotless.

Her brows furrowed. Why are these rooms closed off? This isn't a guest bedroom like Mrs. Bates said.

The room was painted in soft pinks and greens, which had a calming effect on Sarah. Her eyes roamed over the furniture, the intricate and elegant rug that was plush against her slippers.

"This must be the Duchess' wing." She whispered to herself. Why was she not told about these rooms? She was the Duchess now, she should have access to these rooms. Why would the Duke not want her to see these?

Sarah took a deep breath to stop the anger that boiled deep within her. For all that he was, Charles seemed like a logical man, even though she didn't always understand

his logic. Until she questioned him about these rooms, she'll have to assume there is a good reason.

There was a door to her left that opened to a similar size room. She passed through the door and found an abandoned easel that stood by a big window, in the perfect position to capture the day's light. Dried out paint pots and unused brushes sat scattered on a nearby table.

Small paintings were stacked against the inner wall. Some finished, some incomplete, all of them landscapes of the land around the estate.

Sarah thought back to what she knew of the Duke's family. Other than Eli, she knew very little.

She huffed. "Actually, Sarah, you know practically nothing about your husband other than he has a brother and he likes control." She chided herself.

Sarah looked back at the easel. It was leveled at about her height. It couldn't have been the Duke who painted these, nor Eli.

"I wonder if his mother painted these." She was in what she would consider the Duchess's wing, after all.

Sarah picked one up for closer inspection.

Sarah had a fondness for painting, her father had taught to paint when she was younger and several of her landscapes were hung in her family home. She could tell whomever painted these must have loved their home and were very happy here. The painting depicted a pond with tall cattails swaying in the evening summer breeze. The strokes were carefully made with purpose and intent. Sarah couldn't help feel the love and respect the artist put into their artwork.

Her fingers felt a wire hanging from the back of the one she held. It must have been hung up at one point. Perhaps she could hang this in her rooms. The colors matched those of her room and the painting was quite beautiful. Sarah couldn't put her finger on it, but it made her think of her childhood.

Sarah fingered through the other ones stacked against the wall. Most of them had hanging wires on them.

She was in awe of the artistry. "Why aren't these displayed? They're beautiful."

Sarah placed the artwork back down with the others and wiped her hands on her skirt. Mrs. Bates mustn't have dusted those.

Her eyes glanced around the room around her. Little feminine touches added flair to the otherwise ordinary room. A painting of a flower garden sat next to an empty crystal vase that probably was used to showcase actual flowers from the garden.

Once again, Sarah questioned why such a beautiful room was closed off. She wasn't known for her painting, but she most definitely could find use for this room.

Sarah wondered over to the last connecting door. With a slight push the door opened to a tiny library. The walls were lined with shelves of books from the floor to the ceiling. There was a small fireplace with a couch facing it, just like the study, blankets and sheets covered the furniture. The walls were a bit darker in here than the other two rooms giving the room the feeling of quiet comfort.

Sarah took the cover off of the couch to reveal an overstuffed teal lounge that looked like the perfect spot to cozy up on a rainy day and read a book.

Sarah's thoughts drifted to Beatrice. Her sister would absolutely love this little haven, tucked in the back corner of the house. Come to think of it, she, too would love this

room if the Duke would allow her to be in here.

After setting the cover on a nearby chair Sarah walked to the wall of books. There must be hundreds here. Her eyes skimmed over the titles and she was delighted to find some of her favorite books amongst them. If this was indeed his mother's library she had good taste.

She pulled a book off the shelf and began to flip through it. The binding was worn and the pages were rough under her hands.

"What are you doing in here?" Charles's voice roared from behind her.

Sarah squealed as she jumped from the outburst.

"Charles! You startled me!" Sarah brought a hand up to her racing heart.

Charles's broad body took up the entirety of the door frame. His massive frame seemed out of place in the small library. His eyes were large, a vein was bulging from his forehead. His hands were restrained at his sides in tight fists.

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His face was cast in shadows making seem even more menacing than he naturally was.

Sarah took a step back. If ever she wished she would have followed instruction it was in this moment.

Charles's eyes remained on hers., his jaw ticking under the force in which he was grinding his teeth. "Follow me."

When Sarah remained Charles let out a low growl. "Now!"

Sarah jumped at his demand. She put the book back on the shelf and followed him through the doors to the main study she came through.

She opened her mouth several times to ask him about these rooms but each time she thought better of it. Rage and frustration pumped off of him and she didn't want to encourage his wrath any more than she already did.

Sarah risked a glance back at the open door as she descended the steps behind Charles. What was it about these rooms that there are not only closed off, but they would cause the Duke so much distress?

CHAPTER 9

Charles took a deep breath to steady his racing heart as he entered his study.

When he saw the dim light shining from the open door to his mother's study he

sprinted to it. He was foolish to think Sarah wouldn't eventually wonder around the house. The girl had a way of doing the exact opposite of what he wanted her to do.

Why couldn't she just see the gift their arranged marriage was and just be an obedient wife?

Charles stormed directly to his desk where he left a tumbler of whiskey while he was working on some trade deals earlier.

He threw back the drink, letting the trail of fire settle him. The air in the room shifted when Sarah crossed the threshold into his office. He could feel the anxiety radiating from her. Her quick little breaths called out to him.

His jaw ticked as he turned to face his wife.

"What were you doing in there, Sarah?"

Red flags colored Sarah's cheeks as her big round eyes dropped to the floor.

Charles swallowed and placed the tumbler carefully back onto his desk. He adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves. Cracking his neck he took a step towards Sarah.

"What were you doing in there?" He asked again, as if he were speaking to a child. If she took offense, she didn't show it.

Sarah's eyes drifted up and met his. "I was just looking-" Her voice was soft and weak. The fearless hellion who stormed into his house all those weeks ago was nowhere to be found. He felt a strange sinking feeling at the thought but quickly brushed it off, letting his anger take charge of this moment.

"Who gave you permission to look in those rooms?" His words cut her off.

Sarah rose her chin. "You did."

Charles reared back in confusion. "I did no such thing!" He countered.

Sarah pulled her shoulders back and smiled as she took a step forward, matching his stance.

"You did when you married me."

Charles's eyes narrowed. He had to take a breath to remind himself he was angry with her. But that flash of fight in her flipped a switch within him. He knew she was smart. He didn't know if he wanted to praise or punish her for her sharp tongue.

Sarah's eyes were now alight with fire.

Ah. There's the fearless woman I met.

"I am the Duchess now and by the looks of those rooms they are a part of the Duchess's wing, are they not?" Her bore into his. "Someone told me a Duchess is in charge of her home, therefore I am in charge of those rooms."

Triumph and victory shone brightly in her eyes making them sparkle.

Admiration warred with stubbornness within Charles. He wasn't used to being questioned, let alone being questioned by a woman. He couldn't decide if he liked it or not.

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Charles raised an eye brow. “You may be the Duchess but I am the Duke. If you want your own study or library I’m sure we can make arrangements elsewhere.”

Sarah grimaced. “You make it sound as if I am diseased. What is so special about those rooms?”

Charles made it a point to have his eyes rake over his new bride. There was nothing ill about her. Strength and poise pulsed from her. Blonde hair and alabaster skin shone in the streak of sunlight streaming through the window. No. There was definitely nothing diseased about this woman in front of him.

Sarah ignored his prying eyes. “I assure you, Your Grace. I am as healthy as a horse and I will not contaminate your precious rooms with my presence.” Sarah snorted. “You act as if they are a part of a mausoleum. I assume they were your mother’s?”

The world slowed around him at the mention of his mother. His eyes focused on Sarah while everything else melted away from his vision. Her voice became muffled in his head, as if the waves from the ocean were locked inside his mind.

“Do not speak of my mother.” He enunciated each word with cutting precision.

Color drained from Sarah’s face. “What... why...”

Sarah stumbled over her words. The look of terror and confusion mixed in her expression creating anxiety to flow from her once more.

“You are never to speak of my mother or any one of my family members, do you hear

me?” Charles could barely get the words out over the lump in throat. He turned his body away from Sarah as a buzzing sound started in his head. The blasted nuisance happened when he became too stressed or angry. Usually his brother Eli caused it, but, luckily enough for Charles, he had to go and marry a woman who elicited this response from him as well.

Wonderful.

His heart began to beat faster and his hands tightened into fists. Normally, focusing on his breathing helped center him. Unfortunately, there was something about finding Sarah in his mother’s rooms followed by Sarah mentioning him that was too much for him.

Images of his mother crying into her hands swirled around in his mind. Those pictures then morphed into people snickering and turning their back on him as he walked the streets when he was younger.

His teeth began to mash together.

A soft touch on one of his arms brought him back to reality.

Looking down, Charles saw Sarah had reached out to him without him noticing. Her soft touch was timid but enough to ground him. She immediately snatched her hand back when he brought his eyes to look into hers.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t realize those rooms meant so much to you.”

She held the hand that had touched him with her other hand, nursing it as if it was burned. “While I would love to one day have the freedom to live in this house as if it were my own, I understand our arrangement is new and time will be needed on both sides to become acclimated to our predicament.”

Her voice was gentle. She was treating him as if he were a cornered animal, which was exactly how he felt.

He was a man who liked control, and by losing his mind to his memories he unwillingly allowed her to step into power. Charles scowled. Letting his guard down around people was something Charles never let happen.

His eyes narrowed. Well, it used to be never. Now he let one person see him unguarded and he couldn't have that. Charles's neck began to tingle with tension. He needed to reclaim his control of the situation.

Charles tilted his head as he took in his new wife. She was definitely more adventurous than he would have liked. However, maybe he could use that to his benefit.

Relaxing his shoulders, Charles shifted so he stood over her. Sarah's eyes tracked the changes in Charles's demeanor and took a step back.

Good.

Charles rubbed his chin with his hand, letting his finger trace his own mouth.

"You realize you did break another rule of mine and therefore you are in need of another punishment."

Sarah's eyes followed the movement of his fingers. A gasp escaped her perfectly plump mouth when she caught herself staring. Her cheeks reddened. "What rule did I break this time? I didn't bother you. If I remember correctly you sought me out."

Her hand came up to grasp the neckline of her dress, her fingers played with the lace collar. She looked like she didn't know if she wanted to tear her dress off or try to

keep it on.

Her confusion powered his intentions.

The heavy tension that was just hanging over them was replaced with a new sensually charged atmosphere. Charles took in a deep cleansing breath. He much rather have this environment to work in than the previous one.

Charles tsked. “I caught you not only snooping, but within this very conversation you brought up a family member of mine. I distinctly remember telling you not to inquire about my family.”

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Sarah snapped her mouth shut and licked her lips. An action that had him licking his own.

Sarah crossed her arms over her chest in the most delicious display of defiance. “I barely inquired. I asked about one set of rooms, it’s not like I asked what your favorite childhood memory of her was.” Sarah’s lips thinned into a tight line as she grimaced.

“And,” she continued. “I refuse to apologize for looking into rooms that are a part of my household.” She pushed her lips out in a pout.

Charles rolled his lips to stop from smiling. She was gorgeous when she was angry. If he could bottle up her subversiveness into a bottle, he would drink from it daily. It unleashed something within him that he has had locked away for far too long.

“May I remind you that it doesn’t matter if you apologize or not, the truth of the matter is that it was a part of our agreement that you adhere to the list of rules I set forth in the inn and if, and when, you break a rule you are to be punished.’

Sarah took a step towards him so they stood toe to toe.

“And may I remind you that these rules were not established before we were married so I could not enter in any objections or even offer up my own rules for consideration.”

Charles smiled at her cheeky little rant then sauntered to the study door and turned the lock. He faced Sarah with a devilish smirk on his face.

“What in my constitution gives you the idea that I would not only allow my wife to offer her own set of rules, but that I would agree to them?”

Sarah stood speechless. Her mouth opened and closed without a single word coming forth.

He began to walk towards her with slow, purposeful steps. Her breaths came out in fast huffs as he stalked back to stand in front of her.

He lifted a finger and traced her mouth. Sarah’s eyes fluttered shut. A shot of heat exploded from his fingertip up into his arm and straight down to his cock. She was so responsive to him.

Her tongue darted out and licked her bottom lip.

Charles leaned in and laid a gentle kiss on the corner of her mouth. He moved his lips across her cheek until his warm breath hit her ear, causing her to quiver beneath him.

A smile spread across his lips as he spoke, “You are my wife and you will do as I say. Not the other way around.”

Sarah’s eyes flew open. Lust colored her eyes as she focused on him.

“What in my constitution gives you the idea that I would just give in to you so easily?”

Charles’s eyes darkened. A growl ripped through him as he reached out and crushed himself to her, taking her lips in an all consuming kiss.

Instead of pushing him away Sarah’s arms encircled his neck and pulled him even closer.

The familiarity of their tongues fighting for control was a welcomed feeling that Charles tucked away to examine later.

Soft grunts and moans rumbled into his mouth from hers causing Charles to pull away from Sarah.

“I think I have my answer, my darling.”

Sarah’s buzzing lips quelled the anger bubbling deep within her stomach. She wanted to lash out and fight him and his patriarchal ways. Unfortunately for Sarah’s disposition, there was something deeper, something more urgent, that was guiding her instincts to give into this man.

The bruising kiss did nothing to elicit the anger she needed to stand her ground. Instead, it ignited a firestorm of electricity to course through her veins looking for a way out.

Charles’s arms became slack around her waist as he pulled away from their embrace. Sarah’s primal instincts kicked in. She was angry, she was excited, she was confused, she was ready to show this man who he was playing with.

Before Charles could claim his victory she tightened her hold on his hair and pulled herself up to him. This time the shocked gasp came from Charles.

Victory roared through her blood and her hands cramped from grasping his hair so tightly. Surely this must hurt him but instead of howling in pain Charles reclaimed his hold on her.

His hands cupped her rear and picked her up. This was no gentle maneuver. His hands grabbed her bottom so roughly Sarah knew that bruises would form. The thought had her stomach swirling with anticipation. She should be shocked, instead,

she was motivated.

She relaxed her hands only to grab ahold tighter. With each grasp, Charles's tongue thrashed in her mouth. Growls ripped from him as he carried her to his desk where he sat her down.

Her legs were tightly wound around him and she could feel his hardened length against her stomach.

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She whimpered. She adjusted her body, needing more of him. She needed to feel him everywhere but in one place most particular.

Charles's mouth trailed down her neck, leaving a line of fire in his wake. Sarah never felt so much passion in her life. She felt as if an inferno was churning within, fire radiated from her fingertips with every touch she placed on his skin.

With one hand still entwined in his hair, her other one reached down to her own collar, and pulled on it.

She could feel his smile against her neck. "So anxious for our punishment, are we?"

"Shut up and kiss me." Her breathless cry did nothing to motivate Charles to the next step.

He casually stood up and looked down at her.

Sarah opened her eyes. "What are you waiting for? I thought I needed to be punished."

There was a part of her brain that was calling out for decorum. Unfortunately for her gentle upbringing, this part of her brain was decreasing the longer she was in his presence. She no longer cared who was in control, who had the upper hand, or who made the rules.

Something far older than her was telling her to let this man do what he will with her. This ancient voice told her this man was the secret to getting everything she ever

wanted.

A wicked grin widened Charles's lips.

"Oh, my fearless darling, you will be punished."

Sarah's pulse quickened and she had the good sense to be scared. She pulled her hands back and held them to her breast.

Charles noted the change in her demeanor. "Yes, my darling. You should be scared." His voice dripping in seduction.

His hands reached down and gathered her skirts but he didn't remove them, only pushed them up so he could reach a hand underneath.

Sarah's back stiffened. Her cheeks flushed when he touched the most sensitive place on her body. Some of her stories mentioned men touching women there and she's heard a few racy details from friends of hers, but she was never told about the absolute explosion one tiny touch could wreak on her body.

The tip of his finger touched her and her back arched as her head fell back. Her hands fell to the sides of her.

"You're so wet for me." Charles's voice was like velvet settling over her skin.

He leaned down and covered her neck with hot open-mouthed kisses as his finger began to swirl around her.

A hand of Sarah's gripped the desk while the other one reached up and grabbed Charles's hair. Her hips added to the friction under her skirts by rising and falling against his ministrations. Warmth spread over her body.

Sarah mewled. Her collar was too tight, her clothing too restrictive, she needed more freedom to move against him. Blasted clothing!

She shifted her body to expel some of the growing tension deep within her core but it only added to the growing inferno within her.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, focusing all her attention to the circular motion of Charles's finger. With each swirl, the fire grew and grew to the point Sarah was sure she was going to explode into tiny pieces.

Something was coming, her breath quickened. Moans escaped in between gasps for air.

"Yes!" She screamed. Whatever was coming she wanted it.

Charles removed his hand and the building sensation immediately stopped. Sarah to open her eyes in confusion.

"What..." she panted. "Why... why did you... stop?"

Charles brought his hand out from underneath her skirts. Slowly he brought his finger up to her mouth and coated her lips with her own wetness.

Horried, Sarah leaned back. "What are you-"

Her question was stopped by his mouth. Instead of the attacking kiss she was used to, he was gentle. His tongue carefully licked hers, tasting her. He pulled away just enough to slip his tongue out from their mouths and lick her swollen lips.

"Mmmm." His growl called to that ancient voice in her head. "You taste delicious."

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Sarah was enraptured in his movements. Everything this man did surprised her, for good or bad. Only, Sarah was so lost in her emotions she didn't know which one this particular moment fell under.

Charles moved his hand back under her skirts and found her spot again.

Before Sarah could question what he was doing the familiar and intoxicating warmth started to build within her.

She looked up to find Charles watching her intently. She felt completely exposed under his stare.

“Don't be embarrassed, darling. Chase that feeling again. Let it happen.”

Sarah relaxed under his touch.

His finger picked up where it left off, gently massaging her, except this time he added tiny flicks and tugs that caused her breath to catch in her throat each time he did them. The juxtaposition between the gentle massage and aggressive flicks were becoming too much for her to bear.

The fire within her was sufficiently restored and gaining momentum.

“That's it,” his voice cooed in her ear.

The hand that was in his hair tightened and pulled his face into her neck, holding him there.

His hand moved faster, and she could feel the puffs of hot air he breathed against her neck. He seemed just as excited as she was.

She was afraid to move, she didn't want the building sensation to cease. She was so close, to what, she wasn't sure, but the voice in her head implored her to go further, for him to go faster, to reach whatever apex he was hurtling her towards.

Her hips began to move again, her moans returned. Charles kissed her neck, his tongue lapping up the sweat that began to roll down her face and neck.

She pushed her hips up into his hand, only his hand wasn't there.

A scream ripped from her throat. "NO!"

If it wasn't for the arm that he was leaning on she would've fallen back onto his desk.

"Why must you stop?"

Her legs were shaking from the release that never came. It felt as if her body was thrown from a moving carriage. She couldn't catch her breath and felt as if she had lost something sacred.

Charles removed his hand and this time sucked his finger slowly into his mouth.

Sarah's head buzzed and her vision blurred.

"I stopped because this is your punishment." Charles offered easily.

"What?" Sarah's own voice sounded miles away from her.

"Oh, my darling, Sarah. Don't you know, you have to earn your pleasure?"

His fingers returned to her sensitive sex causing her to jerk in his arms. His finger made lazy trails around her center, onto her thighs, and back. Each time causing her muscles to spasm when he finally hit her most sensitive spot.

His fingers continued their aimless wandering around her. Her body slumped against his, unable to hold herself up anymore. Her body was too focused on finding that peak again to worry itself on how to keep her upright.

Her face nuzzled into his neck as she whimpered. "Please, Charles."

She felt him smile.

His finger trailed back to her sweet spot causing her to moan against him. She sucked in a breath as he began to move his finger in the most delicious way.

There was a small part of her mind that was cautioning her to go slowly, that he might pull away again, but her body wouldn't hear of it.

Heat pulled at her, her hips began to piston against his hand. Moans and pleas fell from her lips. She reached a hand around her body to grab ahold of his neck as she screamed into him.

So close, she was so close.

“Faster,” she begged.

Her body prepared to launch itself over the edge when his finger disappeared.

She froze. Her eyes opened as the realization began to sink in that he once again stopped her from experiencing what she so desperately needed.

Sarah blinked and lifted her eyes to meet Charles, who was currently looking quite pleased with himself.

He pulled her up to a standing position and smoothed out her skirts. Charles slipped her arm in his and with unsteady steps she allowed him to walk her to the door.

Her mind was desperately trying to catch up to the abrupt change. She turned her head to look back to his desk. That actually happened, didn't it?

Papers were crinkled and ripped, there was evidence of her sitting there.

She looked back to him for some clarity.

“What is happening?” Her voice was breathy and puzzled.

“You are going to retire to your room to think about your actions and your resulting punishment while I am going to get back to work.”

Sarah blinked, her vision clearing a bit. She looked up to him, back to his desk, then to the door. She shook her head. "I'm sorry, I'm confused. We were," she gestured to the desk. "That is to say, I was about to..."

"Come." Charles said matter-of-factly causing a slight blush to creep onto her cheeks.

"Um, well, yes." Sarah knew it was ridiculous to be embarrassed by their conversation after everything she just allowed him to do to her.

"Exactly my point, darling. Your punishment is that you weren't allowed to finish. It is called delaying gratification. If I were you, I would remember this punishment, it is one of my favorites. Although, looking at the abject horror and confusion on your face, I can tell it is not yours." He let out a small chuckle. "Which delights me even more."

Sarah was at a loss for words.

He opened the door and politely ushered her over the threshold. "Do you need help getting upstairs, darling?"

Sarah's eyes snapped up to his. The anger that she sought out earlier came roaring back into her.

"I do not," She snapped at him. "I am perfectly capable of retreating to my rooms on my own."

Charles nodded and closed the door between them.

Sarah stood there staring at the darkened door. The anger fortified her weakened legs. With a huff she grabbed her skirts and marched upstairs.

If that man thought he had finally found a way to best her, he was in for a shock. Didn't he know there was no one more terrifying than a woman scorned? If not, she will happily teach him the lesson.

CHAPTER 10

Sarah awoke the next morning with pep in her step. After last night's encounter she decided she needed to finally get out of the house and make her way through the town to meet those who lived and worked within the duchy.

Plus, it would give her space from her husband. Before her overworked body gave into sleep, she couldn't decide if she was angry at Charles or not. It seemed her body and her mind had two very different opinions of the man. She would rather not see him until she figured herself out.

She held her breath as she crossed the threshold into the breakfast room and let it out when she saw Charles was not there.

Sarah ate breakfast alone with just Samuels and a footman in attendance. She sighed as her eyes roamed the breakfast room. Everywhere she looked Charles had made his mark. From the general masculine aesthetic of the home, the paintings of hunts that hung on the walls, to the way the maids scurried to make everything just right, she could feel his dominant presence everywhere.

Goosebumps erupted across her skin. Yes. She could definitely feel him everywhere.

After breakfast, Sarah made her way out to the front of the house. She had instructed Samuels to let the coachman know she would need a carriage to go into town. She was surprised at how quickly Charles's men were able to get a carriage readied.

He really did run a tight ship.

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As she rode down into town she couldn't help her mind from wandering back to her husband.

Everything that man touched he controlled. He carried an air of arrogance of a man who was used to getting his way because there simply was no other way. His word was final and pity to those who dared to tell him otherwise.

Sarah clenched her fists. He may have the control in some areas, but Sarah was determined to regain some footing when it came to her husband.

The carriage pulled up to a small modiste and stopped.

A footman appeared at the carriage door. "We're here, Your Grace."

The young man, whose name Sarah learned was William, helped her out of the carriage.

"And where is here, William?" Sarah squinted her eyes at the bright shining sun as she tried to read the sign.

"Cordell's is the town's most popular modiste. It's not as fancy as the ones in London, but they take good care of the women here and I've never heard complaints."

The coachmen let out a haughty cough.

The tips of William's ear turned pink. "Ah, that is to say, that's what my mum says

anyway. Your Grace.”

Sarah smiled at the young man. “Thank you, William. I’m sure your mother has wonderful taste. Let’s go in, shall we?”

William dipped his head and held the door open for Sarah.

Sarah walked into the small modiste and stood as her eyes adjusted to the dim light inside.

William gestured to Sarah while looking towards the counter. “Miss Cordell, may I introduce you to Her Grace, Lady Sarah of Stoleton?”

A woman about Eleanor’s age came out from behind the counter. Her brown hair was neatly pinned up while her bright green eyes lit up as she approached Sarah.

“Your Grace, it as honor to have you in my humble modiste this morning.”

Sarah dipped her head. “The honor is all mine, I assure you. Young William here was telling me your shop is well known for taking care of the women in town.”

Miss Cordell’s face flushed and her eyes dropped before glancing at William from underneath her eyelashes.

Sarah’s smile widened. Perhaps it’s not only William’s mother who frequents this establishment.

“That is very kind of you, William.” The coquettish Miss Cordell replied. “I do my best to get what I can in from London to keep up with the latest fashion trends. Here,” Miss Cordell pointed to a counter with rows of satin ribbons lined up according to color. “I just got these in from a store in London. Aren’t they gorgeous?”

Sarah followed Miss Cordell over to the counter and took in the ribbons. They most definitely were divine.

“Do you get a lot of stock from London?” Sarah inquired..

Miss Cordell worried her bottom lips as her eyes darted to William before returning to Sarah.

Sarah bit her inner cheek to stop herself from grimacing. Why do I always feel like the people around me know something I do not?

“Not as regularly as I would like, Your Grace.” Her voice was low and despondent.

Miss Cordell took a breath before completely changing her disposition. “Are you in the market for a new dress, Your Grace?” She said as she gestured to a dress hanging in the display window. “Along with the ribbons I’ve received a few dresses that would look just darling on you.”

The word “darling” flipped a switch in Sarah’s brain. She could hear his husky whisper in her ear, and feel his hot breath on her neck. Her body began to buzz and a warmth started to grow from her core.

Sarah closed her eyes to refocus her thoughts. This was not the time, nor the place, to be thinking of the way her husband controlled her body last night.

“Not at this time, Miss Cordell. But I would love to purchase a few ribbons not only for myself but I would love to send some to my sister. She just had a baby and she always loved ribbons, I’m sure she would appreciate the gesture.”

Miss Cordell’s eyes sparkled. “How lovely. Which ones would you like, Your Grace?”

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Sarah ran her hands over the cool fabric. “I’ll take these three, please?”

Miss Cordell busied herself with wrapping the ribbons and placed them in a small, pink box for William to take out to the carriage.

Sarah wandered through the store. William was right, it wasn’t as big as the ones she’s been to in London, but her selection was impressive for a small shop. There were some styles from a few seasons ago still displayed but for the most part the styles were relatively new.

Still...

“Miss Cordell? Why is it again you can’t get more shipments in from London, or Paris, for instance? Is there something standing in your way? Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

Miss Cordell opened her mouth but William interjected from the doorway. “Your Grace. I have placed your package in the carriage. Would you like to continue on or return to the estate?”

Sarah clucked her tongue. William’s sudden interjection raised her suspicion.

She thought back to her conversations with Lizzie and Mrs. Bates. She got more out of them when she complied to them instead of fighting against them. She would allow William to steer the conversation away from this particular topic, but she mentally added it to the growing list of things she was determined to find out about.

She thanked Miss Cordell for the ribbons and promised to stop back in later in the week to get a better look at the selection of her dresses.

As William ushered her out of the modiste she couldn't help but think her dear husband had something to do with Miss Cordell's predicament.

"Where would you like to go next, Your Grace?" William stood at the carriage, his body language suggesting he wanted nothing more than to return to the estate.

Sarah looked up and down the street. People were out and about, mostly minding their own business except for a few glances and whispers.

She tried not to take anything as untoward. She could understand why people would do a double take when it came to her. She imagined half of them were surprised someone deigned the Duke suitable enough for marriage.

Sarah shifted her feet as she adjusted her cuffs. If they only knew the reason why she married him. An arranged marriage wasn't unheard of, but the part about her being left at the alter was one she didn't wish to share.

A man across the street let out a boisterous laugh.

Sarah tilted her head, "Who is that over there?"

William rubbed the back of his neck. "The butcher, Your Grace. Mr. Crowfelt is his name."

Sarah's eyes lit up. "The butcher. I'm assuming that's who supplies us with the delicious meats Cook serves us. They are the most scrumptious cuts of meat I've ever tasted. I know it's not done, but I'm going to go over and say hello."

William reached out to stop her but she was already across the street.

“Mr. Crowfelt, is it?”

A burly man with an apron stained red stood in a doorway to the shop.

“It is.”

An out of breath William scurried up to Sarah.

“Mr. Crowfelt, this is Lady Sarah, the Duchess of Stoleton.” The way William said her title had her looking at him curiously.

There was a weight to it, as if Mr. Crowfelt should mind what he says in her presence. She couldn't have that. These people were in her care. They should be able to speak freely in front of her, how else would she be able to help them if the situation called for it.

The man's face scrunched into a sneer.

Sarah dipped her head, “It a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Crowfelt.”

The man stood with his head cocked to the side. Sarah felt as if she were under interrogation for a crime she didn't commit.

She shook off the inference and continued on. Not everyone gave the best first impression. Perhaps he was just shocked that the Duke not only found a wife, but she was able to string sentences together.

“William here had mentioned you are the butcher and I had to come tell you the meat you supply us with is top notch. Really. You could rival some shops in London.” She

said with utmost sincerity. “Between the meats and luscious fruits and delectable vegetables I fear I may be visiting the modiste for constant changes in my measurements.” She mused.

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She was good at winning people over with her kind disposition when the occasion called for it. She could tell this seemed like the perfect time to lay it on thick.

Mr. Crowfelt grunted.

Sarah's smile wavered. Not the response she was expecting.

Sarah looked at William who was nervously looking back at the coachman who was looking on with shocked eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Crowfelt. I fear I may have said something to upset you."

The man snorted.

Sarah was losing patience. It was one thing to feel like she's missing the bigger picture but it's another thing entirely for a merchant to outright treat her like she's not even there.

"Mr. Crowfelt, I must implore you to tell me of my offense. I just praised your meat--"

"It's not my meat, Your Grace." He spat.

Sarah's mouth snapped shut.

"What your tongue when speaking to the Duchess." William was no match for the surly butcher but Sarah admired his gravitas.

Sarah held a hand up to William. “It’s all right, William.”

She took a step closer to the butcher. “What do you mean it’s not your meat?” Sarah looked up and down the street. “Is there another butcher in this town?”

Mr. Crowfelt shook his head. “It’s just me, Your Grace. I help feed this entire town.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes in confusion. William rubbed his neck again, which clued Sarah in that she was touching upon a subject someone didn’t want her talking about.

And she knew exactly who that someone was.

Must his presence follow me everywhere!

She gave in at the modiste, but unlike Miss Cordell, Mr. Crowfelt felt like he would be willing to tell her what she wanted to know.

Sarah rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry, Mr. Crowfelt. If you don’t supply the estate with your meat, where does our meat come from?”

The man leaned against the door jamb and folded his arms across his wide chest.

William scoffed at the disrespectful gesture. It didn’t bother Sarah, she wanted to know what this man had to say more than she cared about the proper etiquette when speaking to someone of the peerage.

“You’ve been getting your meat and other foods, like your lovely fruits and vegetables, from other towns for awhile now, Your Grace.”

Exasperation and disbelief roared through her veins. “What do you mean?”

Mr. Crowfelt rolled his eyes, eliciting another huff from William. “I mean none of your food is from your duchy, Your Grace. His Grace has made deals with neighboring towns to supply the estate with food.”

Sarah scowled. “First of all, Mr. Crowfelt, it is not I who have been getting meat and food from other towns, it is the Duke. And I can assure you that will be changing at once.”

Mr. Crowfelt dropped his arms and stood straighter in the doorway. “Excuse me?”

Sarah rose her chin. “You heard me. I will personally see to it that you and your fellow merchants will supply us with our food. I cannot possibly fathom why the Duke would hinder your livelihood, his own people, like this but I will find out and,” she rose a finger in the air. “I will correct it.”

Sarah turned to William who looked pained standing there.

“I assume that my loving husband has something to do with why Miss Cordell has difficulty getting shipments from London and the like?”

William hemmed and hawed but Sarah didn’t have time for it. She returned her attention to Mr. Crowfelt.

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Sarah gestured to the people who were meandering around their conversation, pretending not to listen.

“Mr. Crowfelt, I am no businesswoman, but everyone here looks well fed and not sickly so am I right to ascertain your handling of your products is above board and well maintained.”

Mr. Crowfelt’s expression turned steely. “I serve nothing but the best, Your Grace. I make sure everything is of the finest quality we can afford. We have the best livestock around. I think if you talk to anyone on this street they’d say the same thing regarding their goods.”

Sarah nodded. “Good. I do intend to talk to everyone. For some reason the Duke has decided to leave his people behind and that does not sit well with me, Mr. Crowfelt.”

Sarah swore she could hear William’s physical cringe but she ignored him.

Finally the man dropped his hardened expression and cracked a smile.

“I can honestly speak for all the merchants within this duchy that your words are welcome balm. We would love to serve our Duke, if he would let us.”

Sarah frowned. “He’ll let you, I will make sure of it.”

She finally put William out of his personal misery and bid farewell to the butcher to crossed the street back to her carriage.

“I take it we’re not going back to the estate, Your Grace.” William, God bless him, looked hopeful but Sarah had more important things to see to other than playing by her husband’s rules.

“Sorry, William. I feel there are many other merchants I must speak with. It is time for someone to teach His Grace that there is someone new with power and she intends to use it for good.”

CHAPTER 11

“She went where?” Charles slammed the tumbler down on his desk.

Samuels stood in the doorway with his hands behind his back. “William accompanied her to the town, Your Grace.”

Charles leaned over his desk. It was all he could do to keep himself from charging over to Samuels and ringing his neck for no reason other than he was the bringer of bad news.

“And who let her go into town?” He was seething. The thought of his wife congregating with those people made his blood boil.

Samuels blinked a few times and cleared his throat. “No one, Your Grace. She is the Duchess, I didn’t think she needed anyone’s permission to go.”

“Are you talking back to me, Samuels?” Charles knew his line of attack was uncalled for. He knew Samuels wasn’t to blame for his wife’s actions. But since she wasn’t here, and unfortunately for Samuels was, he was going to get Charles’s wrath.

Samuels audibly swallowed. “No, Your Grace. I’m only saying that-”

Charles's hand slashed through the air cutting his butler off.

"No. You're not to blame for this. You know how I feel about those people."

Charles straightened his posture and adjusted his cravat before running his hands through his hair. "Is she back?"

The sound of hooves hitting the dirt out front drifted in from the outside. Charles's eyes darted to Samuels.

"That must be them now, Your Grace." Samuels offered.

Samuels barely had enough time to move out of the way as Charles barreled past him.

Charles pushed out of the main door just in time to see his wife being helped out of the carriage by a young footman.

"Thank you, William." She smiled at him demurely and, by God, was the boy blushing? "Will you see that my packages make it up to my room, please?"

"What is the meaning of this?" Charles bellowed from the stoop.

The look of surprise only lasted a moment before Sarah's face turned icy. "Ah, husband. So good to see you today. I missed you at breakfast."

Charles ignored her jab. "I asked you a question, Sarah." He growled.

She laughed.

Charles stood stunned. The chit had the audacity to laugh.

She sighed then dared to look bored. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. I missed your question. Will you please repeat it?”

Charles took a deep breath and felt his right eye begin to twitch.

“I asked you what is the meaning of this.” He gestured to the boy William, who was standing scared next to the open carriage door.

Good. He should be scared. They all should be scared.

Sarah looked at William and then back to Charles. “I’m not sure what you’re implying, Your Grace. I went into town today and William accompanied me, as he should have. He was quite the guide when it came to the townspeople.”

A slight buzzing sound accompanied his twitching eye.

Charles brought up his hand in question. “Did you say townspeople?”

Sarah laughed... again.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Sarah nodded to William and made her way to the door where Charles stood.

“There are people who live in the town who are commonly referred to as townspeople. Although, from what I’ve heard, I’m not surprised you are not aware of their presence.”

Sarah’s eyes cut to Charles’s as she passed him then she left him to walk further into the house.

“Samuels,” she called back to him. “Is dinner ready? I’m famished from all the lovely conversations I’ve had with the residents.”

Samuels had come to stand behind Charles, just within the house.

“Yes, Your Grace. Dinner will be served shortly.” He answered Sarah’s call from where he stood.

“Wonderful.” Her voice grew softer as she ascended the staircase. “I shall be down promptly. I hope to see you there, husband.”

Charles was left staring at William. The boy was wilting under his stare. Charles cracked his neck as he stalked to the footman who was now quivering in his spot by the carriage.

“Where did you take her?” Charles towered over the young man.

“Just into town, Your Grace.” His voice shook with fear which fueled Charles.

“And who did she speak with?” Charles leaned into him.

Countless situations ran through Charles’s head. Who did she speak to? What did they tell her? Does she know about his family?

“Answer me!” He roared.

William winced. “The modiste, Your Grace. She spoke with Miss Cordell and bought some ribbons.”

Charles narrowed his eyes. “Who else?”

The boy swallowed, his throat bobbing with the effort.

“Mr. Crowfelt and some others, Your Grace.” The footman’s voice was shaky and high pitched.

Charles cocked his head to the side. “The butcher?”

William shook his head fervently. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Charles tilted his head. “What could she possibly talk about with a butcher?”

William licked his dry lips.

“It was nothing, Your Grace,” the coachman interjected from where he still sat in the front of the carriage. “She was just making herself known to the people. They seemed to like her. Nothing untoward or sensational happened. Not that I could see from my perch on the carriage, Your Grace.”

Charles looked at the coachman. He couldn’t remember his name, but he’s been around for some time and he always seemed reliable.

Charles grunted as he looked back to the footman who looked like he was about to pass out.

He nodded to the carriage. “Make sure these packages get to her rooms promptly and without damage.”

The young man dipped his head and started grabbing as many packages as he could before he scurried into the house.

Charles looked up to the coachman. The old man looked met his eyes with something akin to disappointment before it was cleared from the man’s expression.

“If you don’t mind me saying so, Your Grace, William is a good lad. Does what he’s told, always willing to help or do more. He’s very well liked amongst the staff.”

Charles furrowed his brows. Usually he would not condone such an opinion from staff, but the coachman, Robbins? Tobbins? Doesn’t matter, had been with the family

since Charles was a young boy. This man has stood with his family through their darkest times and if there was one thing Charles appreciated from those around him it would be loyalty.

“You’ve been with my family for a long time.”

The coachman dipped his head. “Well before you were born, Your Grace. I had the honor of bringing your father home from a meeting in London when he got word of your arrival. He was so excited, Your Grace.”

Charles allowed the corners of his lips to curl in a slight smile.

“I appreciate your loyalty and your dedication to my family. However, mind your words when speaking to me.” He warned. He held the man’s eyes long enough for the man to dip his head in acknowledgement. Charles watched as the man drove the carriage to the stables.

Charles turned on his heel and met Samuels at the doorway.

Samuels stood taller, most likely hearing Charles’s conversation with the coachman. Samuels may be getting older, but his hearing was far from giving in to age.

“Will you be dining with Her Grace this evening, Your Grace.” Samuels asked.

Charles pushed out a breath. “Yes. It seems my wife and I have some things to discuss.”

Sarah breezed into the dining room. She was exhausted from the day and her body ached for the comfort of her bed, but her mind was buzzing with all the information she gathered today.

Most of the people she met took some time to warm up to her but once they did she found them nothing but jovial, kind people who had a love for their town and their neighbors. It really was a nice little town. She felt very lucky, she couldn't have asked for a better duchy.

Her mood quickly soured when her eyes crashed into her husband's dark green eyes. She hated how they sparkled in the low light. Of course, she also secretly loved it, but she would never admit that.

Especially not after all she learned in town.

"Your Grace." Her head bobbed as she took her seat opposite of him. "It's nice to see you. I was starting to think you never ate."

Charles remained unmoved. He sat still with only his eyes moving, watching, studying her every move.

Sarah shifted under his gaze.

His unforgiving stare was making her uncomfortable and she so desperately wanted to fidget to release some anxiety.

She was still gathering information on her husband, but one thing she was absolutely sure of was his incessant need for control.

No doubt remaining quiet and motionless was a power tactic.

Well, two can play at this game.

Sarah was not known for her quiet countenance but she was determined to gather any control she could get her hands on. She lost a major battle last night in the study and

she was intent on reclaiming some ground.

She smiled across the table and unfolded her napkin in her lap.

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Several servers came in with a tray of meat and other sides that made Sarah's mouth fill with saliva even if it did remind her how their people were being forgotten outside these walls.

Her stomach growled reminding her she hadn't eaten a bite since breakfast.

She opened her mouth to ask Charles a question but promptly closed it, remembering her earlier resolve not to be the first to cave into conversation.

"Everything all right, Your Grace?"

Sarah looked up to one of the servers standing next to her..

"Oh, yes, sorry, did you ask me something?" Sarah inwardly chastised herself for not being present. Here she has concocted a competition between her and the Duke in which she wasn't entirely sure he knew he was playing.

Sarah sighed. Her mother was right. Sometimes her imagination got away from her.

"I only offered you something to drink, Your Grace."

Sarah looked at her empty glass. "Oh, yes. I would love some, thank you, Christopher."

The young man smiled at his name. She made it a point to learn everyone's name, it made her feel more connected to her new home.

She took a sip, peering over her glass to her husband who was still staring at her. Only now he was cutting his meat without looking at it.

Sarah swallowed a healthy portion of her wine and sputtered a little afterward. “I hope your day treated you well, Your Grace.”

Charles blinked and a wide, triumphant smile spread across his face.

Blast it. I was right.

Sarah rolled her lips. He was waiting for her to talk first. She pushed her annoyance to the side. After all, she had more pressing matters to discuss than seeing who talked first.

“It was going smashingly until I heard my wife went into town without telling me.” He said before he took a bite of a potato.

Sarah picked up her fork and stabbed a piece of meat.

“I’m sorry, husband. I was unaware of that rule. I’m pretty sure I remember them perfectly.” Sarah squinted her eyes as she looked up towards the ceiling. “Let’s see. Ah yes, the first one was I will mind my business when it comes to your family.”

She popped a piece of meat in her mouth and chewed. She swallowed and pointed her fork at Charles. “I already broke that one.” She said with a smile. She thought she saw the corner of his mouth twitch but she couldn’t be sure.

“The second was I will not disturb you unless there is true emergency. As I don’t see visiting the people that live within our duchy as an emergency, you can’t be referring to that one.”

Sarah brought her fork back down and poked another piece of meat. “Number three was I will fulfill all my duties as Duchess. I would think getting to know the townspeople would be a part of that. And there is one more...” Sarah brought her fork up to tap her chin. “Now what was that one?” She stuck her fork in the air. “I remember,” she said brightly. “I will give you an heir,” her voice dropped to annoyance. “How could I possibly forget that one.”

“I couldn’t fathom as you seem to have lost your manners.” Charles growled.

Sarah tilted her head in defiance. “I match respect, Your Grace. You show me respect, I show you respect. It’s simple as that. It is a quality I find most helpful when deciding who is worth my time.”

Charles scoffed. “And those people,” he nodded to the window, “down there? Are they worth your time?”

Sarah cocked her head in disbelief. She rose a finger to the same window he gestured to. “Those people are your people, Your Grace! Why do you speak of them in such a manner?”

Charles’s face darkened. “They are not to be trusted, Sarah. I would expect a better judge of character from you.” Charles pinned her with a look. “Although, you did think my brother would be a suitable match.”

Sarah’s vision blurred with quiet rage. She took a few breaths to settle herself. She just learned another characteristic of her husband, he is quick to lash out when he felt out of control.

Noted.

“I beg to differ, Your Grace.” Sarah made sure her voice was steady and even. “I may

have only met them for a few moments but what I saw was resilience and pride. They were kind and-”

Charles huffed out a laugh, stopping her words. “Kind. They are not kind. They see you as a way to get to me. Trust me, Sarah, they will only use you and hurt you. And I will not be there to rescue you especially since you were warned.”

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Sarah laughed. “Trust you? I know less about you than I do about them. Why should I trust you any more than them?”

Charles wiped his mouth his napkin before throwing it onto his plate. “You know only what they tell you, and what they tell you is lies.”

Sarah shook her head. “How do you know what they told me?”

Charles rested his elbows on the table. “All right then, tell me what they told you.”

Sarah raised her chin. “Very well. While they are only trying to survive you make deals with other towns instead of looking to your own people. Mr. Crowfelt, the town’s only butcher, told me that he does not supply this house with our meat, that you get it elsewhere. Is that true?”

Charles nodded. “Yes.”

Sarah was shocked with his quick affirmation. No remorse or guilt colored the word. “Why?”

Charles grimaced. “Because it is my choice and I choose elsewhere.”

Sarah slumped back against her chair. She was beginning to think there was no arguing with this man. How can you argue with someone who always thinks he’s right?

“What could possibly be the reason why you would choose another supplier over

your own butcher in your own town? Do you not care for your people?"

Charles straightened his cravat. "I can care for my people and not trust them in the same breath. They are not mutually exclusive."

Sarah's back straightened. "Not trust them? Why wouldn't you trust them?"

Charles stood, his chair scraping the floor. "I've had enough of this conversation. I'm retiring to my study. Samuels?"

Samuels stepped up from this place in the corner. "Yes, Your Grace."

"I'll be finishing my meal in the study. Please have someone bring it to me."

Samuels nodded and quickly left the room to fetch a maid.

Charles walked towards the door and stopped at Sarah's side.

"You live in a fairytale, Sarah. Not everyone is looking out for you. We may have our differences, and you may not know a lot about me, but one thing you can absolutely count on is I will look out for you. If something happens to you it happens to me."

Sarah eyes reached up and met his as he stood over her. "What I hear is you only care about my wellbeing because it may reflect poorly on you?"

A flash of emotion crossed his face but disappeared too quickly for Sarah to decipher what it was.

Charles only looked down at her. "Good night, Sarah," he said as he left her sitting alone in the dining room.

CHAPTER 12

Sarah sat in what had become her favorite chair in the library. It was angled just so that the morning sun lighted her pages, but the afternoon sun wasn't so harsh.

Her mind drifted to the library she found upstairs. Its books were bright colors of pinks and blues and called to her more than these heavy handed books on warfare and politics did. How she longed for her romance novels she cherished. She brought a few with her but she was itching to get her hands on a new story. Perhaps there was a store in town that could accommodate her.

Stretching her arms over her head, she sighed. It was doubtful. It seemed as if her husband had a strong hold on what he allowed in and out of his duchy.

Sarah chewed on her bottom lip. Each day she accomplished her goal of learning more about the man she married but there were still major questions that needed to be answered.

For instance, this library. It practically screamed Charles. The sofa and chairs were stiff and uncomfortable. The pillows weren't soft. The colors were drab and dark with browns and grays. Once more her mind drifted to the perfectly suitable feminine library upstairs.

Why couldn't he just let her have that room? Or at least allow her to leave her mark in some rooms? Perhaps she'd feel more at home if she saw herself within her surroundings.

The door opened and Samuels ushered in Charles.

"Ah, there you are. I wanted to let you know I will be going out of town for a day. I won't return until the day after tomorrow."

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Sarah blinked owlishly at him. She looked behind her to see if a maid was standing there. He couldn't be talking to her in such a casual manner.

She could count on one hand how many conversations she has had with her husband and none of them had him offering up information about his plans.

"Is all well?" Her voice cracked. Her cheeks heated at the awkwardness of the situation.

Charles shook his head. "Nothing to concern yourself with, just some business I need to attend to in the next town over."

Sarah's hackles rose. He was most likely establishing another deal that rob their people of a lucrative deal.

Charles swung his coat over his broad shoulders. "I just wanted to let you know you won't be seeing me. Samuels knows how to get in touch with me if there is a problem."

Sarah's eyes drifted over to Samuels who was standing at Charles's side.

She nodded in acknowledgment and watched as Charles turned on his heel and left without another word.

Sarah closed the book in her lap and jumped up, placing the book on the table.

She rushed out into the hall just in time to see Charles step out of the house. She

walked quickly to the front door and watched the carriage pull away.

“Is he really going to be gone until the day after tomorrow?” She asked Samuels who was at the door.

Samuels dipped his head. “Yes. He will not return until the evening after next.”

A wicked smile danced across Sarah’s face.

“Perfect.” She squealed.

Samuels stepped in front of her as she tried to turn.

“May I be of service you, Your Grace.”

His old grey eyes looked alarmed which made her smile wider.

“If you could ready a carriage for me, Samuels, that would be wonderful. I’m in the mood to some shopping while His Grace is away.”

She brushed past him and walked towards the stairs with a little bounce in her step. Ideas were running rampant in her mind and she couldn’t decide what she wanted to do first.

“A carriage, Your Grace?” Samuels stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked up to her. His eyes pleading for her to not do whatever it was she was planning on doing.

Sarah had to bite her tongue. Samuels may seem quiet and out of the way, but the man was a good judge of character. Recalling their first meeting together Sarah took some pity on the man. Between dealing with the Duke’s mood swings and now herself, poor Samuels didn’t get a break.

“Yes, a carriage.” She paused at the top of the stair. “Do you know if William is free?”

Samuels’s face pinched in thought. “I think so, Your Grace. Will you be needing him for your trip?”

Sarah continued up the stairs, wishing she could take two steps at a time. “Yes. Oh, and Lizzie. Could you find both of them and have them meet me outside at the carriage as soon as possible?”

“May I ask what you’re looking to buy, Your Grace? So I know where to direct the coachman.” He added when she threw a questioning look his way.

“Ah, yes. I’m in the mood to do some redecorating. A stop at Miss Cordell’s will be first and we’ll go from there.”

“Redecorating, Your Grace?” Samuels’s voice squeaked in the most unmanly way causing Sarah to giggle.

Sarah wasn’t proud to admit but watching the color drain from Samuels face gave her a thrill. He was obviously, and with good reason, nervous about her plans. If he was anxious about her plans, Sarah couldn’t wait to see how the Duke would react.

She didn’t give Samuels time to voice any concerns. She turned and hurried down the hallway with bright floral patterns and different shades of pink filling her mind. Oh, and ruffles. The Duke must simply have ruffles. After all, the Duchess was in charge of the house and the Duchess loved ruffles.

It was high time Sarah made her mark on the household and she knew the perfect room to start with. The Duke’s study.

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A little bell rang alerting Miss Cordell that Sarah had entered her shop along with William and Lizzie.

She had told the two of them about her plan on the short carriage ride into town. Lizzie was apprehensive at first, but Sarah won her over with her vision for the room.

William was categorically against it from the start. But when he was told where they were going he relented. Lizzie teased him about his caving at the mention of Miss Cordell but he denied any infatuation with the modest. He stood firmly that he was going simply because it was his duty to see to the Duchess outside the estate.

Sarah didn't care why he chose to come, she was thankful for the help. For what she was envisioning, she would need all the help she could get.

Miss Cordell's head lifted up from the papers on the counter. "Your Grace! You're back so soon? Is everything all right with the ribbons?"

Sarah waved away Miss Cordell's worries. "Everything's fine with the ribbons. Lovely as ever. I'm back because I need your help."

Miss Cordell tilted her head in confusion. "My help, Your Grace?" Her eyes darted to William's before she settled on Lizzie's for a beat longer.

Sarah shook her head vigorously. "Yes, your help. I'm in the need of fabrics."

"Fabrics, Your Grace?" Miss Cordell brought her attention back to Sarah.

Sarah decided to ignore the added tension between Miss Cordell, William, and Lizzie. There was a story there, but she had more pressing matters than a love triangle involving two of her staff.

“Yes. Why must everyone repeat what I’m saying?” She sighed. “I’ve decided to do some redecorating at the estate and I’m looking for some very specific material.” Sarah ran her hands over a pink satin dress hanging next to the door. Her fingertips traced the intricate lace threaded amongst ruffles, her eyes glittering with possibilities.

“I’m looking to add some color and feminine touch to some rooms.” Sarah continued. Sarah’s eye caught a ribbon with bright pink peonies on it. “Perhaps some floral material as well.”

Miss Cordell’s face relaxed a bit. “Oh, how lovely.” She smiled. “I always thought redoing a personal bedroom was cathartic. It allows you to own a space that reflects you and you alone.”

Sarah turned to face Miss Cordell. “Oh, I’m not redoing my rooms.”

Miss Cordell’s brows furrowed. William sighed audibly causing Lizzie to nudge him with her elbow.

Miss Cordell noticed the gesture and her brows pinched further before returning to Sarah.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” Miss Cordell said while she shook her head of whatever thought she just had. Miss Cordell gestured to the dress Sarah was still touching. “It’s just you’re speaking of adding a feminine touch and I can tell you’re getting ideas from that dress.”

Sarah was impressed. “You can?”

Miss Cordell nodded. “When the muse sings it’s hard for any creative person to hide their fascination from their expression.”

Sarah smiled in appreciation. William was right, this young woman knew what she was doing.

“May I ask what room you are looking to decorate?” Miss Cordell inquired with a tilt of her head. “Perhaps it’ll help me guide you in the right direction.”

Miss Cordell’s eyes kept glancing back to Lizzie and William.

“The Duke’s study.” Sarah said as plainly as she could. She wanted to watch Miss Cordell’s face morph from inquisitive and interested into shock.

And, much to Sarah’s pleasure, Miss Cordell’s expression did not disappoint.

Disbelief colored Miss Cordell’s face as it snapped back to Sarah’s. “His Grace’s study?” Miss Cordell’s eyes looked at the dress still in Sarah’s hands and shook her head.

“Your Grace, I’m not sure my store has what is suitable for a Duke’s study.”

Sarah giggled. “And that’s precisely why we’re here.” Sarah clapped and William groaned again.

“I don’t want suitable, Miss Cordell,” Sarah said as she walked towards the nervous modiste. “I asked for a feminine touch. Do you consider yourself to have a feminine touch and are able to aid other’s in achieving a certain *je ne sais quoi* when it comes to decorating, whether it’s a body or a room?”

Sarah raised an eyebrow in a challenge.

Miss Cordell swallowed and bobbed her head. Her eyes looked just past her to William before refocusing on Sarah. “Yes, of course, Your Grace.”

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Sarah clapped. “Excellent. Let’s get started, shall we? What is the pinkest fabric you have? I have a lot of ideas!”

Miss Cordell escorted the three of them to her back storage room.

Sarah marveled in the amount of fabric bolts she had within in the small storage room. She definitely could use some more space for all this material.

Lizzie was just as impressed. “You have a lovely selection, Miss Cordell.”

Miss Cordell coolly acknowledged Lizzie’s compliment. “Thank you, Miss.”

“It’s Elizabeth, but my friends call me Lizzie.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth.” Miss Cordell corrected.

Lizzie’s eyes widened at the slant and stepped back, recognizing her place in the room.

Sarah frowned. “Now, come now, we are all friends with a common goal here.”

William cleared his throat.

Sarah scrunched her face. “Fine, us women all have a common goal. Let it be noted that William is against my plan and has been from the start. He is here under protest.”

William raised his chin. “Thank you.”

With a roll of her eyes she returned back to Miss Cordell.

“You seem to have taken issue with my maid and if there’s one thing about me is I hate unfinished business. It gets in the way of things.”

Sarah couldn’t help but feel her life was surrounded by unfinished business. If she couldn’t fully understand her husband she would put this to rights at least.

Miss Cordell sniffed in Lizzie’s direction before her eyes landed on William.

The tension was palpable and grating on Sarah’s nerves.

“William? Do you know what is going on?”

William’s cheeks reddened. “What? Me? I don’t know anything, Your Grace.”

Both Lizzie and Miss Cordell snorted causing William’s blush to deepen.

Miss Cordell sighed. “It’s just I thought we were...”

Lizzie jumped from her spot in the corner. “Wait. Do you think he and I...” her finger wagged in between her and William.

Sarah had to admit she rather enjoyed watching other people’s drama unfold instead of being the one in the middle of it. It was quite refreshing.

Lizzie broke out in fitful giggles while it took William a moment longer to understand what Miss Cordell was implying.

“With her?” William looked absolutely shocked as he pointed to Lizzie.

Lizzie's giggling stopped abruptly. "Hey. You could do a lot worse than me."

William scoffed. "I could do a lot better."

Sarah cleared her throat.

"Miss Cordell, it seems whatever you may have surmised to be going on between Lizzie and William is simply not true."

Lizzie made audible noise of disgust when Sarah mentioned William.

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Miss Cordell dropped her eyes out of embarrassment. “This is terribly unprofessional of me, Your Grace. I am so ashamed.”

Sarah walked over to Miss Cordell and embraced her. She lowered her voice and whispered in her ear. “Love, or even the hint of love, can have us acting out in the most bizarre ways.”

As she pulled away Sarah her whispered words took on a different meaning when she applied them to her own situation.

Surely, she wasn’t in love with the Duke. She only knew him a few days. Yet, she had never let anyone affect her in the same way this man had. Even only after a few days he had her scheming an entire room renovation simply as an act of revenge.

She may have let her imagination get the best of her in the past, but this was a bit much even for her.

Miss Cordell pulled away, a bashful smile with blushing cheeks met William’s awkward stance. Now that it was open knowledge that Miss Cordell was interested in William it seemed the young man forgot how to stand.

Wanting to take the attention from William, Sarah walked over to a bright pink fabric. “Is the same as the dress out front?”

Miss Cordell nodded. “It is, Your Grace.”

“This is will be perfect. Do you have any ruffles that match?”

Miss Cordell's face brightened. "I do! Lizzie, will you help me get this box down, it has the exact color ruffles in it."

The two women reached up to a top shelf to bring down a box.

William coughed. "If you two are going to get things that are out of reach why am I here?"

Lizzie stuck her tongue out. "You're the moral support."

Sarah giggled. The easy talk and growing camaraderie between them strengthened her resolve. She missed the familiarity of having family nearby and these people were beaming her family.

Lizzie pulled out a long strand of ruffles. "Is what you were thinking, Your Grace?"

Sarah looked over and her eyes widened. "Absolutely!"

"How much will you need?" Miss Cordell asked holding up two rolls.

"All of it." Sarah grinned.

CHAPTER 13

Sarah plopped down on the sofa in the study. "Just put that last one over there, William." She threw her arm over towards the window. The three of them spent two hours with Miss Cordell looking through countless bolts of fabric the modiste had. When Sarah closed her eyes she saw rolls and rolls of ribbons, lace, and ruffles. She couldn't be happier.

"William," she called out to him before he left. "I have a question for you."

The young footman stopped in the doorway and began to rub his neck. She found it endearing she made him nervous. He reminded her a lot of Charles. Both liked things in order and maintained and hated when things didn't go according to plan.

Sarah motioned to the room around her. "A lot of this looks very old and well used. When was the last time the Duke decorated?" A corner of her lip quirked up. "Or, I guess a better question is, has the Duke ever changed anything in this house?"

Her mind went to the rooms upstairs, untouched, stuck in a time she was not allowed to learn about.

William dropped his hand. "To be honest, Your Grace. The Duke doesn't redecorate or change anything, really. It's been this way for as long as I remember." He squinted his eyes. "Although, I do remember hearing about someone changing the curtains and rugs in one room."

Lizzie appeared behind him carrying the last package from the carriage. "That's not what happened. You weren't even alive when that room was redone."

William scowled. "Neither were you."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "True, but I know more about the comings and goings that happen within this manor than you." Lizzie set the package on the Duke's desk and turned towards Sarah.

"From what I was told, by Mrs. Bates, mind you." She threw her words at William before refocusing on Sarah, "that the previous Duchess hated the decorations in the Duchess's wing. However, the Dowager Duchess insisted she keep them up. It wasn't long after the Dowager's death the previous Duchess took them down."

William scoffed. "I heard the Duke ordered their removal because they were too

feminine.”

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The two began to bicker like siblings. How Miss Cordell could ever consider their relationship anything other than platonic was beyond Sarah.

Wait... what did he just say?

“Hush. Both of you.” She looked at William. “Where are these feminine things now?”

William and Lizzie exchanged looks. William shrugged.

“The attic, Your Grace.” Lizzie said with all the smugness she could muster. Lizzie was right, she did more know about the estate.

“The attic, you say?” Sarah jumped to her feet and ran out of the study, down the hall, and up to the second floor. She hadn’t tried every door on this floor, and considering there wasn’t another staircase leading to the third floor, one of these doors must lead to the attic.

There was a door at the end of the hallway next to her bedroom that she realized she never opened.

Crossing her fingers, hoping it would open, she turned the handle. Her breath came rushing out when the handle turned, giving entry to steps that led to the attic. She let a squeak of triumph as she tried to take the steps two at a time, but her cursed skirts kept getting in the way.

There was a small ray of light shining through a small window at the front of the

house. It wasn't much, but it was enough for her to see in front of her. She saw old paintings, and some books on an old desk. She made a mental note to return to those books once she was done asserting her dominance with the Duke.

She meandered around old furniture, stopping at an old crib. She ran her fingertips along the railing, wondering if the Duke slept in this as a baby. She couldn't help but let her mind wander to what he must have been like as a child.

Most likely a serious little boy, she gathered. You don't become highly disciplined and formidable over night.

How different their childhoods must have been. Sarah remembered bruised knees and silly songs, but most importantly lots of love and laughter. Did the Duke have that? Would he offer that to their children?

Their children.

Sarah's eyes widened. The Duke's deadline was approaching and soon his final rule regarding an heir will come into play.

She stepped away from the crib, rubbing her now clammy and dusty hands onto her skirts. She made her way over to a set of rather large, and dirty, trunks that sat in a corner.

Kneeling down she thanked whomever was watching over her because there were no locks on either trunk. Thankfully, it only took little effort to open the one.

Sarah took in the pile of material that looked like curtains. Dust had settled on what was most likely bright pink fabric. She pulled out one panel and was relieved to see that no moths had eaten away at the material. They were sturdy and with a light beating to get the settled dust out, they would look almost new.

She brought the fabric to her chest and laughed. This was turning out better than she could have possibly imagined.

“Your Grace?”

Sarah turned at the sound of her maid’s voice. She stood up and hurried to the top of the attic steps. Lizzie was standing in the doorway, peering up at her, quizzically.

“Lizzie! Good. I need your help.”

Lizzie’s shoulders dropped. “Up there?”

Sarah laughed. “Of course, up here.”

Lizzie shuddered.

“Oh, come now, Lizzie, there is nothing up here but some dust and old junk.”

She looked back down at the open trunk and the one sitting next to it, no doubt with more of the same in it. “Actually, I’ll need your help and more. Could you bring William as well? I would like the contents of both of these trunks to be brought down to the Duke’s study.”

Lizzie’s shoulders sagged. She did not seem too keen on entering the attic. “Right away, Your Grace.” Lizzie ducked out the doorway and went off to find William.

“Finally,” Sarah said out loud, “someone who just listens to what I say and doesn’t look at me like I’m losing my mind.” She laughed to herself.

Sarah returned to the trunk and picked up another curtain panel. She heaved it over her shoulder and made her way down the attic steps.

In the hallway she met William and Lizzie, both of whom looked like they'd rather be doing anything but what she was about to ask them to do.

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“Why do you two look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

Lizzie’s face went white. “Ghosts? Are there ghosts up there?” She took a step closer to William who looked annoyed.

“There’s no such thing as Ghosts, Lizzie.” William reprimanded her. “It’s just another room of the house. No different than the kitchen or library.”

Sarah smiled brightly at William. “He’s right. Thank you, William.”

Her praise did nothing to loosen the grimace on William’s face.

He made it no secret he did not approve of her plan to disrupt the Duke’s study. He most likely was afraid of being associated with the ruckus.

She leaned into William. “I promise I will not mention you helped me nor here or at Miss Cordell’s. And if your association is found out, I’ll say you protested every step of the way.”

William pursed his lips but he nodded in acceptance.

“Perfect. Now, go on and grab the rest of the curtains and I think I saw some pillows up there as well.”

William walked to the attic doorway with a scared Lizzie shuffling her feet behind him.

“It might take us several trips, but we must be fast, I only have tonight and tomorrow to finish my plan.” Sarah called out to them.

Lizzie stood in the doorway and looked back towards Sarah. “Do you think the Duke will be all right with these changes, Your Grace? I mean, I’m sure he won’t be at first, but will he...” Lizzie looked nervous.

The reality of what they were doing must be starting to settle on Lizzie’s shoulders.

Sarah had to remind herself while she was able to hide behind the title of Duchess William, Sarah, and even Samuels didn’t have such protection.

Sarah walked back to where Lizzie stood. It took a bit of maneuvering with the curtain panels hung over her shoulders, but she took the maid’s face in her hands. “I make you the same promise I made William. I will not mention your name when this all comes to light. I will take your participation in my scheme to the grave.”

Lizzie smiled and shook her head. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Sarah shooed the maid up the steps to the attic while she turned and hauled the two panels downstairs.

She unloaded the curtains she carried onto his desk causing some papers to blow off the desk.

“Your Grace? Are you in need of any assistance?”

Sarah looked over her shoulder and blew a stray piece of hair off of her face. “Samuels? I would love some, but the real question is are you willing to cross enemy lines to do so?” She asked with a wink.

The corners of his lips curved up as a small smile formed. “I’ve given it much thought, Your Grace. While I enjoy working here and I miss the quietness and order this house once maintained, I can’t help but think a little bit of change will be good for our Duke.” Samuels hesitated before adding, “May I speak freely, Your Grace?”

Sarah nodded. “Of course.”

“You may feel like you are on opposite sides from His Grace, but you two are a lot alike.”

Sarah mocked offense. “Take that back.” She said as she playfully grabbed her chest in fake shock.

Her motion garnered a laugh from Samuels. “It’s true and I have learned long ago it is much easier to give in and do what the Duke wants than to try to persuade him to see reason.”

Sarah fully turned to Samuels and placed her hands on her hips. “I feel there is a backhanded compliment in there.”

Samuels raised his hands in defense. “No ill will intended, Your Grace.”

“Very well, I’ll take the help no matter your reasoning. Will you see if Mrs. Bates is busy. I need some pillowcases made post haste. I know running a household takes a lot of effort but do you think she and the girls would be willing to make some pillowcases for the Duke?”

Samuels swallowed a laugh. “If it’s for the Duke I have no doubt they will jump at the chance. But for you, not only will they do it, but they will do so willingly.”

He dipped his head as he left.

Sarah leaned back onto the desk, folding her arms in front of her.

What an odd thing to say.

She could tell instantly that the Duke ran a tight ship and he was not a very personable person. She surmised most of his staff feared his wrath although she had never seen him raise his voice, let alone a hand, to them.

Was it just his imposing nature that scared them into submission? Or was he truly an evil man that abused his help? She couldn't see that being the case, but the truth of the matter was, she hadn't seen him enough to garner a viable opinion of the man. Every time she thought she was closer to uncovering another truth about the man she married, she found herself with more questions than answers.

She heard huffing followed by low grumbles coming from the hallway.

“Your Grace? Are you in there?” Lizzie’s voice was muffled against the towering stack of material in her hands.

Sarah jumped up from the desk and ran towards the unsteady girl. “My goodness, Lizzie,” she laughed. “You didn’t need to carry it all in one trip!”

Lizzie huffed as she dropped the pile onto the sofa with a groan. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. But I’d rather not go up there again. I know William says it’s just like any other room in the house, but I take offense to that. We make sure every room in this house is spotless and taken care of.”

“If that were true then the attic would be spotless.” William joked as he effortlessly put a similar size pile down. He even managed to bring down the throw pillows she saw.

Lizzie scowled and mumbled. “Semantics. Every room that is occupied by humans is taken care of.”

“What is occupying the attic? Ghosts?” William teased.

Sarah laughed. “All right you two. Was that everything?”

The two nodded as Lizzie rubbed her arms. William stood tall, proud of his not only bringing down the heavy material without much effort, but for having the last word with Lizzie.

Sarah’s hands clapped together. “Perfect. That gives me more time to set up the curtains. William, are you able to help with that?”

William’s mood quickly soured. “Curtains?”

Lizzie elbow found the side of his stomach.

“Oh, I mean, yes. I can help, Your Grace.” He grumbled.

Sarah smiled warmly. “Thank you. And again, there will be no word from me of your help.” Sarah brought her finger up to her mouth and crossed an ‘x’ over it. “I promise.”

“Is there anything else you need from me, Your Grace?” Lizzie looked on expectantly.

“Yes, Lizzie. How are you with a needle and thread? I need some pillowcases made.”

Lizzie’s face lit up. “I am excellent, Your Grace!”

“Wonderful. I sent Samuels to look for Mrs. Bates but he hasn’t returned yet. Would you mind going to look for her?” Sarah reached into one of the packages and brought out several yards of bright pink satin and a few rolls of ruffles.

“Take these and those pillows and see if you could cover them for me.”

“Right away, Your Grace.” Lizzie said with a wide smile on her face.

After watching Lizzie leave Sarah turned to William.

“Now let’s get to work hanging these curtains, shall we?”

Sarah and William worked late into the night. Samuels came in around midnight and shooed her to her rooms before she fell off the chair she was stabilizing on in order to hang the curtain by his desk.

She skipped breakfast the next morning and went directly to the study. When she opened the door her eyes were bombarded with bright fuchsia curtains with ruffle valences.

Oh my. They are bolder in the morning light than I had anticipated.

A jolt of electricity ran through her body.

Perfect!

Bright pink squares stole her attention.

“Oh! The pillows!”

Amongst the drab brown leather sofa sat six perfectly pink satin pillows with ruffle edges that matched the curtains perfectly. Not only had the girls made pillowcases for the four pillows they brought down from the attic but they covered the two pillows the Duke already had on his sofa.

Sarah made a mental note to do something nice for the women. They definitely understood the assignment she set forth.

The clash of the sturdy, masculine furniture in warm earth tones clashed with the bright and shocking color of pink hanging from the windows. Sarah went to the sofa and picked up two pillows, placing one on each of the chairs sitting opposite of the sofa. She left three on the sofa, positioning one at each corner and centering the third.

She decided Charles’s desk needed a splash of pink and added a pillow to his desk chair.

“What’s this?” Sarah looked down.

Underneath Sarah’s feet in between the sofa area and the desk was a plush pink rug.

She didn’t remember seeing this last night. “What in the world?”

A soft cough sounded from behind her.

Sarah turned to see Samuels standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, Your Grace. William found the rug upstairs when I had him check to make sure nothing was amiss upstairs. He figured you would appreciate it.”

Sarah’s heart swelled. “I absolutely do. I would tell you to offer my gratitude, but if you ask me, all of this was of my own doing.” Sarah winked.

Samuels tilted his head in good humor.

“It’s a good thing you were able to work so efficiently on your own, Your Grace. I just received word that His Grace will be returning tonight.”

Sarah was absolutely giddy. “That’s wonderful! I don’t think I could stand to wait another day!”

“Would you like me to bring in some breakfast for you, Your Grace?”

“That would be lovely, Samuels, thank you. And Samuels,” she called before he could leave. “Truly, thank you.” She spread her arms towards the room. “I know both you and the Duke appreciate order and it seems that my only contribution to to this household thus far is creating chaos. However, if he fights dirty so can I. I really do appreciate you helping me. I won’t soon forget your support.”

“Ah, but you didn’t have anyone’s help, Your Grace. You are quite spirited when you have a goal.” Samuels said.

Sarah nodded her head and brought her fingertip up to head and tapped it. “Right. I did this all by myself, and I’m quite proud.”

“As you should be, Your Grace. I’ll see to your breakfast.”

Sarah spent the rest of the day making sure the study was completely spotless and ready for the Duke. Any furniture she and William moved the night before she made sure was back in the perfect spot so he couldn’t detect movement.

Not that he wouldn’t know someone was in there. The masculine study looked as if it was designed by a young girl without any guidance. It was an eyesore. It was garish. It was perfect.

She couldn’t wait for the very controlled and intimidating Charles to walk into his study after a busy day of business and travel.

She could barely contain her excitement when she heard his carriage pull up. She paced her room as she listened for the door to the house open. She counted his footsteps as he walked to the study door.

She held her breath as she pictured his hand reaching for the handle and turning it. She closed her eyes and prepared herself for his undoubtedly loud and disgusted reaction.

She opened one eye. She heard the door open but she didn’t hear anything else.

Perhaps he opened the door but someone called to him.

Her other eye opened. No. She would have heard that.

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She shuffled over to her door and peeked her head through the opened door. She tiptoed to the railing that over looked the hallway downstairs. She could see the study's door had, in fact, been opened.

Was he in shock? Did he faint? Did Dukes faint? Did someone take everything down out of fear of retribution?

Sarah darted out of her room and rushed down the steps. She felt something was amiss and she began to worry she took her prank too far.

Just as she reached the door a dark, rich laugh boomed from the doorway. Sarah skidded to a halt just outside of the study's door.

Sarah stood very still in hopes to hear the sound again so she could decipher what it was. Surely, it wasn't the Duke laughing. He should be appalled. Furious, even.

Once again a crystal clear laugh rang out, sending shocks of electricity down her body.

Sarah's feet padded towards the door and she peered in.

She found the Duke doubled over in laughter.

"Your Grace?" Her voice was unsure as she took a step inside the study. Everything was as she left it. The curtains, the pillows, the rug, everything was there, in blaring contrast to the original decor.

Charles turned, wiping a tear from his eye. Sarah stared at the track the rolling tear left on his cheek.

He was laughing so hard he was crying.

“Sarah! Let me guess, you did this.” His voice was light and full of mirth. She never heard him sound such a way.

Sarah was stunned speechless. She nodded her head.

“It’s bloody brilliant!” Charles’s laugh began again and Sarah was left to wonder if maybe her husband had hit his head while he was out.

“I’m sorry?” Sarah took another step inside, cautiously staying away from him in case this was a ploy to pull her further into the room and punish her.

Her body heated at the thought. Sarah chastised herself for the path her thinking went. Pushing the salacious thoughts out of her head she focused on the laughing man in front of her.

“The room,” he threw open his arms wide, “it’s brilliant. Did you do this all by yourself? In one night?” He exclaimed in between bursts of laughter. He turned back to the sofa, looking down at the pillows and shaking with laughter.

Sarah looked back out into the hallway, surely she isn’t the only one that is witnessing this madness.

Sarah raised a hand to her head. Perhaps she was the one who hit her head and this was all a dream in an unconscious state.

CHAPTER 14

Charles's stomach was cramping from all the laughing. After the disastrous meeting this morning, which ended his trip abruptly, he was in the mood for a night of solitude in his favorite chair with a tumbler of whisky.

He didn't even stop to converse with Samuels when he walked through the door. Charles just handed Samuels his overcoat and proceeded to go straight to his study.

Come to think of it, Samuels was blabbering on about something, but Charles was busy shutting down his mind from the riotous chaos brought on by dealing with imbeciles this morning.

Shock did not adequately describe what Charles felt when first he opened the door to his study. If he were being completely honest, he was concerned he walked into the wrong room. Seeing old curtains that once hung in the Duchess's wing when he was a child paired with an old rug from his mother's room had him questioning if he opened the door to another time.

It was the sight of the pillows that started his laughing fit. He picked up the satin pillow and ran his fingers over the ruffles.

The vivid pink pillows clashed against the stark darkness of his leather sofa. Much like a certain presence that now invaded his senses. A soft, timid touch landed on his shoulder.

"Your Grace, are you sure you're all right?" She sounded confused and he didn't blame her. He couldn't remember the last time he laughed this much.

He turned to find a very perplexed Sarah staring at him like he had lost his mind. Perhaps he had.

Charles wiped another tear from his eye. "Yes, yes, I'm fine Sarah. This," his arms

gestured broadly and he turned in a circle, taking in the entire room, “is quite an accomplishment. I must know how you pulled it off.”

Sarah’s wrung her hands in front of her while she chewed on her bottom lip. “It was all me, Your Grace.” She said quite matter-of-factly. “I sought out Miss Cordell, told her I wanted to do some redecorating, then as I was looking around, getting to know the house, I, um, stumbled upon some old curtains and rugs and brought them in here.”

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Charles raised an eyebrow. “You were getting acquainted with the attic?”

Two flags of red bloomed on Sarah’s cheeks. “The attic is a part of the house, is it not?”

He laughed again. With each laugh he felt lighter, as if he was breaking down a piece of a wall that had been long standing within him. Charles took in his wife. Or was she the one breaking down his wall?

Charles eyed the tall window behind his desk, garishly wrapped in fuschia curtains with ruffles. It was an eye sore when he was a child and his mother would be happy to know they still were.

His mother hated the curtains, but they were his father’s mother’s decoration and the old bird wouldn’t let his mother take them down until she passed away.

The day after his grandmother’s funeral his mother, along with a few trusted footmen, snuck into the rooms, tore them down and stored them in the attic.

Seeing them now soothed a part of Charles he didn’t realize was aching.

Charles walked to the curtains behind his desk. “And you put the curtains up by yourself as well?”

Charles watched as Sarah swallowed, her slender neck bobbing in the motion. He remembered what that soft skin tasted like. He licked his lips at the memory.

Sarah sucked in her bottom lip as she thought of a lie to tell him. He knew anything she said would be a lie. There was no way a slight thing like her could haul those heavy curtains down from the attic and hang them by herself.

A wicked smile widened his mouth. He couldn't help to think of all the fun ways to punish her for whatever lie she came up with.

"If I told you how I did it it would take away the magic of the surprise, Your Grace." Her omission was a sign of loyalty to the staff. Loyalty was a quality Charles held in high regard. Hearing her stand her ground pleased him immensely.

"Clever girl," he murmured.

The twin flags of red on her cheeks spread over her entire face and her eyes widened in embarrassment. Or was it something else?

Her chest heaved against the confines of her dress, and the pupils of her eyes were blown.

My, my, my, she is a receptive little thing.

"Is this your revenge for dinner last night?" Charles cooed teasingly low and soft as he rounded the desk and walked towards Sarah still standing at the sofa.

A slim hand brushed a stray curl behind her ear as she licked her dry lips.

"I am astounded by your eye for decorating. You should renovate the whole house." He said with a drop of sarcasm.

Sarah shook her head, the lust he once saw in her eyes began to melt away.

“You like it?” Confusion and a hint of anger dripped from her words.

“What’s not to love?” He said playfully. He felt like a predator playing with his food.

He slowed his steps, carefully moving with the grace of a cat prowling. With each step he took she took a step back until the back of her legs hit the sofa.

Sarah huffed. “Well...” her arms gestured wildly. “It’s... pink!”

Charles took another step closer to her, until he was directly in front of her. Standing this close to her he could see a whisper of freckles that dusted her cheeks. He had the sudden urge to kiss every one of them.

“Oh, it’s very pink.” He agreed. “But I think it’s the perfect combination of light and dark, wouldn’t you agree?” Charles’s body roared to life when he saw the goosebumps erupt across her skin at his seductive tone.

Sarah only nodded. Her hazel eyes were once again heavy with lust and they called to him.

“But, you have to admit that your intentions were not in good faith and for that, you must be punished.”

Sarah’s knees buckled beneath her. Charles reached out and grabbed around her waist, pulling her to his chest.

“Do you want to be punished, Sarah?” His voice smooth as velvet.

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Sarah's eyes flared in response to his question.

"Yes." Her voice was quiet, but determined. There was no hint of question in her affirmation.

Charles rested his forehead against hers. "Good girl."

Sarah's moan was captured by Charles's lips as his tongue swiped into her mouth.

She didn't fight back, she didn't try to outmaneuver him, she simply gave into him. She pressed her body against his, molding her slim frame to his.

Her mouth's compliance didn't equal full submission, however. Her hands reached up and found purchase within his long hair. She pulled against the strands eliciting a growl from Charles.

His little hellion could definitely stand her own ground which made this all the more enjoyable.

After all, the hunt is just as enjoyable as the meal.

Sarah had given up trying to understand the man who was now holding her bottom as her legs wrapped around his waist. And she most definitely stopped trying to understand why her own body forgot everything she stood for when he talked to her in his seductive way.

Clever girlnearly sent her tumbling.Good girlalmost sent her to an early grave.

His mouth continued his attack on her and she willfully gave in to him. Her body was on fire and it craved consumption. If this was how she would go out, she'd welcome it.

Her legs tightened around his stomach, a part of her needing to be closer, and closer still, to him.

Her fingers played his silky strands, scraping his scalp with little tugs here and there. Every time she tugged he grunted and moved against her causing the most delicious sensation to course through her body.

Charles dipped at the waist laying her down on the sofa amongst her sickly sweet pink pillows and she couldn't help to giggle at the juxtaposition of the feminine pillows against the masculine sofa.

"Are you really not mad at the state of your study?" She whispered.

Charles's bruised lips were plump and marked by her lip stain. His hair was tousled giving him a roguish charm she found pleasing.

He shook his head. "Not one bit. I quite admire you, actually. Not many people have had the gall to stand up to me. And no one has had the ability to do so through room decorating."

Sarah laughed at his joke while her body warmed. Who was this man and how could she get him to stay?

Charles closed the space between them, fully laying her on the sofa. He placed his forearms on either side of her head, his legs pushing hers out to allow him to nestle between her legs.

Sarah brought her legs up and, once again, settled them around his waist.

He took her mouth and pushed his tongue into her.

Even fully clothed Sarah felt his length push up against her and she moaned loudly into his mouth.

“Charles.” She groaned in pleasure.

“You are so receptive of me, darling.” He was relentless and shameless.

Darling.

Sarah’s eyes rolled back and she arched against him. There should be studies done on this man’s voice and his affect on her. Simple words like “clever,” “good,” and “darling,” had the ability to send her into a different reality.

His mouth trailed down her neck and found a sweet spot right at the base of her neck and sucked. She gasped and raked her hands through his hair.

She pushed up against him, needing more friction, more of him. Surely he wasn’t going to make her wait a full eight days. Especially since she was supposed to take those eight days to wrap her head around being with him.

Considering her body was currently literally wrapped around him, she felt most decidedly ready to have him.

She pulled at his shirt, hoping he would get the idea she wanted it off of him. Charles ignored her ministrations as his kisses kept traveling south.

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His heavy lidded eyes looked up into hers as he ripped the collar of her dress exposing her breasts to him. Instead of embarrassment at being partially naked in front of a man Sarah felt emboldened.

It was not only his words that encouraged her, but the way he looked at her. As if she were the only one in the world that mattered. Being a middle child, that was a feeling that alluded her many times. In this moment with Charles, she felt like she was the middle point from which everything came.

Even when they fought, he challenged her to be quicker, smarter, better. It was frustrating, it was exhausting, but she had to admit, it was also exhilarating.

His hot mouth twirled against one of her peaked nipples and she sighed into him. His lower body pushed and swirled in small circles against her. Her legs tightened against him, needing him closer.

Charles shifted his weight so he could move his arm that was holding him up. He reached below and started pushing her skirts out of the way.

She wiggled in anticipation. His actions became more aggressive and needy. Sarah's core was molten magma looking for a vein to erupt.

Charles's hand found her center and she cried out in ecstasy.

A knock sounded from the door and Charles's hand froze.

"What do you want?" He barked.

Sarah bit her lip to stop from moaning. Even with the disruption Charles's fingers still played with her. She couldn't hear who was answering him and she didn't care as long as he never stopped his movements.

Her hips pushed against his hand and her body began to climb the hill she'd come to love.

But his movement stopped.

Sarah's eyes flew open.

Please don't say my punishment is delayed gratification again!

Instead of playful, and lustful eyes she was just looking into before ecstasy took over, Sarah found dark and dangerous eyes looking down at her.

"What is it?" She whispered.

"Who did you say is here?" He demanded from the disembodied voice.

There was a pause. "Miss Honora is here to see you, Your Grace."

Sarah's heart dropped.

A woman?

"Who is Honora?" Her voice cracked. Her mind was racing with thoughts of scorned women coming to demand his time.

Charles cursed and pushed himself up off of Sarah. He stood up, adjusting his trousers.

She took a pillow and covered her bare chest. She was thankful whomever was on the other side of the door, most likely Samuels, didn't come in to deliver their news.

Tears prickled her eyes and she blinked quickly in hopes they'd stay put.

Charles stormed to the study door and opened it enough for him to look through the crack.

He spoke in hushed murmurs but she could tell that he was not happy with the news. Sarah sat up and tried her best to put her collar to rights but the Duke had ripped it enough that it was thoroughly ruined.

She stood up, brushing her skirts down with one hand, while her other hand held her shirt together at her neck.

Her heart sank at the idea of walking out of the study in a disarray in front of the staff. The tears she tried to stave off began to fall as embarrassment fell like a heavy blanket over her.

The click of the door had her looking up at Charles. She quickly wiped her tears, hoping to keep her embarrassment to a minimum.

"Is everything all right?" Sarah's voice was thick.

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Charles walked over to his desk and began looking through papers.

“Yes, it’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting her, that’s all.”

Charles sounded distracted and no longer looked at her, rummaging through papers and cursing when he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

Sarah bit her quivering lip. One moment she was his world and with one knock on the door she ceased to exist to him.

She bit her lip harder hoping to stop the tears that were threatening to fall again.

“Who weren’t you expecting?” She barely managed to get the words out over the lump in her throat.

“Honora.” He stated, ignoring her as he walked past her and back to the study’s door.

“Charles.” Sarah pushed her voice as much as her closing throat would allow her.

He stopped and heaved a sigh before turning.

“She is Eli and my younger sister.”

Relief flooded Sarah’s body. “Your younger sister? I did not know you had a sister.”

“She’s not someone...” His pained eyes glanced over his shoulder to the open door. He lowered his voice. “She likes to keep to herself. Most people do not welcome her

presence.”

Sarah’s eyebrows raised. “What? Whomever would scorn a young woman? What could she have possibly have done?”

Charles expression darkened. “Her crime was being born. And to answer your question as to who would scorn an innocent child?” His head nodded towards the window that faced the town. “Those people you dare to defend as kind and loving people took it upon themselves to be judge and jury to an innocent woman and child.”

Charles turned on his heel and disappeared into the hallway.

The Duke’s remark slapped her across her face. She stood stunned. The people she met seemed like such generous people who were discarded by their Duke.

The realization that she was too busy trying to establish dominance with the Duke that she was taken for granted broke her heart. Was the Duke’s original warning about the townspeople correct?

Doubt and confusion began to eat away at her.

She moved towards the door when the state of her dress caused her to misstep. Peeking her head into the hallway she thankfully found it empty.

Sarah needed to get to the parlor where she could hear the light melodic feminine voice drifting into the hallway. She was eager to get there in hopes of finally putting the pieces her mysterious husband together. But first she needed to change out of this ruined dress.

CHAPTER 15

Thankfully Lizzie was upstairs righting Sarah's room when she busted in needing to change her clothes. Lizzie's eyes widened at Sarah's state of undress.

"My goodness, Your Grace! What happened to your dress?" Lizzie averted her eyes out of respect.

Unfortunately for Sarah, her fair complexion did not allow her time to come up with an adequate response. Two red spots blossomed on Sarah's cheeks before her mind fully comprehended what Lizzie had asked.

Sarah stood holding on to her tattered dress while it dawned on Lizzie the reason for Sarah's ruined attire.

Lizzie's own cheeks reddened with the realization. "Oh. I, um, can I help you change into something more... together?"

Sarah didn't have time for embarrassment. Regardless of her enflamed cheeks, every second she spent in her room was one minute she was not down there. Who knows if his sister would still be there? Was she intending on staying? But more importantly, why was she here?

Sarah rushed further into the room and straight to her closet. "Yes, please. The Duke's sister is here and I must get down to them right away."

Sarah was too busy rifling through her hanging dresses she didn't notice Lizzie had become frozen in place.

"Lady Honora is here?" Lizzie's voice was hushed.

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Sarah poked her head out from the closet. “That’s what I said. Now, come help me at once. I’m losing valuable time.”

Sarah’s hands landed on a modest blue dress that had always made her feel more mature and stately when she wore it.

She showed it Lizzie. “Do you think this will make me look like a Duchess? I want to make a good first impression.”

Lizzie lifted a slender shoulder. “Anything you wear makes you look like a Duchess, Your Grace. Simply because you are a Duchess.”

It was then Sarah noticed Lizzie’s concerned eyes and fiddling fingers.

“Lizzie? Is everything all right?” Sarah questioned.

Her maid shook her head solemnly. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Sarah felt there was more Lizzie wanted to say, but perhaps she was afraid to.

She sighed. “Lizzie, I think by now you know you can speak freely in front of me.” Sarah looked to the door. “And I’m really in a hurry so if it’s not pertinent to this particular situation I’ll ask you wait until later to discuss it with me.”

Lizzie rolled her lips as she looked to the door before pushing out a small breath. Her soft grey eyes locked in on Sarah’s.

“Lady Honora is a very sweet girl, Your Grace. I hope you find her pleasing and generous as we all have.”

Sarah rose an eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t I? Lizzie,” Sarah walked over to the bedroom door and closed it. “What is going on? What is all this secrecy regarding the Duke’s family?”

Lizzie resolutely shook her head. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. It’s not my story to tell. Perhaps you’ll find your answers this week. I heard that Lady Honora will be staying with us for a few days.”

Sarah’s eyes lit up hearing the news.

“That’s wonderful!” She looked back down at the dress in her hands. “Well, let’s get me fit for company so I can go and meet my new sister.”

She smiled warmly at Lizzie hoping to dispel any worry the maid had.

As Lizzie fastened the buttons at her back and re-pinned some of her fallen hair, Sarah couldn’t help but wonder what could cause such a reaction from Lizzie. What was it about this girl that had Charles turning cold and distant and Lizzie worried?

With her final tendril tucked securely in its pin Sarah turned to Lizzie. “Thank you for your help.” She gave Lizzie a quick hug in gratitude and opened her door.

“Your Grace,” Lizzie called out.

Sarah turned. “Yes, Lizzie,” she sighed. She really didn’t have time for this.

“Please remember, she’s just a girl, and a sweet one at that.” Lizzie’s voice was full of concern.

Sarah tilted her head in confusion.. “Of course, Lizzie. You have nothing to worry about. I’m sure our meeting will go brilliantly and we’ll get along smashingly.”

Lizzie shook her head in acknowledgement but Sarah got the feeling Lizzie wasn’t so certain.

Sarah stood outside the door to the parlor. She could hear her husband’s deep rumble of a voice. He sounded softer when he spoke to his sister. A light giggle floated through the door followed by a low chuckle.

Was Charles laughing?

Sarah pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

She found her husband embracing a young girl in one of the most beautiful displays of sibling love she had ever seen.

Her giant brute of a husband, whose one hand could cover her entire head if it wanted to, was handling this young girl with such gentle care it stole her breath.

While the two were sharing a moment, oblivious to her entrance, Sarah took the time to take in the pair in front of her.

They had similar coloring and brown hair. She couldn’t see the girls face since it was nestled against her brother’s chest, but Sarah could tell she was young, most likely not even fifteen yet.

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Lizzie's words infiltrated Sarah's mind and gave her pause. What has happened to this young girl that would elicit such a response from those around her?

Sarah cleared her throat.

Two sets of emerald green eyes looked at her. Like her brother, the young girl had two prominent dark brown eyebrows over striking green eyes.

Sarah smiled in their direction. "I'm sorry to interrupt, I was just so anxious to meet you." She looked at the young girl and tried to seem as non-threatening as possible. If she was anything like her brother this girl would already have a protective wall up.

The girl's feet shifted as she looked up to her older brother for guidance.

The exchange was curious to Sarah. It was as if his sister was afraid of Sarah.

"Sarah? This is my sister Honora. Nora, this is my wife, Sarah."

Sarah's heart fluttered at the way he said "wife," and she wanted to sit in that moment for longer, but the opportunity to learn more about his family was too much to pass up.

"It is so nice to meet you, Honora." Sarah said softly.

A corner of Honora's mouth tipped up in a small, timid smile. Sarah knew instantly she would have to tread lightly with Honora lest she scare her away.

But why?

Nora pushed her hand through the air. “You can call my Nora, if it pleases you.”

Sarah smiled. “Nothing would please me more.”

Sarah took Nora’s hand in hers and led her to a sofa set in the middle of the room. “Now tell me, Nora, where have you been hiding all this time? I’m sure you’re quite aware your brother is not the most communicative when it comes to his family.”

Nora seemed to shrink into the sofa as her eyes rose to meet her brother’s. Charles was staring back down at Sarah with a look of resignation. Sarah got the distinct impression she had already started off on the wrong foot.

“Nora lives with family outside of London.” Charles began. “She has a tutor and governess there and we hear she is doing wonderful with all of her studies.” The way Charles spoke of her was the same way he held her. He spoke as if she were the most fragile and precious jewel he’d ever seen.

If only he could speak of me that way.

Sarah grimaced quickly before she caught herself. This was no time to think of such things. Obviously there was something regarding this young girl that troubled not only Charles but the staff. Charles’s staff is loyal to a fault, and seeing the slight girl in front of her afraid to answer a simple question concerned Sarah.

Sarah tore her eyes away from Charles to look back at Nora whose eyes were now focused on her twiddling fingers in her lap.

Sarah reached out and took one of her hands. “That sounds wonderful, Nora. London canoe gorgeous this time of year.” She tried meeting the girl’s eyes, but they

remained firmly focused her lap. “I always enjoyed my studies. Not as much as my older sister Eleanor, but definitely more than my younger sister, Beatrice.”

“You have sisters?” The young girl’s eyes lifted in curiosity.

Sarah nodded. “Yes. An older one, Eleanor, who just had a little baby girl, and a younger sister, Beatrice, who is about your age. She’s fifteen.”

Nora smiled. “I’m thirteen.”

“Ah. I figured as much. So, tell me Nora, other than succeeding in your studies what do you like to do?”

Sarah listened to Nora speak of painting and playing the pianoforte all the while noticing Charles’s reactions to the conversation.

He never sat but remained standing behind the sofa looking down on them. Sarah couldn’t help but feel as if he was acting as the girl’s protector, on the ready to jump in and rescue her if, and when, the situation called for it.

Considering his size, his standing there was beginning to make even Sarah nervous. She was just about to interrupt Nora to ask him to sit when he began to speak.

“I hate to interrupt, Nora, but I just remembered there is some business I need to take care of. And I need to gather the paperwork you asked for. I couldn’t find it when Samuels first announced your arrival. Let me see to that before I forget.”

He touched Nora’s shoulder. “Will you be all right if I leave you with Sarah?”

Sarah bristled but didn’t say anything.

Of course she'd be safe with me.

Nora only nodded and sank back down into the sofa.

"If you need anything ring for Samuels and he'll come and get me." Charles hesitated before he lifted his hand, but Sarah saw the little squeeze he gave Nora on her shoulder.

It was just a tiny gesture, not even a full moment, but yet it spoke volumes to Sarah.

Charles was making sure his younger sister felt safe and secure in his home. He was taking his time to make sure she felt his protection even when he wouldn't be here.

The revelation astounded Sarah.

Dominant Charles, brute Charles, salacious Charles, frustrating Charles, these were the sides she got of her husband. She never once received the gentle Charles, or the caring Charles.

She was in awe of their relationship and if she were being honest, she was a bit jealous of their interaction. She had only met his younger sister moments ago but it was very apparent that they were close and loved each other dearly.

Then why is it I'm only learning of his sister now?

Sarah let out a small huff as Charles bid farewell and left the parlor.

Spotting the tea cart in the room Sarah pointed to it. "I see they brought in the tea, would you like some?"

Nora only nodded again.

Sarah stood and walked to the cart, using the time to try and come up with a way to get the conversation flowing again. Nora seemed to loosen up a bit when talking about her pastimes, but as soon as Charles left she seemed to rebuild her wall.

"You had mentioned you like painting and playing the pianoforte," Sarah started as she handed Nora her cup of tea.

"I enjoy painting more." Nora all but whispered.

Sarah sat down next to Nora on the sofa. Her mind drifted to the small painting studio upstairs. Did Nora know about those paintings?

"That sounds lovely. I used to paint a lot when I was younger, my father taught me. I love to paint landscapes. A few are hanging in my family home back in London."

Some color appeared on Nora's cheeks as her eyes brightened. "Me, too! There is a small park just by my home that I love to paint. In the summer there is a family of ducks that frequent there. If I'm quiet enough I can get close enough to paint them. It's one of my favorite places to be."

Nora's mouth snapped shut after she spoke. Something told Sarah Nora wasn't used to speaking so openly to strangers. Anxiety seemed to flow from the girl as her eyes wandered around the room. Nora shifted again in her seat as she cleared her throat and dropped her eyes once more.

"That does sound peaceful." Sarah said as she patted the girl's clammy hand.

“Perhaps one day I will be able to see your paintings. I’m sure they’re lovely. In fact, I would love nothing more to have one hanging here.”

Twin red flags rose high on Nora’s cheeks. “But you haven’t even seen them yet. What if they’re horrible?”

Sarah waved her off. “Nonsense. Talent knows talent, my dear.” She said with a wink. “And I am talented.” Sarah ended on a chuckle.

Nora joined in on her laughter and Sarah could feel the tension melting away. Nora’s shoulders relaxed as she sipped her tea.

“I’m not sure about that, but I think I’ve come a long way in my art.” Nora offered. “But I’m not ready to show it to many people definitely not Charles.”

Sarah tilted her head. “Why not? He seems very fond of you. He even said he was impressed with how well your studies are coming along. Why would you be afraid to show him your work?”

Nora shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s always so controlling and opinionated.” Her hand gestured to the perfectly cultivated parlor. “Things are always so perfect here.” Once again her eyes tracked over the room. “What if it wasn’t perfect and he found fault in it? Or fault in...”

Nora’s lips tightened. Sarah thought she saw Nora’s eyes moisten but the girl dipped her head to take a quick sip she couldn’t be sure.

Sarah looked to the door of the parlor. “It’s true, Charles has a certain way about him when it comes to relinquishing control, but I can absolutely tell that whatever you create your brother would be impressed.”

Nora chewed on her bottom lip. “I’m not sure about that. I’ve showed him pieces in the past and he didn’t seem too interested in them.”

Sarah pursed her lips. “Hmm, perhaps you caught him on a bad day?” Sarah let out a small chuckle. “And if anyone truly knows your brother, they’d know he’s prone to having bad days.” She leaned in to nudge Nora’s shoulder, hoping to lighten the mood.

Nora's laugh was genuine and it made Sarah's heart swell.

Sarah looked out the window at the waning light. "The day is almost over, but I think we can fit in a short walk. Would you like to go out and get some fresh air?"

Nora put her tea on the table next to her. "I'd like that. I've always liked these grounds."

Sarah clapped her hands. "Wonderful. I'm still learning my way around so it'll be nice to have someone who is more familiar with the estate."

Nora stood and followed Sarah out of the room and into the hallway.

"Hasn't my brother shown you around?" Nora sounded curious and more confident than in the parlor. Sarah felt as if Nora was starting to let down her guard which delighted Sarah.

Sarah laughed. "Heavens no. Mrs. Bates has shown me the rooms but I really haven't ventured outside of the home."

Sarah took Nora's arm and slipped it through hers. "But none of that matters now. I would much rather have you show me around than your brother. I have no doubt you will be an excellent tour guide."

Nora leaned into Sarah. "I fear I'll get us lost, I haven't been here in quite some time. What if the grounds have changed?"

“Oh Nora,” Sarah chuckled. “You know your brother. Does he sound like a man who would go ahead and change things?”

Nora shook her head. “You’re right, I’m sure it’s all exactly the same as the last time I was here.”

Sarah led them out the door and down the pathway that led to the garden. “Well, there is one room that is different.”

Nora looked up to Sarah with interest.

“His study.” Sarah said with a fiery gleam in her eye.

Nora’s laugh erupted from her small frame, shocking Sarah. “That I find most doubtful. He wouldn’t let anyone change any room, especially not his study.”

Sarah preened. “When we get back from our walk remind me to show you his wonderfully redone pink study.”

“Pink?” Nora giggled.

“With ruffles.”

CHAPTER 16

Sarah stood up, brushing the dirt off her skirt.

“Sorry.” Nora winced. “I don’t remember this hill being as steep as it is.”

Sarah shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. A little dirt won’t hurt anyone.”

Nora reached up and pulled a small stick out of Sarah's hair. "Yes, but this might."

Sarah laughed. "Oh goodness, I guess I took quite a tumble, didn't I?"

Nora's face reddened. "Are you sure you're all right?" Sarah could tell the girl truly did mean no harm and was embarrassed that her memory of the grounds wasn't as good as she thought.

"Yes, I'm fine. I've gotten into far bigger messes with my sisters when I was your age. This is nothing a good cleaning won't fix. I'm fine." She raised her arms wide and waved them around. "See? No rips or tears." Sarah twisted her body as she looked over her dress. "I don't see any bruises on my arms and legs. I am truly all right, no need to worry."

Nora didn't look convinced but dipped her head nonetheless. "If you say so."

Sarah looked at the small pond in front of them.

"Now, let's just make sure we watch our footing, we want to make sure we don't fall into the water." Sarah took Nora's hand as the two gingerly walked closer to the water.

Nora released her pent up shoulders with a small laugh. "It would fall in line with the rest of this evening."

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Sarah raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean? Other than this slight mishap,” she nodded to the small hill now behind them, “I feel as though we’re getting along well. Is there something amiss with our conversation?”

Nora shook her head. “No, not at all.” The young girl dipped her eyes in avoidance. “I just sometimes feel as though I’m a burden, that’s all.”

Sarah’s heart sank. The poor girl hunched her shoulders, trying to appear as small as she possibly could.

“Has your brother made you feel this way?”

Nora quickly looked up in horror. “Oh no! My brothers have made it their life mission to make sure I’m well taken care of and tolerated.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose at the girl’s choice of words. “Tolerated? A young woman is not to be tolerated. She should be worshipped and appreciated for all of her wonderful attributes.” Sarah leaned into Nora. “Which I hear you have many. Who just ‘tolerates’ you?” Sarah stuck her nose in the air and puffed out her chest. “I must speak with them at once and put them to rights.” Sarah said with candor. There is no one who should be making this girl feel small.

Nora lifted a slender shoulder. “No one in particular. I guess it’s just due to my circumstances.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. This was it. She could sense the girl was willing to give some of the sought out details Sarah needed to piece together the anomaly that was her

husband and his family.

“Circumstances?” Sarah tried to keep her tone conversational while inside her mind was screaming for the details to come fast so she could finally put this mystery to bed.

Nora stepped over a rock and pointed to it so Sarah wouldn’t trip.

“My mother’s death.” Nora said nonchalantly as she stopped to look at the waning light reflecting in the pond’s water.

Sarah’s heart began to beat faster. Finally! Someone was going to give her some information. She made sure to tread lightly, not only when walking around the rocky ground, but with the girl. She didn’t want to scare Nora out of giving the details of Charles’s family.

“How did she pass?” Sarah prodded gently.

Nora didn’t raise her eyes, but kept her eyes trained on the ripples in the water caused by the jumping frogs. “There’s not much to say. She died shortly after I was born. Charles rarely talks of her or her passing so I don’t know much.”

“Does Eli not speak of her?” Sarah took a chance mentioning Eli. She knew Charles and Eli had a tempestuous relationship, she was hoping the same could not be said of Nora’s relationship with him.

Nora once again shrugged. “I seldom see Charles. I see Eli even less.”

Disappointment settled in Sarah’s bones. She was hoping for some light to be shed on that corner of the family tree as well.

“I see. Was Eli not around when you were younger?” Something was poking Sarah in the back. She reached around and found another stick lodged in the waist of her skirt. She yanked it out before Nora noticed.

Nora shook her head. “It was more like I was not around.”

Sarah cocked her head to the side. “How do you mean?”

“As long as I could remember I lived with relatives outside of London. I visit here every so often, but never for long.” Nora’s eyes drifted off towards the horizon.

Sarah’s eyes followed Nora’s to see what she was looking at but all she saw was the small village on the distance.

“Do you like living outside of London?” Sarah brought Nora’s focus back to her.

“I do,” Nora admitted. “I just wish I had siblings, or more people my age. I’m constantly surrounded by adults.”

Sarah looked back towards the house. Or, at least, where she thought the house was. Now that Sarah was looking, she wasn’t sure from which direction they came.

“Well, it’s not like you’d be around many children your age here. Although, I suppose there is the town you could visit to be around peers your age.”

Nora’s shoulders tightened. “I’m not sure that is better.”

“How so?” Sarah asked.

Nora was quiet for a moment. “It doesn’t matter.”

They stood in compatible silence for a few minutes. Sarah wracked her brain to come up with a way to get back to the conversation about Charles's family without it sounding like she was prying.

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“I, um, wish I knew more of Charles’s family. I know of Eli, and now you, but not much is said about the rest of your family. I found your mother’s room the other day.” Sarah inwardly cringed. She felt as if she was parading around a sign that said, “Tell me every family secret.”

Nora still didn’t look up from watching the frogs. “I wish I knew of her. I’ve heard the servants talk of her.” Nora supplied, her voice small and distant.

Hope once again rose within Sarah. “Oh?”

“I’ve heard Mrs. Bates say that she was one of the kindest people she’s ever met. She would go out of her way to help the people in the village. Once a week she would go down to the village and help tend to the sick, children and adults alike. Mrs. Bates said she was good with medicine.”

Nora’s voice was full of reverence and wonder when she talked of her mother.

Sarah’s heart broke for the child. “She sounds like she was a wonderful woman and a noble Duchess.”

Nora’s eyes flashed up, bright and shining. “I like to think so.”

The two shared a sober smile.

Sarah thought back to the painting studio she found in the home. She chewed her lip, conflicted as to bring it up or not. Nora mentioned she liked to paint and perhaps learning her mother liked to paint, too, would help bring her closer to her mother’s

memory. However, when she mentioned finding the rooms earlier Nora ignored it. Sarah didn't want to upset her any more than she was.

"It's getting dark. Perhaps we should go back." Nora's voice cut through Sarah's thoughts. "Charles doesn't like when I'm out for long."

Sarah looked around and saw the darkening sky. "Oh my. I didn't realize we've been out for so long. We should definitely get back."

They turned to make it up the hill they came down to get back onto the main path. Sarah was grateful that it didn't seem as steep going up as it did going down. She was beginning to think she would manage to get back to the road without causing another scene.

"Be careful," Sarah started. "There is a divot around here somewhere. I remember seeing it on the way down."

The words hadn't left her mouth when Sarah's foot landed in the exact divot causing her to tumble.

"Oh gracious," she said from the ground. "I am in a state tonight." She laughed.

Nora's giggles filled the air. It's light melody reminded Sarah of her times with her sisters when they would just enjoy each other's company and they didn't have to worry about the pressures of the ton. Her heart ached for simpler times.

She looked up at Nora who was holding her stomach from her laughter. In that moment, Sarah made it her mission to see that Nora had more laughter in her life. She was a completely different girl out here than in the parlor when they first met. She no longer seemed closed off or shy.

Nora's face was flush from exertion and laughter but there was a calmness in her that Sarah hoped would continue. This girl was far too young to carry whatever burden had been placed upon her.

Nora reached down to help Sarah stand. "Are you good to continue? I could go get help."

Nora looked up the pathway and then down the other way. Her brows furrowed. "Although, now looking, I'm not sure which direction we came from." They heard rustling in a nearby bush. "And I'm not sure I want to venture out alone."

Once Sarah righted herself she looked at the path. "Hmm, I'm not sure I know which way we came from either."

Nora's features began to tighten which worried Sarah. She wanted nothing more than to give this girl a sense of security.

"No need to worry, Nora." She reached out and took Sarah's hand in hers. "We are still on the estate. All roads lead to Rome and all that, right? Let's just pick a way and I'm sure it will lead us back to the house."

Nora smiled in relief. "Very good point."

"Your choice, my dear. Which way shall we go?" Sarah asked.

Nora worried her lip. "Do you really want me to pick? Do you remember how you fell down the hill? That was on my direction."

Sarah laughed. "That was bad footing on my part. I trust you. I have all the faith in the world no matter which way you'll pick you'll get us back home."

Nora pushed out a breath and pointed. “That way.”

Sarah nodded and slipped her hand through Nora’s arms. “Then that way it shall be.”

Nora’s eyes scanned the brush on either side of the pathway. “Sarah, do you believe in monsters?”

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There was a slight rustle in the bush next to Sarah. She swallowed. “No. I do not and neither do you.”

“I don’t?” Nora did not sound convinced.

Sarah shook her head resolutely. “No, you do not. If you believe something you give it power and no one holds power of you, Nora. Remember that.”

The rustling grew louder.

Nora tensed but Sarah decided to use this time to prove her point. She took a stick from the ground and prodded the bush.

“Who’s in there?” She chastised the trembling bush.

The bush began to shake more violently and Sarah had the immediate fear that she may have made a grave miscalculation.

She looked back to Nora whose face was drained of color.

Sarah took a deep breath and straightened her back. She needed to show this young girl that she could be capable of taking care of herself and she was no burden to anyone.

Sarah pushed the stick farther into the bush and wiggled it around. She said a silent pray that it was just a small forest creature and not a man eating beast biding its time until two women unknowingly crossed its path.

Just then a rabbit jumped out of the bush causing screams to escape from both Sarah and Nora.

The two watched as the agitated bunny hopped further down the path before disappearing into another bush.

“Ah, see,” Sarah said while trying to catch her breath from her scream. “Just a rabbit.”

Nora’s hand was resting on her chest. “I thought you said there was nothing to be scared of?”

“There wasn’t. It was just a rabbit.” Sarah noted as she tossed the stick down.

“Then why did you scream?” Nora rose an eyebrow, taunting Sarah.

Sarah bristled in jest. “Well, I screamed because you screamed.”

Nora giggled. “I’m sure that was the reason.”

Both laughed at their fright.

“Regardless, I proved my point. If you give into fear, the fear will control you. We could have run and told your brother there was a monster in the bushes when all it was was a tiny bunny. How silly is that?”

Nora pondered that for a moment. “Ah, or we could tell him that there was a monster and we took it on and came out victorious!”

Sarah laughed freely. “What an imagination you have. You remind me a lot of my younger sister, Beatrice. She reads a lot and comes up with the most fantastical

stories.”

“Do you think I would be able to meet her one day?” Nora sounded hopeful.

Sarah pulled Nora closer to her. “I would love for that to happen. And one thing you must know about me, Nora, is that when I want something, I will do whatever it takes to make it happen.”

Nora smiled. “Well, now you sound like my brother Charles.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “You are now the second person to say that to me. I find great offense in that sentiment, take it back.” She teased.

Nora erupted in a fit of giggles that warmed Sarah.

“Come on, you. I don’t want your brother mad at me for bringing you in after dark.” Sarah pulled a laughing Nora on towards what was hopefully the house.

The two set off into the night, the rising moon their only light.

CHAPTER 17

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Charles's jaw clenched at the sound of giggles coming from the hallway. He left the spot in front of his window where he spent the last forty-five minutes pacing and charged out into the hallway.

"Where have you been?" His booming voice echoed throughout the hallway causing the girls to jump.

"Charles! You scar-"

Charles walked straight past Sarah and took a hold of Nora by the shoulders.

"Are you all right? Where were you? It's late and you know better than to walk around by yourself." Charles hated how frantic he sounded.

Just then a pointed finger poked, rather harshly, into this shoulder.

"Excuse me. She was not alone, I was with her." Sarah's voice was stern and unmoving.

He glanced over his shoulder to see his wife standing there perplexed and most likely offended. He shrugged her off. She wasn't his concern right now.

Charles held Nora at arms length while he looked over her to make sure she was unhurt.

"Answer me, Honora. Where were you?"

A not-so-ladylike scoff emanated from behind him. “Oh, please, Charles, do stop this line of questioning. You are acting as if we stole away in the night and fled to the town for a night of debauchery and mischief.”

The buzzing sound that only seemed to frequent his mind when his wife was around started.

He looked down at Nora and instead of finding the intimidated and shy girl he was used to seeing, he saw something else entirely. Something he quickly discovered he was not fond of.

She looked as if she was about to burst open from laughing... at him.

Or was she laughing at Sarah?

Charles shook his head. No. It didn't matter. Sarah was making fun at his expense, so if Nora was laughing because of Sarah's remark, she was laughing at him.

He couldn't have that. He must be in control.

“Not now, Sarah. I'll get to you later, darling.” He threw a look off his shoulder just in time to see his lovely wife's normally alabaster complexion turn pink. A thrill ran through him from her amenable disposition.

His wayward mind wanted to take the next several moments to come up with all the delectable ways he would punish her for her part in this situation, but his sister's eyes were focused on him.

“Charles, please don't be upset.” Nora began. Charles was taken aback by her voice. Usually meek and mild, Nora was standing tall with her chin jutting out in defiance.

“Sarah and I were talking in the parlor and we both needed some fresh air. We had a lovely walk, we just lost track of time.” She shrugged.

Charles released Nora's shoulders after he gave her one more once over to make sure she was all right.

He turned to Sarah.

“My God, woman, what happened to you?” Dirt smeared her cheeks, her dress was covered in grass stains and dirt, and was that a stick in her belt?

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Oh, are we addressing me now? I figured you forgot I was here.” Sarah picked off, what Charles could only assume was, a piece of grass from her skirt.

“Truly, Sarah, are you all right? Should we fetch a doctor? Samuels!” Charles’s bellowed down the hall.

Sarah’s eyes widened as she raised her hands. “No, no, don’t. I’m fine, really.”

Samuels appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. “You called, Your Grace.”

Sarah waved him off. “It was just a misunderstanding, Samuels. We’re fine.”

Charles’s heart thudded low in his chest. “Sarah, are you sure? You look like you were run over by a carriage.”

“It was a rabbit.” Nora snorted.

“What?” Charles looked back to Nora. “A rabbit did this?”

Sarah huffed out a sigh and took his arm, pulling his focus back to her. “It wasn’t a rabbit.” She glanced around him and shook her head in jest towards Nora.

“We were walking and we happened upon the pond. Nora said it was one of her favorite spots on the estate so we walked towards it. Neither one of us realized there was a decline and I tripped and fell on the way down.”

“On the way up, too.” Nora chimed in from behind him.

Charles looked towards his sister in confusion. Who was this sassy chit? He had never heard Nora speak so openly and candidly with such mirth and spirit. His eyes darted back to Sarah who was trying not to laugh.

“Yes, thank you, Nora, for reminding me.” She widened her eyes and lifted a shoulder. “I also fell walking back up the hill. What can I say? I am a woman of many talents.” Her self-deprecating laugh danced along his skin.

“And the rabbit?” Charles questioned, rubbing his temples. These women were going to be the death of him.

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Oh, that. That was just the monster in the bush. We took care of him, didn’t we, Nora?”

He could see Nora shaking her head vigorously out of the corner of his eye.

Charles heaved out a sigh and looked up to the ceiling. He was losing control of the situation very quickly. Although, after recalling their entire encounter in his mind, he wasn't sure he ever had it.

Time to rectify that.

"Honora, please go to your room. We'll talk about this more tomorrow." He pointed to the steps.

Nora opened her mouth to argue but Charles raised his hand to stop her.

"I'll have Samuels bring up your dinner. You will eat in your room tonight. Now, go."

Nora's shoulders dropped and Charles had to admit he rather missed her little rebellious streak from earlier. It was nice to see some life within her eyes, even if it was at his expense.

Nonetheless, she knew the rule about being out after dark and she broke it. "Honora." He warned.

She dipped her head and walked past Charles. She walked up to Sarah and wrapped her arms around her. He could tell she whispered something in Sarah's ear that had Sarah's eyes shining.

Charles dropped his eyes to allow them their moment.

He couldn't help but wonder what secret his sister shared with his wife. A part of him acknowledged he wished he could be her confidant, but that was not his role. His role

was one of protector and sometimes that meant being the bad guy.

Nora left Sarah's embrace and made her way up the steps. He turned his focus on his wife.

"Are you sure you're all right?" The words came out more gruff than he wanted. The truth was seeing her in such disarray alarmed him more than he cared to admit. He didn't see any rips or tears, which was miraculous considering the dirt and stains that covered her.

Sarah looked down at her disheveled state. "I promise, it looks worse than it is. I'm made of sturdier things than most women."

Her eyes flashed as the words left her mouth, leaving Charles with a tightening in his gut.

He took a step towards her. Standing this close to her, Sarah had to lift her head to keep eye contact.

Their breaths mingled as they looked at each other. "Follow me."

Sarah's pupils dilated at the command.

Charles turned on his heel and began walking towards the steps. He was pleased to hear her quick footsteps behind him.

It seems she was just as eager as he was to get to her punishment.

"Follow me," was all he had to say and Sarah could feel the warmth spread throughout her body.

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What was happening to her? She was developing a physical reaction to his commands and she really didn't mind. Thoughts of punishments ran through her mind. However, it was a short list since she was new to this whole concept of punishment as a form of pleasure.

Her body began to hum in excitement. As long as it wasn't that delayed gratification nuisance again she was up for it.

Charles had obviously done this before and was well-versed in dominance, heaven knew what tricks he had up his sleeves.

Sarah was so lost to her thoughts that she didn't realize she was standing in Charles's bedroom until he closed the door behind her and locked it.

He walked past her and stood at his dresser. He unbuttoned his cuffs one at a time. Sarah's eyes watched as the muscles moved under the shirt with every movement. Unknowingly, she licked her lips.

Charles rolled up each sleeve, showcasing strong forearms with veins that pulled at his skin down to his large hands..

Sarah's heart began to race. She knew exactly what it felt like to be held in those strong arms and her body itched to be in that position.

She shifted on her feet and pulled at the collar of her dress. Oh, why couldn't her dress have ripped in one of her falls? Her clothes felt way too restrictive now.

Charles caught her staring at his arms and he cleared his throat.

Sarah shook her head to clear away the salacious thoughts.

“I know you are new to this household, and I’m sure finding out about Honora was most intriguing to you, but you must be careful with her.” Charles unbuttoned the top two buttons of his dress shirt.

Sarah’s breath caught in her throat as she saw tanned skin with dark curls peeking out of the shirt.

“Sarah.” Charles’s voice was coaxing but still had an edge to it.

Sarah blinked a few times to regain conscious thought. “Um, why must I be careful with Nora? She seems like a healthy and capable thirteen-year-old girl, just like any other girl her age.”

Charles shook his head as he sat down on a chair. He crossed one leg over the other to take off his boot.

Sarah looked down at her fidgeting hands. Suddenly the realization that she was standing in Charles’s bedroom while he undressed became too much for her. Which was absurd, he had been her husband for several days now yet, for some reason, this felt too intimate for her.

“Sarah. Look at me,” his voice commanded.

Sarah’s eyes rose to meet his. His green eyes looked almost black in the low light in his room. He seemed sinister and dangerous now standing barefoot with his sleeves rolled up and his shirt open to reveal his muscular chest. However, in the same breath, he was enticing, alluring, and all too consuming for Sarah.

He was magnificently beautiful and she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

"The reasoning doesn't matter. What would you have done if something truly terrible happened? You don't know your way around the grounds that well, and I'm not sure Honora is that great of a guide. You two could have been seriously hurt. Look at the state of your dress!"

His normal lecturing tone had another layer to it. Sarah lowered her gaze and turned her head ever so slightly to focus on his words.

"There would be no way for me to find you, I didn't know where you were. I can't let that happen again."

Worry.

Sarah looked back up to Charles. He was standing there with his hands hanging freely at his sides. Not behind him or crossed in front of him. He was standing there, plainly and openly. He was pleading for her safety.

He was worried about her.

Whatever game these two were playing with each other before Sarah put it to the side. "Charles," she said as she walked to him. "I am sorry, I did not know you didn't like her out past dark. I knew it would be dark and I was hoping to get a quick walk in. I was hoping a change of scenery would help her open up to me a little more."

Charles sighed. "Did it work?" His voice cracked ever so slightly with his question.

Sarah shook her head. "It did. That's part of the reason why we were late coming back. We just walked and talked, it was delightful. It was actually Nora who pointed out that it was dark and we needed to get back."

Sarah took a risk and took his hand in hers. “I didn’t rush after she said that. Perhaps I should have. I’m sorry.”

Charles was focused on their entwined hands while she spoke. He watched as her thumb rubbed the top of his hand in little circles. The corner of his lip tipped up in a small smile.

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He brought his eyes up to meet hers.

“Please be careful next time. You... she means the world to me. I wouldn’t want to see anything bad happen to her. Or you.”

Goosebumps erupted across Sarah’s skin causing his sly smile to grow wide.

With his free hand, Charles cradled Sarah’s head and tipped it back, allowing him to claim her mouth.

It was a gentle kiss, but it made her weak in the knees all the same. He took his hand from hers and wrapped it around her waist, bringing her body flush against his.

The heat from him covered her and she whimpered.

Charles pulled away, looking at her. His eyes searched her face. “You really are something else entirely.”

Sarah’s brows furrowed. “Is that the sweet talk I’ve heard so many of my friends talk about?”

Charles laughed. He actually laughed and it calmed her nerves.

“I’m not much of a sweet talker, I’m more direct than all of that.”

Sarah blushed at his inference.

Charles's smile turned wicked before it softened. "I just mean, I was not expecting you."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Sarah licked her lips.

Charles's eyes had followed her tongue as it swiped across her lips. He leaned in to capture it. Sarah sighed into his mouth as his tongue caressed hers.

He finished the kiss with a small, chaste kiss on the side of her mouth. "I have yet to determine that."

Sarah smiled. "You know, while you are ruminating over if my presence is a blessing or a curse there is another pressing matter I feel you should address."

"Oh, is there?" He said as his mouth came down and kissed her favorite spot on her neck.

She shivered in delight within his arms.

"Mmhmm." Her eyes fluttered shut as her body melted in his arms.

"And what is this pressing matter that needs my immediate attention?" He asked between his hot open-mouthed kisses along her neck.

"My punishment."

Charles's kisses stopped. He straightened as he looked at her. "Your punishment?"

Sarah looked at him from underneath her lashes. "Yes, sir. I broke a rule, therefore I need to be punished. I feel the lesson would be better learned if I had something to think about."

Charles's eyes flashed before he scooped her up.

“You’re absolutely right. And not only did you put yourself in danger but my sister as well. For that, your punishment will be one that you will be thinking about for days to come.”

A thrill of excitement raced down Sarah's spine and straight to her center where her pleasure was already starting to build.

“Are you ready for your punishment, darling?” He purred.

Sarah couldn't speak, she could only shake her head quickly.

Charles chuckled. “Oh, I don't think you are,” he said as he tossed her onto the bed to the squeals of her laughter.

CHAPTER 18

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Charles looked down at a giggling Sarah. Her big owlish eyes held such reverence and obedience when she looked up to him. The power she gave him made him feel he could conquer the world.

He had been a force to be reckoned with in business and amongst the peers, but here, with her, was the only time he truly felt in control. Looking down at her flush and expectant face he realized it was a gift he did not want to squander.

“You’ve definitely made my life more complicated, my darling.” His voice rumbled from deep within his chest. His fingers ached to reach out and touch her soft skin, but he knew going slow would be beneficial for both of them. The ten days were not up yet and he wanted to make sure she would enjoy their coupling as much as him when the time came.

Charles flexed his hands then tightened them into fists. He needed to control himself as much as her when it came to the pleasure he wanted to give her. Unfortunately for him, he’s been hard ever since his lesson in delayed gratification. He spent a week’s worth of cold water in one night, trying to calm his body down after that.

He’s been anxiously waiting for his next chance to pleasure his wife.

Sarah’s face burned a deep red at his words. She nibbled on her bottom lip.

Charles reached out and pulled her bottom lip from her teeth. “No, no. Don’t hurt those succulent lips. Those are mine.”

Sarah’s pupils dilated in response to his candor.

He leaned down to place a healing kiss on her swollen lips. She moved her body forward to lean into him but he pulled away.

“Not yet, my love.” Charles said as he stood back up to his full height. He began to unbutton the rest of his shirt, her eyes tracking each movement. Her eyes became heavy with lust.

Charles threw the shirt to a nearby chair. He walked to his dresser, leaned back on it and folded his arms across his chest, making his muscles bulge. Sarah’s eyes widened at his appearance.

He wasn’t too proud to admit her response to his body turned his blood to molten lava. The need to control his body from taking her right then and there was becoming increasingly difficult to subdue.

“We must take our time to make sure your punishment is one that does its job and teaches you a lesson. Something that is rushed through is usually not done properly.” Charles lowered his eyes. “Oh, no, darling. I want to take my time with you.”

Sarah audibly gasped as her legs began to move underneath her skirts. She needed more friction, she wanted to be touched. And by God he wanted to touch her. But this was a lesson in patience, even if he had to learn it along the way as well.

Charles pursed his lips as he watched his beautiful wife squirm on the bed.

“Look at you.” He kicked off the dresser and walked back to the bed. He place a finger under chin and lifted her face to his. With his other hand he swiped at dirt on her cheek with his thumb. “You’re so dirty.”

Sarah’s eyes flashed before the reddening of her cheeks caused her to try to dip her head.

Charles turned her face to the left and to the right. His eyes narrowed on a spot on her cheek. His rough thumb swiped the dirt away causing Sarah to flinch. The excitement that was building within him evaporated as he looked closer at the reddening cut on her face.

“Eyes on me, darling.” He commanded.

Sarah’s eyes, hungry with need, lifted to meet his.

“We need to clean you up first.” He gripped her chin firmly. “Stay right here and do not move.” He punctuated each word with a small kiss to her lips.

Charles walked to the door and gave a glance back, making sure she was still there, then turned and left the room.

Sarah’s vision swam as Charles left the room. She was curious as to where he was going and was held tempted to follow him to the door. However, if she didn’t regulate her breathing first, she’d pass out the second she tried to stand.

Sarah squealed in delight as she threw her body back onto the bed. She recalled how his eyes traced every curve of her body when he stood at the dresser. Would tonight be the night he finally took her?

No. That wouldn’t be a punishment, would it? A punishment is something you don’t want. Sarah giggled to herself. Although, she was beginning to think there was nothing this man could do to her that she would consider a punishment.

She sighed into the soft pillows as her mind replayed how he removed his shirt. She licked her lips as her fingertips played with the lace at her collar.

She’s never seen a naked man before and watching his deft fingers undo one button at

a time was torture. Perhaps if she were more forward she would have leapt off the bed and ripped at his shirt. Sarah rolled onto her side, giggling into her hands.

She was always a romantic, but who knew she had such a salacious side to her?

Sarah heard the heavy footsteps of her husband approaching the door.

She quickly put herself back into the position he left her in. Whatever he had in store she did not want to miss out because she did not listen to him.

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Charles entered the room with a basin of water and a few small towels.

A wicked smile widened across his face. “Ah. I see you listened and did not move. Good girl.”

Sarah’s heart almost leaped out of her chest. Exhilaration raced through her veins. The anticipation of what was to come next was almost too much for her to bear.

Charles rounded the bed, placing the basin on the nightstand before he sat down next to her.

“Sit up, love. Let’s get you cleaned up.” His voice coaxed her.

Sarah scooted up and sat next to Charles at the head of the bed. He dipped a corner of a towel into the basin and brought it up to her cheek.

Locking eyes, he began to gently rub the dirt off of her cheeks.

Their closeness and his act of washing her face overwhelmed her senses with the intimacy of it all.

Instinct wanted her to drop her eyes out of propriety but his emerald gaze commanded the connection.

Charles’s eyes drifted to her cheek and narrowed. He moved the cloth just above where he was and Sarah winced.

“It seems you have scratched yourself. I thought you said you were unharmed?” Charles’s voice was low and menacing.

Sarah raised a hand to feel the scratch. “I wasn’t aware I was until you cleaned it. I’m fine, though, just a scratch.”

Charles’s eyes darkened. “Nothing is just anything when it comes to you. Do you understand?”

Sarah swallowed and shook her head up and down ever so slowly. “Yes.”

Charles dipped another corner into the basin and took her hand. He began to massage the warm, wet towel into her hands, removing the dirt.

“Do you remember the night we had dinner and we discussed the town?” His words were light and conversational. However, his line of questioning put Sarah on alert. Charles made no secret about his feelings for the town and she was fearful this turn in conversation would sideline the evening’s presumed activity. She only shook her head in acknowledgment.

“Do you remember when I said that the one thing you can absolutely count on is I will look out for you? If something happens to you it happens to me.” He inspected his work on her hand before picking up her other hand and repeating his actions.

Sarah licked her dry lips. “And I said it sounded like you were only concerned how my actions made you look.” Her voice cracked. Her chest rose with shuttered breaths. She truly had no idea where this was going.

Charles nodded solemnly. “The second thing you must know about me is that I do not blame you for your miscalculation.”

Sarah breathed in and held it for a second, waiting for a ‘however,’ to come. When she realized it wasn’t coming, she pushed out the breath, releasing the tension in her shoulders at the same time.

Charles noted the movement and smiled.

“I know I am a difficult man, Sarah, and I have my reasons. One day you will know all about my family and our secrets, but you must understand, no one, and I mean no one,” he stopped and brought his eyes to hers for emphasis, “has ever entered into my inner circle like you. Not only has no one entered my inner circle, but I have never allowed anyone to get as close to me or my sister as I have you. Not even Samuels.”

Sarah’s wince had both of them looking back down at her hand. Underneath the dirt were several scratches that irritated her when he rubbed over them with the cloth.

Charles’s jaw ticked. “And it is for that reason, that I said what I said. You interpreted it as I was worried about my reputation, and there is some truth to that. However, I take care of what is mine. We may not agree on the manner in which I do it, but I make it my life’s purpose to make sure people have what they need to survive.”

Charles placed the towel next to the basin on the side table and took her scratched hand in his.

He raised it to his lips and kissed each scratch tenderly. “You falling and hurting yourself is you falling and hurting me.” Even though his kisses were compassionate and soft they reached down into her soul and grabbed ahold of her heart.

“I’ve made the mistake of not looking after someone before and I will not make that mistake again. Do you understand?” He whispered against her hand.

Sarah once again could only shake her head. The tenderness in which he spoke, coupled with his gentle action stole her breath.

She felt revered, cared for... loved?

The thought sent chills up down her body. Was this love? Or was this the first time someone paid this much attention to her? Her mind and body were fighting with each other when all she wanted to do was to stay in the moment and be lost to his attention not her thoughts.

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His light kiss on her cheek brought her focus to the man in front of her.

“You can’t hurt yourself, darling, do you understand?”

Her eyes searched his face. He was being sincere and genuine. She shook her head.

“I need to hear you say it, Sarah. Say you will take better care of yourself in the future.”

Sarah cleared her throat. It was hard to get the words out over the lump that had formed in her throat.

“I promise to take better care of myself in the future.”

Charles shook his head. “Good. Now. Let’s take this dress off and let’s see where else you’re hurt.”

Charles stood and walked around to come up behind her on the bed. Kneeling on the bed he began to undo the buttons down her back. The cool summer air tickled her skin.

Her body was overrun with new and exciting emotions. Her mind tripped over itself trying to focus on just one sensation.

His fingers brushed against her back as he made his way down the row of buttons. When the last button was undone he pushed her top off her shoulders, allowing it to pool around her waist.

Charles leaned in closer to work on the buttons at her waist for her skirt. The heat from his body kissed her skin causing goosebumps to race down her body.

He leaned closer still. “Lay down on the bed, my love.” He whispered in her ear.

Sarah complied and laid down on the soft mattress. Instead of being relaxed, Sarah could feel her body stiffen under his gaze.

Seeing him naked from the waist up was fine for her. However, the idea of being naked in front of him was terrifying.

His eyes warmed as he took her body in. “Relax, darling. I’m going to take care of you.”

His words did little to release her tension. Charles pulled the gathered material around her waist and took it off. “Lift your hips, love.”

Sarah followed his instructions while he slipped her skirts off. She was afraid to look at him so she focused on the ceiling above her.

He lifted each of her legs to roll down her stockings and take off her muddy slippers.

Charles tsked. “These poor slippers are ruined.”

A trail of kisses followed the path of his hands up her calves. Sarah’s eyes fluttered shut and the embarrassment of being naked in front of him was no longer a concern of hers.

“You are too precious and beautiful to be harmed, Sarah.” His breath was warm against her thighs.

Sarah shifted underneath him. When his mouth landed on her center in between her thighs she jolted up to a sitting position.

“Charles!” she shouted.

Charles held her thighs in place, not allowing her to further scoot away from him.

“What are you doing down there?” Sarah tried to pry her legs from his hold.

“I’m making you feel better, my love.” His eyes were mischievous and wicked. “Now be a good girl and lie back.” His tone left no room for argument.

Sarah hesitated. Charles lifted an eye brow that had her lying back.

Charles’s warm tongue swirled around her center and Sarah’s back arched. Her eyes flew shut as colors bursted behind her eyelids.

Electricity rocketed through her body taking her consciousness to another level. She moved against his tongue and that now familiar ancient voice came back to her.

More! More! More!

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The chant in her head fell from her lips as her hips bucked against his mouth. Beads of sweat gathered on her brow as her eyes clenched and her fingers grasped the duvet cover.

He stoked her fire with every flick and lick of his tongue. She had no idea her body could move and feel like this.

The tension began to build within but this time it felt different than the other night. The tension began to tighten to the point where it almost began to hurt from her clenching all of her muscles.

Charles lightened his pressure. “Relax, love. Let your body go. Remember, I will always have you. I will always take care of you.”

Sarah looked down and froze. She saw a sight that was now forever seared into not only her memory but her very soul.

Charles was looking at her, his green eyes shining back with adoration, his dark hair was disheveled and sticking up, giving him that rakish charm she’d come to love. In that moment she knew no harm would ever come her way if she just gave into him, if she gave into the moment.

If she wanted control, she needed to let go.

She watched as he dipped his head back between her thighs and began kissing her. He spread her legs further and once again her back arched. She dug her heels into the mattress for purchase as the tension once again began its journey through her body.

Only this time, she breathed through it. His soft kisses turned into gentle tugs then sucking. She began to whimper with each change.

He whispered words of encouragement against her. “That’s it. Let your body go, Sarah. I’ve got you.”

Charles’s tongue swiped over her before he began sucking. Each suck pulled her closer to her peak.

The chanting began in her head again as her hips matched his rhythm.

“Yes, Sarah. Feel everything, my darling.”

Darling.

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut as a tidal wave of ecstasy washed over her. Her body was carried away in a rush of euphoria she had never experienced before. She felt as if she was soaring above the clouds and she never wanted to return to earth.

The wave of pleasure began to recede and her body, unfortunately, returned to the room in which they were in.

She opened her eyes to see Charles sitting next to her with a wet towel in his hand.

“The water has gone cold, but it’s the best I have. Just lay still.”

Sarah couldn’t move if the house was on fire. Her muscles were heavy and languid. Laying still was the only thing she could do now.

That is until a cold towel touched her between her thighs where the inferno began. The jump from searing hot flames, to cool water caused her to yelp and jump.

Charles chuckled. “Sorry, my love, you are quite responsive, which I love, but we’ve made quite a mess, so I want to clean you up.”

Sarah licked her dry lips and nodded.

Charles reached behind the basin and brought out a glass of water. “Here, drink this.”

Sarah sighed as the cool liquid replenished her dry throat. She handed him the glass back.

She had a question but she didn’t know how to ask him. Embarrassment colored her cheeks.

Charles dipped his chin. “What is it?”

Sarah grimaced. “It’s just… well, that didn’t feel much of a punishment.”

Charles’ laugh echoed across his room. “Will it make you feel better if I tell you it was a punishment for me?”

Sarah cocked her head in confusion.

He brushed a tendril of hair off of her face. “You have been through a lot these past few days. Once I saw the scratches on your skin, my focus became taking care of you.”

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“But... you’re so...” Her hands fluttered in front of her, trying to grasp the right word without offending him. “Dominant.” She flinched. She hoped that wasn’t an insult. Most men want to be considered that, right?

Charles licked his bottom lip as he continued to shake his head in agreement. He stood up and gathered her ruined dress. He bundled it into a ball and placed it by the door.

“That I am, and I never hid that about me. It’s no secret I like control, we’ve discussed this before. But to be dominant in an intimate situation,” he looked back to her and waved a finger between them, “means that you need to trust and take care of each other.”

He walked to his closet and pulled out a house coat. “You were hurt. It is my job to take care of you. So I took care of you.” He handed her the robe.

The realization that she was sitting there fully naked dawned her and she snatched the robe from Charles.

“No need to rush, darling. I’m enjoying the view.” Charles said with a wicked grin.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and further down, but she ignored it as she put the robe on and fastened it.

“Was everything all right with what I did?” Charles questioned.

Sarah looked up and met his eyes. He didn’t seem overly concerned, more like he

was on a fact-finding mission to understand her.

Perhaps they are not so different after all.

Sarah shook her head. “It was... the most wonderful thing I ever experienced. Just not a punishment.” She shrugged.

Charles helped her stand and took her in his arms. “You shouldn’t worry about that, my darling. I have not forgotten the danger you put you or my sister in. So I will take the, what is it,” Charles looked up and squinted his eyes in thought, “two days to come up with the most delectable punishment I can think of for you.”

Sarah’s breath rushed out of her as her eyes widened. She didn’t know if she should frightened or excited.

For once her mind and body agreed on something. She was excited.

CHAPTER 19

“I promise no harm will come your way.” Nora’s eyes were bright and eager.

Sarah raised her eyebrow as she speared a strawberry. She pointed the strawberry at her new sister. “I heard that one before.”

Nora bit her lip to stop the laughter that was no doubt bubbling within her. “I swear. It’s daylight out, the chances of you mis-stepping and falling down another hill is less this time.”

Sarah clucked her tongue before popping the fruit in her mouth.

“Please! And, I know exactly where this lake is. It’s just on the edge of the estate,

closer to the village.”

Sarah wiped her mouth with her napkin. “You said you knew of the pond as well.”

Nora chewed her lip. “Well, yes, I did say that, but I also said my memory of the grounds wasn’t the best.”

Sarah laughed. “So why should I trust your memory now?”

“What’s all the laughing about?” Charles stepped into the breakfast room with a bounce in his step.

Sarah lowered her eyes to hide the blush that blossomed on her cheeks. It was increasingly difficult to look at her husband after the times they spent together. Her body heated as memories of rough touches and skillful lips infiltrated her mind. She shifted in her seat, hoping to shake off the warmth that just coated her body.

She cleared her throat. “Uh, your sister was trying to take me back out into the wilderness and finish me off. She failed last night.”

Nora guffawed and put up a finger. “One, it’s not the wilderness, it’s your estate and you should get to know it. Two, it was your idea to take a walk last night.” She poked her own strawberry with a fork and pointed it at Sarah. “And three, I told you I wasn’t familiar going to the left out of the garden gate. I always went right, which is the direction we’d go today.” She said with a sniff before eating the strawberry.

“Going for a walk?” Charles asked as he buttered some bread.

“I would love to go for a picnic by the lake.” Nora offered.

Charles’s hand hesitated mid stroke before continuing to butter the bread. “Sounds

like a lovely idea. I think I would like to join you.”

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Of course, Charles picked the most inopportune time to become social. The tea came sputtering out of Sarah's mouth at his idea.

"What?" She asked as she blotted the tea dripping from her chin onto her dress.

One side of Charles's mouth tipped up into a sly smirk. "I simply said I would love to join you both on your picnic. The lake is a favorite of our family's and I think you should see it. A summer afternoon is the perfect time."

Nora bounced her chair. "Yes, please do come, Charles!" She turned to Sarah, joy pouring out of her. "It is a beautiful place, especially in the summer. There's a willow tree that hangs low that is just lovely to sit under and the reeds blow in the wind. It's so peaceful. It reminds me of the lake by my home. The one with the ducks, remember?"

Sarah was finding it difficult to not look at Charles. His admission surprised her and the ease in which he joined the conversation startled her.

Did their time together last night finally move things in the right direction between the two of them? It wasn't like their normal intimate interactions, but perhaps him seeing her in a state of distress unlocked something for him.

Regardless of the reasoning she was happy with the thought of spending an afternoon with both him and Nora.

She forced her eyes to drift to Nora. "It does sound lovely." Without conscious thought she found herself looking back to Charles. "And if it is a popular spot

amongst the family I would love to become familiar with it.”

Charles nodded once. “That settles it then. I’ll talk to Mrs. Bates and Samuels to get everything prepared for us.”

Sarah sat up. “Oh, please, let me do that, Charles. It is my responsibility, after all. I would be happy to organize it for us.”

Charles’s eyes darkened in appreciation and caused butterflies to swarm in Sarah’s stomach.

“This is going to be so much fun.” Nora squealed. “And with Charles we definitely won’t get lost!”

Sarah narrowed her eyes on Nora. “We better not.” She joked.

“You never know, Sarah, I might purposefully get us lost. I would love to see you go head to head with a rabbit.” Charles took a healthy bite, his smile wrapping around the piece of bread.

Sarah scowled. “Nora jumped, too. I only screamed because she did. How did you find out about that anyway?”

Nora dipped her head, sheepishly. “Charles and I spoke this morning about last night.”

Sarah shook her head. “Ah. I see. Is all well.?” Sarah looked at Nora. Charles was known to be stiflingly strict, she could only imagine the discipline he bestowed on her.

Nora shook her head. “Yes, we’re fine. I know how serious it is to be out after dark

around here and I should have made that more apparent to you since you're not aware."

Alarm rang through Sarah's body.

"Around here? What do you mean by that? My goodness, are there actual beasts out there that I need to worry about?"

Visions of man eating bears or giant mountain lions on the prowl infiltrated her brain. Which was ridiculous because those two specific animals lived nowhere near them. She shook her head. Maybe she did read too many books.

Charles grimaced. "No. You are perfectly safe here. There was some issues when Nora was young with some people in town and we had to be vigilant. But it has since been dealt with. Old habits die hard, I guess."

Sarah locked eyes with Charles's whose were now darkened, not with lust, but rage.

A shiver ran down her spine. Instinct told her the ominous way he said the issue was dealt with most likely had to do with the town's perception of Charles and vice versa.

Sarah eyes looked to Nora who was looking at her food, pushing around random pieces of fruit aimlessly. The mood had definitely shifted within the last few moments.

Sarah blew out a breath. "Well, I'm glad to hear that the only animal we'll need to concern ourselves with is a rabbit. Last night, our furry friend gave us quite the scare. It's about all I can take." She said with a laugh.

She watched as Charles's demeanor changed in front of her eyes. It was as if a switch was flipped. One moment he was cold and calculated and now he was looking at her

as if she invented the fork.

“Yes, you let me know if you see a rabbit. I’ll make sure to protect you both.”

Nora wrinkled her nose. “We can take care of ourselves, right, Sarah? It’s like you said.”

Sarah nodded, proud of her words getting through to the young girl.

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“What did you say?” Charles leaned forward in interest, resting his arms on the table.

Sarah waved her hand in front of her, dismissing his question. “It was nothing.”

Nora shook her head. “No. It was sage advice.” She turned to Charles. “She said that if believe in something it controls you. So, if you’re afraid of something, then it controls you, and nothing should control me but me.”

Charles smirked. “Is that so?”

Sarah licked her lips. Her mouth always seemed to run dry around her husband. “I did say that, yes.”

He tilted his head to the side. His eyes roamed over her face causing another blush to form on her cheeks. She took a deep breath to try and control her breathing.

“And who is control of you, Sarah? Are you afraid of anything?” Charles’s voice was low with a note of seduction she had hoped Nora did not pick up.

Sarah lifted her chin. “I control myself, Your Grace. And I am afraid of nothing.”

Charles brought his cup of tea up to his mouth. “Fascinating,” was all he said.

Something in his eyes told her she was very wrong to admit she was in control of herself. Especially since with one look, or one word, from her husband and she was a quivering mess of want and need.

Unfortunately for her, he knew it.

“I’ve seen this before.” Sarah’s voice whispered, in awe of the landscape in front of her. It was the lake from the painting she found in the studio. Her instinct was right. Charles’s mother had truly loved this place for she captured the serenity and beauty of it perfectly.

Charles looked down at her as Nora walked ahead of them to place a blanket underneath the hanging willow tree.

“You looked at my mother’s paintings.” It wasn’t a question.

Sarah shook her head slightly. “I’m sorry for snooping. I was just so curious and I couldn’t wait for answers.”

Charles smirked. “Yes, I found your impatience to be somewhat of a nuisance.”

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Do I get to list traits of yours that I find annoying? If so, we best go sit down, it will take a while.”

Charles’s smirk widened into a full blown smile and it nearly knocked Sarah over. His smile was dazzling. His green eyes lit up and there were slight crinkles at the corners of his eyes that made him look refined.

“I think we should sit down before I decide to punish you here and now for that tongue.” Charles whispered into her ear.

Goosebumps sprung up all over body at his words and the memories of what his tongue could do to her.

She took his arm as he helped her cross the last bit of grass to the blanket Nora was

now sitting on.

“I looked in the basket Mrs. Bates put out. She made some of my favorite sandwiches. Oh, and look,” she exclaimed as she pulled out little jars. “She put my favorite jelly in here with some extra biscuits!”

Sarah sat down next to Nora. Charles remained standing, looking out over the water.

She followed his gaze and once again took in her surroundings. “It truly is beautiful here. I can see why it’s your family’s favorite spot.”

Charles looked down at the ground and smiled. “Yes. My mother would bring me and Eli here when we were young to go swimming in the summer months.”

Nora sighed. “That sounds divine. I wish I could go swimming.” The young girl began to chew her bottom lip. Sarah noticed Nora would often do that when she was about to say something she didn’t know if she should say. Sarah had the same affliction. It was one more thing that drew her to the girl.

“What is it, Nora?” Sarah prodded.

Charles’s eyes darted to Nora. “What is it?”

Nora shrugged. “Nothing. I just often wonder if Mama was still here if she would have brought me here to go swimming when it was hot or would I have always ended up at her cousin’s home.”

Her eyes squinted as she looked up to her older brother who stood at the water’s edge looking back at her.

Charles sighed.

“I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that she would have brought you here. We all would have. Unfortunately, when she passed, I didn’t have the resources to give you the life you deserved.”

His voice had grown thick and Sarah could tell it took a toll on him to talk about his mother and the events after her death.

Nora brushed a wrinkle out of her skirt. “Would you have kept me if you had the resources?” She sucked on her bottom lip to stop it from quivering.

Sarah’s heart broke at the emotion in the young girl’s voice. She reached over and covered Nora’s hands with her own.

“Yes.” It was all Charles said, but it was enough for Nora.

A smile blossomed across her face.

“There now, enough of that.” Sarah said, hoping to dispel the weight of emotion that had settled over them. “Let’s eat. I’m famished from the walk.”

Charles sat down next to her as she passed out napkins and offered the sandwiches.

“Mmm, I forgot how much I love Mrs. Bate’s jellies. Sarah, you must remind me to ask her for some jars before I return to London. I have gone much too long without these in my life.”

Sarah smiled at Nora's dramatics. It was nice to sit with family and just be.

Family.

Was she truly starting to feel like this was her family now? She looked over at Charles who was making a silly face at his sister, causing a giggle to fall from Nora's lips.

A warm familiarity settled within her. Yes. This was her family now. For all that it was, the ups and downs, the confusion, the frustration, it all came together and gave her a sense of belonging. A feeling she has so desperately wanted to feel for a while.

A squeal of laughter rang out from beyond the lake.

"What is that?" Sarah questioned.

"Probably a wild boar getting ready to attack you." Charles teased.

Sarah furrowed her brows. "You won't be laughing if that is true."

Nora scrunched her face as she looked out over the water. "It looks like there are some boys fooling around by the village."

Sarah looked at the boys. "Are they on the estate?" She looked to Charles. "Is that a problem if they are?"

She was enjoying the mood the day and didn't want to disrupt it by bringing up town nonsense.

Charles leaned back on his elbows and stretched his long legs. He lifted a shoulder. "They're just beyond our border, but they know better. They won't cross it."

Sarah looked back over to the young boys. After watching them for several seconds she could tell they were being careful to stay a certain distance from the water. She wondered if there was some marker there that she couldn't see from where they sat that indicated the estate line.

"Eat." Charles nudged her with his foot. "I don't want to have to tell Mrs. Bates you ignored her food."

Sarah brought her attention back to her husband. He seems relaxed and not concerned with the boys at the perimeter. She picked up a sandwich and took a small bite.

She looked over to Nora who's gaze was lost to the horizon and the boys on the other side of the water. Instead of biting into her sandwich, she was nibbling on her bottom lip.

Sarah wanted to say something but decided against it. If Nora wanted to say something, she would say it.

CHAPTER 20

Sarah stretched out and let out a groan. She had never eaten so many little sandwiches before. Nora was right, Mrs. Bates made the most delicious food.

Everything about this day was perfect. The summer sun was high in the sky but underneath the branches of the willow tree the breeze off of the lake brought much needed cool air.

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Charles, Nora, and Sarah laid in compatible silence, digesting their food and listening to the sounds of nature around them.

Each of them were laying on a section of the wide spread blanket, remnants of their lunch littered in between them.

Sarah turned her head to look at Charles. He was on his back, with his hands resting underneath his head. His eyes were closed and he looked so relaxed. Sarah's heart squeezed at the sight. She couldn't remember a time, if ever, when he looked this peaceful.

He was always on edge, waiting for something to happen. To see him in such a serene state made her somewhat emotional.

Smiling to herself she turned her head and found a pair of wide green eyes staring back at her.

"Oh. Nora! You scared me." Sarah chuckled.

"I think I want to go pick some flowers over there." Nora said as she sat up and pointed across the lake.

Sarah joined her by sitting up. "I don't see why that would be a problem."

Nora leaned over and nodded her head towards her brother.

Sarah looked at her in confusion before she realized Nora's intention. "Oh. Right."

Sarah leaned over and poked Charles in the stomach.

“Ow!” Charles scowled as he rubbed his stomach, his eyes remaining closed. “Has anyone ever told you, you have pointy fingers?” Charles grumbled.

Sarah looked at her finger. “What an odd thing to say. Aren’t all fingers pointy?”

Nora snorted. Both women looked at their fingers then at each other as a fit of giggles overtook them.

Charles groaned. “Will you stop that noise? I was just about to drift off into a peaceful sleep.”

Sarah poked him again. “Your sister has a question for you.”

Charles opened one eye. “What is it?”

Sarah looked back to Nora, only to find her looking at her dress, that forsaken bottom lip in her mouth.

“I, um, was hoping I could pick some flowers over on the other side of the lake.” Nora mumbled.

Charles’s other eye opened and he rolled to his side.

“The other side of the lake, hmm?” He rose an eye brow in her direction.

Nora nodded. “Yes, because that side has full sun and the flowers I like are over there. Please? I promise I won’t go far. You’ll always be able to see me.” Nora pleaded.

Sarah couldn't see why it would be a problem for the girl to go, other than the fact the other side of the lake was the closest to town.

More information filled in the blanks in Sarah's head. Something happened in the town to cause such disdain between Charles and the townspeople. Sarah looked between Charles and Nora, perhaps it had to do with Nora or his mother's death.

Charles was very protective of her, but what could she have to do with the town? She was very young when she was sent to live with his mother's cousin.

Sarah sighed. The more she put pieces she fit together, the more pieces she found.

"Let her go, Charles." Sarah said and looked to Nora. "You promise to stay where we can see you?"

Nora shook her head profusely. "Oh, of course!"

Sarah looked back to Charles who was looking towards the town. The boys had since left and it was back to being a serene, quiet afternoon.

Charles dipped his head. "Don't go too far and don't stay out in the sun too long."

Nora squealed as she lunged towards her brother to give him a hug. "Thank you, Charles!" She reached out and hugged Sarah next. "I'm going to pick you the most beautiful bouquet of flowers. Just you wait!"

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Nora hopped up and began to run to the far side of the lake.

“You know, if you keep defying me the list of your punishments will just get longer.”
He countered.

Sarah’s head snapped to Charles who was now on his side, resting his head on his hand. He was the epitome of a carefree Duke and it looked good on him.

Sarah rolled her eyes. “I did not defy you. I only suggested you let her go.”

Charles shrugged and pursed his lips. “Not how I see it, darling.”

A wide smile broke free before Sarah could stop it. She shook her head and lifted a shoulder. “Promises, promises. I remember I was supposed to receive such discipline last night.”

Charles licked his lips. “What did I tell you last night? You can’t be punished if you are hurt. I was kissing you better.”

Sarah smirked. “I don’t recall being hurt there, Your Grace.”

Charles’s eyes flashed at her remark.

She couldn’t believe the words left her mouth, but he had a way of making her feel as if she could not only play the game but keep up. As the middle child, she always felt like she was one step behind Eleanor and in a different league than Beatrice.

With Charles, she felt like she fit. Well, she felt like this when he allowed her. The wall of control was still between them but after last night and now with this lunch, she felt as if they were taking his boundary down brick by brick.

Charles sat up and moved closer to Sarah. He looked around to see where Nora was before returning his hot gaze to hers.

Sarah sighed. She could stare into his green eyes forever, if he let her. She supposed most wouldn't consider him handsome in the classic sense. His nose was a bit crooked, his expressive eyebrows were thick and he had full, luscious lips that Sarah was currently staring at.

It didn't bother her that people wouldn't consider him striking by classic standards. He was breathtaking to her. Regardless, she was never much for following society's rules.

He placed an arm around her waist and pulled her towards him as he laid her back. Charles leaned over her, searching her eyes.

What she would give to get a glimpse into his mind. He looked at her as if he was cataloguing her every feature.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are?"

Sarah moved her head slowly to the left then the right, without breaking eye contact.

"I remember when I first saw the dusting of freckles on your face. I wanted to kiss every one of them." His words ignited a fire within her that the summer sun's rays couldn't match.

She arched into him, running her hands up his muscular arms and around to his back.

She loved how her hands couldn't touch around the breadth of his body. He towered over her, blocking out the sun. Instead of being scared by his size, she found security in it. Not only did she feel safe, but deliciously feminine.

Sarah looked up to him from underneath her lashes. "Is this part of the punishment, Your Grace? If so, I feel like you need too work on your disciplinarian measures."

Charles took a deep breath and settled in between her thighs. "You test my patience, Sarah. I thought I was getting an obedient wife when I took you."

Sarah licked her lips. "As memory serves me, you have yet to take me."

Cheers went off in Sarah's head. She continued to shock herself with the ease in which she spoke to him in regards to their intimacy. And by the look on Charles's face, she wasn't the only one surprised at her remark.

"I think you're the only one I have ever met to render me speechless." He said with a chuckle.

"Then perhaps I need to be praised instead of punished?" She furrowed her brow. "What would that look like, I wonder?"

A growl ripped from Charles's lips before they crashed against hers. Their tongues lapped each other while she pulled him closer to her. He remained balancing on his arms that now laid on either side of her head. She wanted him closer.

He broke the kiss. "Do you want me to crush you?"

"I would die happy if you did." She replied.

A laugh broke free. "That mouth. I don't know whether to punish or praise you."

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His eyes were shining with mirth and a calmness had settled around him. She wanted nothing more than to live in the ease of this moment forever.

“You could kiss me. That’ll quiet me.” She said with a smirk.

Charles tilted his head. “It will be my pleasure.”

Sarah sighed into his mouth as his lips caressed hers.

The peace of the moment was interrupted by the sound of running footsteps approaching them.

She turned her head to the side to break away from the kiss. A girl was running towards them.

“Nora!” She yelled.

Charles’s eyes flew open as he turned his head to see his sister running towards them with her hands in front of her face.

“Nora?” He called to her as he scrambled off of Sarah.

They both stood up. Sarah’s body hummed with satisfaction at seeing Charles needing to adjust himself as he stood.

Her mood quickly soured when she realized Nora looked like she was crying.

Sarah took off towards Nora. “Nora! What is it?”

Nora stumbled into Sarah’s arms. Tears marked her face as sobs wracked her body.

The sun had winked out behind her.

Charles.

He pulled Nora from Sarah’s arms. “What happened? Are you all right?”

The poor girl couldn’t get any words out. She just clung to her brother’s hulking frame as she cried.

Sarah heard snickering coming from the lake. She looked and she saw the boys from before standing in a circle looking in their direction. Derision and sneers colored their expressions

Sarah cocked her head at the sight. What happened to cause them to look at Nora that way?

Sarah turned her body back towards Charles and his sister when she was pushed out of the way by a meaty arm.

“You!” Charles shouted at the three young boys as he began to move towards them.

Sarah instantly threw her arm out and luckily caught his as he passed her.

“Stop! Charles, no!” She yelled.

She dug her heels into the ground, her efforts barely affecting her husband’s strength.

She looked at the boys frozen in their spots. “What are you doing?” She yelled to them. “Run!”

Still pulling on Charles to get him to stop Sarah looked over her shoulder to a horrified Nora. “Go back to the house, Nora. Now!”

Nora took off running.

Sarah struggled to keep a hold of her husband. “Charles!” She pulled as hard as she could. He turned.

“What?” He bellowed.

“Your sister needs you!” She pleaded.

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Charles thankfully stopped to look past Sarah to see his sister running towards the house. He glanced back at the boys who were slowly backing up.

“Not until I talk to those boys.” He grounded out.

At the sound of his voice the boys took off in a sprint.

“It isn’t worth chasing them, Charles.” Sarah said through breaths as she rubbed her arms , sore, from the exertion it took to slow her husband down.

Charles snarled. “They don’t deserve to run.”

Sarah sighed and risked touching her husband.

He recoiled at her touch and her heart sank. Pushing her own pride aside she held her hands behind her back. “I understand that, but right now your sister is more important than finding those boys.”

She reached out her hand. “Come. Let’s go back to the house and find out what happened. Perhaps it is just boys being boys or some sort of misunderstanding.”

Charles huffed and walked past her outstretched hand.

Sarah told herself the cold breeze came from the lake and not her husband, but she knew otherwise.

Charles bounded up the steps two at a time as Sarah gave up trying to match his speed.

“Your Grace, is everything all right?” Lizzie jumped out the way just before she became collateral damage in Charles’s rampage.

“I’m not sure, Lizzie. Did you see where Nora went?”

Lizzie nodded. “To her room, Your Grace.”

Sarah brushed past her and continued down the hall to where Charles was pounding on Nora’s door.

“Nora! Open up!” His hand jiggled the handle. “Now Nora or I will bust down the door!”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Charles.” Sarah tried to keep her voice even. She approached him much like the other times he lost his temper, with measured steps, and calculated words.

“She’s clearly upset, sometimes just leaving a girl to get her emotions out is helpful. I can’t tell you how many times my sisters and I-”

Charles put his hand up to stop Sarah. “Enough, Sarah. I don’t have time for silly stories of your life with your sisters.”

Sarah’s mouth snapped shut. She bit her cheek to stop her lip from quivering. She needed to remind herself she was made of sturdier things and a harsh word wouldn’t break her. After all, she knew Charles was not one for tender words when he was upset.

She straightened her back. "I was only saying--"

"Nora! Open this door immediately!" Charles's fist hit the door so hard Sarah worried it would break the wood.

She grimaced. She took a deep breath and slid herself between her husband and the door. "May I try?"

Charles huffed. Rage and impatience pumped off of him. There was a moment she was certain he would pick her up and physically move her out of his way, but instead he gestured to the door, giving her the go ahead to try.

Sarah faced the door and knocked gently. "Nora," her soothing voice called. "Nora, it's me, Sarah. Please open the door, we want to make sure you're all right."

Feet shuffled on the other side of the door before it opened up just a crack. Swollen green eyes peeked through the sliver of space.

"I'm fine." Nora hiccuped.

Sarah's lips thinned. "Nora. I can see you're not. Can we please come in?"

Nora hesitated before she opened the door a little wider. Sarah's shoulders released and she let go of the breath she was holding. She knew all the girl needed was a gentle touch.

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She looked over her shoulder to her sulking husband with a hint of triumph in her eyes.

“But I only want to speak to Charles.” Nora’s whispered words shocked Sarah.

Sarah’s head turned to Nora in surprise. “What?”

Charles moved past Sarah, who was frozen in shock, his arm opened the door wider to step through the doorway. Without turning, he shut the door in Sarah’s face.

She stood, staring at the door in confusion. Tears clouded her vision.

How can they shut me out like this? I’m the one that brought him back here. I’m the one that got her to open the door. Why doesn’t she wish to speak to me?

“Don’t take offense, Your Grace.”

Sarah turned to see Mrs. Bates standing at the top of the steps. Sarah tilted her head in indecision.

“They have a special bond and he’s been the only constant in her life. He has been more of father than brother to her.”

Sarah opened her mouth but closed it before the words came. Tears threatened to fall and if she spoke she was afraid they would release.

She dipped her head and made her way to room. She closed the door behind her and

made her way to the bed to sit on its edge.

Hurt, anger, and frustration fueled her thoughts.

She had given up her life to come here and for what? So that she wouldn't be known as the girl who was left at the altar? Was this any better? These back and forth encounters with her husband? The secrets? The avoidance?

Sarah's heart began to break. The worst part of it all was she was finally feeling like she belonged and in one dastardly moment she was hit with the realization that she still was an outsider.

She curled onto her bed, holding a pillow to her chest.

Was she always destined to be an outsider? Will she never have a special bond with anyone?

Her tears warmed her pillow as she fell asleep in the waning light.

Sarah awoke to someone in her room. Disorientated, she jolted upright.

"It's just me, Your Grace." Lizzie pushed open the curtains in the room, allowing the morning sun to peek through. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I wanted to make sure you were all right." Lizzie's voice was soft and soothing.

"We saw you all come in last night. Mrs. Bates said you had retired to your room but when you didn't call for me to help you get ready for bed I came up to check on you. You were asleep on top of the covers."

Lizzie shuffled her feet. "I hope you don't mind I covered you with a blanket."

Sarah looked down and touched the soft blanket that was laid over her with care. She rubbed her eyes to stop the tears that had gathered. She had cried enough last night, she refused to do it again.

“Thank you, Lizzie. I’m glad to have someone looking out for me.”

Sarah’s eyes drifted to the door. She couldn’t help but wonder if Nora was all right. If Charles was able to comfort her. Her heart ached at the missed chance to be a help, to be a part of their family.

She looked back to Lizzie and her maid’s soft features soothed her. She may not been fully immersed in Charles’s life yet but she had to give credit to those who did show up for her.

Lizzie and the rest of the staff have been nothing but supportive and welcoming. Small victories and all that.

Sarah smiled.

“His Grace would like to know if you’ll be joining him for breakfast.”

Sarah’s heart thudded. “His Grace... asked about me?”

Lizzie giggled. “Of course, Your Grace. You are his wife.”

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Sarah rubbed her temples. “I know that, it’s just after last night... you know what? Never mind. Help me get dressed, I’d love to have breakfast with him.”

Lizzie helped Sarah freshen up before she made her way to the breakfast room.

She didn’t know which Charles she would get after the way he dismissed her last night. She felt hopeful at the thought of him wanting to dine with her this morning, but it didn’t excuse his rude behavior.

Charles was standing by the window when she walked in. He turned and smiled when he saw her.

“Sarah.” Her name was a whisper on his tongue. “Good morning.” He walked to her and took her hands. “Did you sleep well?”

Sarah furrowed her brows. “I did.” She said slowly.

She may not have known what Charles to expect, but did not expect kind and considerate Charles to be one of the choices.

“Are you well?” She asked, cautiously.

Charles smile was tight lipped. “I’m sure you have some questions about last night.”

Sarah rolled her lips. “Is Nora all right?”

“Yes. Those boys said some things that upset her, I told her I’d take care of them.”

“Do you think that is wise? What did they say?” Sarah could only imagine her gigantic brute of a husband stalking three pubescent boys. It would most likely would not end well for the boys.

Charles shook her words off. “It doesn’t matter. I’m heading into town to talk with them.”

Sarah became alarmed. “Charles, what did they say that would warrant a visit from the Duke?”

“Good morning, all.” Nora breezed into the breakfast room completely carefree. It as if whatever happened last night no longer bothered her.

Sarah looked between the siblings. There was the one who was wronged acting like she didn’t have a care in the world and the other, the protector, who was ready to burn the village down to avenge her.

“Good morning, Nora. How are you today?” She tried to match Nora’s energy but was failing. This was all too much before her first cup of tea.

Nora looked over to Charles who was standing with his hands in his pockets.

“I’m well, thank you, Sarah.” Nora dipped her eyes and hesitated for a moment before she took a step towards Sarah, taking her hands.

“I want to apologize for last night. I was being,” her eyes went to Charles, “overemotional and I took some things those boys to heart. But I remembered what you said about not letting things control you. Charles reminded me of that.”

Sarah rose an eye brow and looked at Charles. “He did?”

“Mmhhh. He knows just what to say.” Sarah offered. “I’m sorry if I worried you. I’m really much better now.”

Sarah pursed her lips. The instincts she had honed as a middle sister were telling her they were specifically side-stepping the point of their discussion, but she would have to let it go for now. Just like everyone else in this house, she needed to let it rest. They’ll open up to her when they’re ready.

Hopefully, she’ll have the patience to last that long.

Sarah squeezed Nora’s hands. “Well, I’m glad your brother was able to help and that my words were of some comfort to you.”

“I was thinking. Would you like to go to the orangery with me this afternoon? After the lake, it’s my favorite place to go.” Nora’s eyes were pleading, she even stuck out her bottom lip.

Sarah couldn’t help but laugh at her impish face. “I would love to go. I assume you know how to get there and we won’t end up in some ditch?”

Nora shook her head. “I do. Plus, Charles asked William to accompany us just in case we get lost since he won’t be able to join us today.”

“Oh, how lovely. I’m sure William is looking forward to that.” Sarah laughed to herself. She was one hundred percent sure William was not looking forward to it. She made a mental note to visit the modiste later this week and bring William along as repayment for his service today.

Nora looked over to her brother. “Are you sure you can’t join us this afternoon, Charles?”

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Sarah looked back to her husband who was still standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at her in the most peculiar way.

He rocked back on his heels. "I'm sorry, Nora. I cannot. I have a lot to prepare for." He pulled out his pocket watch. "In fact, I'm running late already. I hope you both have a lovely afternoon. I'll be back for dinner."

He began to walk out of the room when he stopped right in front of Sarah and Nora. His eyes found Sarah's. "Would you believe we've been married ten days already? We should celebrate tonight."

Sarah's eyes rounded as her heart dropped into her stomach. He was right. If you counted the day they were married, tonight would be ten days. She licked her lips as she swallowed.

"How lovely! I think anyone who sticks around you for ten days should be celebrated!" Nora teased.

Charles didn't break eye contact with the now paralyzed Sarah. He winked before he leaned down and captured her lips in a chaste kiss. His lips grazed her ear as he whispered, "I have a lot planned for this evening. Don't tire yourself out this afternoon. Do you understand?"

Sarah didn't move. He pulled back to look into her eyes. She nodded ever so lightly and he stood up straight.

He looked over to his sister and pointed at her. "I liked you better when you were

shy. I think someone's been a bad influence on you." Charles's voice was full of jest, but Sarah heard the message.

Nora laughed him off. "She's been the best influence on both of us and you know it."

Charles's eyes returned to Sarah's and flashed. "Oh, I am very well aware of her influence on me."

Was Sarah still standing? She lost feeling to her legs moments ago. She was either still up in her room and this was all a dream or she was floating and no one noticed her feet weren't on the ground.

This man and his words.

"Sarah?" Nora touched her arm.

Sarah blinked and her vision cleared. "What? What were you saying?"

"Are you all right? You were staring. Charles said good bye and you didn't even move. Have you eaten yet?" Nora moved Sarah over to the table and helped her into her chair.

Sarah shook her head. "No, I, uh, haven't eaten anything yet."

Nora picked up a piece of bread and began to butter it. "Here, eat this."

Sarah took the offered bread and took a bite. It tasted like dust on her tongue. She wasn't lightheaded because of lack of sustenance. She was weary because today was ten days and every encounter with her husband was leading up to tonight.

She was excited, she was terrified, she was still chewing the bread. Sarah choked

down the lump of bread that was congealing in her mouth. After washing it down with some tea she looked to Nora.

“I’m much better, thank you.”

Nora gave Sarah a once-over before she sat in her own chair. “Wonderful. We can go to the orangery after breakfast that way we don’t have to rush back for dinner. Congratulations on ten days, by the way. Ten days married to my brother, who would have thought?”

Nervous laughter bubbled out of Sarah. “Certainly not me.”

Nora plopped a sugar cube into her teacup. “I wonder what he has in store for tonight? He seemed really excited for dinner.”

Sarah tilted her head in confusion. “All he said was that he’d be back for dinner.”

“I know.” Nora deadpanned. “This is Charles we’re talking about. The fact that he brought it up at all means he’s excited for it.”

Sarah laughed at Nora’s comment on Charles’s serious persona. However, her laughs soon dissipated into nervous energy. How would she get through the day knowing that each minute that ticked by was one minute closer to whatever he had planned for her?

Excitement mixed with nervousness as she finished her breakfast.

CHAPTER 22

“And then the orange went crashing into the table and knocked over the plants.” Nora’s giggle bounced off the wall.

Charles, who was sitting across from Sarah looked at his sister with interest. How could he possibly sit there looking so comfortable while she sat in her chair practically on fire?

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She had spent the day trying to focus on anything other than what was going to happen tonight, but she failed every single time. Even when William declared he could juggle anything and picked up three oranges which led him to tripping over a bucket sending oranges everywhere.

She still thought of Charles.

Even when her and Nora walked around smelling the exotic plants she had never heard of or seen before, her thoughts were on Charles.

And here he was, hanging on his sister's every word like he's not about to change Sarah's life forever.

She grimaced. If he's going to act like he hasn't a care in the world, then so shall she. She's in control of herself, right?

Sarah nodded to herself and sat up in her chair.

"It was quite the sight, poor William." She chuckled. "I do wish you would have been able to join us Charles. William said you are well versed in the origins of the plants and flowers in there. Other than the orange trees and some other fruit trees there was a lot I have never seen before."

She speared a potato on her fork and breathed out. See? She can hold a normal conversation just like him.

Charles dipped his head. "My apologies, my darling. As you know I have a busy

night ahead of me and I wanted to make sure I was prepared.”

Sarah’s fork hovered in front of her open mouth. All sense left her body at the word “darling,” and by the smirk on his face, he knew it.

She slowly put the potato in her mouth and reminded herself how to chew.

And for the love of God, don’t choke.

Nora wrinkled her nose. “What business do you have late at night?”

The potato bobbed in Sarah’s throat causing her to cough.

Charles rose an eye brow at Sarah’s misfortune. “Are you all right?”

Sarah took a healthy sip of water. “Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I’m fine. Just swallowed it the wrong way.”

“Hmm. We may have to work on that.” Charles said with a devilish grin.

Sarah’s eyes widened. She didn’t know why, but the way he said that inferred something indecent and her mouth went dry. She took another pull of water.

Charles turned his attention back to his sister. “Just some business I had put off since the wedding. It’s time I get back to work and do my due diligence by the duchy.”

How was he able to say those coded words with such coolness? To his sister, he sounded like any Duke getting back to taking care of his duchy after focusing on his new marriage.

But to Sarah, he was talking about the last rule of their marriage. Consummation and

an heir.

Her head swam with the innuendoes and casualness of his words. She shifted in her chair as she concentrated on putting a piece of meat onto her fork. She felt like a child moving ever so slowly with calculated movements to be able to poke the meat through with her fork.

After her second shaky attempt, she put the fork down and folded her hands in her lap.

“Are you sure you’re all right, Sarah? You haven’t touched your meat.” Once again, that cheeky grin appeared on his face. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to kiss it or slap it off of him.

How was he so collected when she was ready to jump up and run away? She bit her bottom lip. Or perhaps she wanted to jump up and run to him?

Sarah took a deep, cleansing breath and looked at her husband. He was sitting across from her, his dark hair fell to just above his collar while his emerald eyes danced with mischief. He sat comfortably in his chair, leaning back, his long legs stretched out that she knew if she were to extend her leg she most likely would hit one of his.

She leveled a look at her husband. “The meat is fine. I’m just worn out from the busy day we had. Perhaps I shall retire so you can get to your work.” She challenged.

He seemed to consider her words. “Perhaps you should.” He looked down at his plate then up to his sister. “I think I am done as well. I should get to work, there is lots to do.”

Nora sat, her eyes bouncing between the both of them. “You both barely touched your dinners. I thought we were celebrating your marriage?”

Charles smirked. “We will need to continue the celebration later.”

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Sarah's knees almost buckled as she stood.

Nora turned to her. "All right. If you say so. I hope you both have a good night's rest."

Sarah quickly turned to walk out the door. She needed to remove herself before she ended up embarrassing herself in front of Nora.

She heard Charles mumble something to his sister as she exited the room and made her way to the steps.

A large hand grabbed around her waist and halted her on the last step.

"Where do you think you're going?" His lips grazing her ear.

She wanted to squeal in delight, but she tampered it down. She looked over her shoulder and faked a yawn. "I told you, Your Grace. I'm awfully tired."

His eyes darkened. "Are you telling me you didn't do what I told you to do?"

She turned in his arms, wrapping her own around his neck. On this step she was almost looking directly into his eyes. Almost.

"And what if I am?" She challenged.

A devilish grin spread across his face as he let out a little growl that caused Sarah to yelp and run down the hallway.

She could hear his heavy footsteps following behind her. Just as her hand landed on her room's handle her body was snatched up and the world turned upside down.

"You're fast, but I'm faster." Charles said with a smack on her bottom.

He crossed the hall and opened the door to his room. He kicked the door close with his foot before tossing her onto the bed.

"Now. About that last rule of mine."

Whatever he did in a past life time to get this woman to be his wife he was eternally grateful for. Never in a million years did he think he would find someone who saw past his size and particular tastes and stuck around.

He was sure after their first foray into the intimate side of their marriage she would have begged to run back to her family.

But not Sarah. She met him at every turn, wanting to learn more, needing to know more about what her body could do. It was not only refreshing to see a woman be curious about pleasure, but it was intoxicating. The more responsive her body was to his choices, the more he wanted to play.

Currently, she was looking up at him from his bed. Her legs spread wide, her hair falling out of the perfectly positioned pins, her face flush with excitement. Instinct was roaring inside of him to finally take her.

But his discipline had other plans.

He licked his lips. "As you know, we are at ten days."

Sarah sat up onto her knees and leaned forward.

My God, she is crawling to me.

Charles had never seen a more beautiful sight. He tried to control his racing heart as he shook his head in disbelief. Where was this vixen his entire life? She had the etiquette and polite upbringing that was expected of her station but this salacious side of her called to his baser instincts.

He loosened his cravat with shaky hands. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to clear his head. He was usually the one causing shaking hands, not the other way around.

“Charles?” Sarah purred.

He opened his eyes to see her kneeling in front of him, her delicate hands on his cravat. She rose up onto her knees as she pulled him down. Her mouth covered his and she pushed her tongue in between his lips.

Her body was fire in his arms. His large hands expanded her back, which is exactly what he wanted. He wanted to consume this woman, be the only one she feels. He wanted her to feel him everywhere. She did not exist without him.

Her moans made his hardening length painful. He needed to be inside of her and soon.

He pulled away from the kiss, leaving them both panting. “I see you’re ready for this.”

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She shook her head as she looked up at him. She reached down to her belt and took it off. She turned around on the bed and her slender arms gathered her hair to hold it off of her neck. She looked over her shoulder at him and nodded.

His fingers pulled at each button down her back, his control unraveled with each undone button. His mouth ran dry as the falling material of her dress revealed more of her milky white skin. He let his finger trail down her spine and his body hummed at her quivering response.

Once the dress was completely unbuttoned he helped her out of it. He rolled down her stockings and removed her slippers, letting them hit the floor next to the bed.

She turned on the bed and sat, completely naked in front of him. She wasn't trying to hide her body this time. She looked confident, ready and it couldn't be more of a turn on for him.

He took off his shirt and watched her eyes drink him in. He reached down to his trousers and pulled them off, shucking his boots along with them.

Charles stood to his full height in front of her, gripping his painfully hard cock in his hand.

Her eyes widened as her tongue darted out to swipe her bottom lip.

“I’ve lost track of all the wrongs you’ve committed these past few days, darling.”

Sarah tilted her head, her blonde hair catching the moonlight. She stuck out her

bottom lip. “Really? I don’t think I was anything less than the perfect, obedient wife.”

Charles hissed as his hand gripped his cock tighter. He clucked his tongue. “And now we’re lying? That does not sound like an obedient wife.”

Her giggle reached through his chest and grabbed a hold of his heart. What was this woman doing to him? If he wasn’t careful he would end up giving away more than he bargained for.

Sarah breathing shuttered as she looked up at her husband. Her eyes were focused on his hand that was slowly gliding up and down his length. The outside world seemed to disappear around her. There were no voices in her head, no worries consuming her mind, no mysteries to solve. Here, in this moment, it was only him and her.

A familiar feeling had settled deep within her. Her body relaxed against his bed as it dipped under his weight as he climbed over her.

“I won’t promise to go gentle, Sarah.” His voice rumbled.

“I’m not scared.” Her voice was steady and even. She didn’t know whether to be more proud of the fact that she sounded ready or that she truly was ready. She wanted this, she needed this. But more importantly, she needed him. She needed this one last connection to make her his, unequivocally. There would be no denying her now.

They would be one, forever, and ever, amen.

Her heart swelled at the thought. She belonged here, she could feel it deep in her bones. She looked up into his hungry eyes and knew that on some level he knew it, too. He would just take more convincing.

She smiled to herself.

“What are you smiling at?” He asked.

Sarah shook her head. “Nothing. Everything. You, me, us. I’m ready.”

Charles nodded. “Let me be the judge of that.”

He shifted his weight so his body laid next to hers. He reached below and cupped her sex. “Mmm, I love how responsive you are to me. So very wet.”

Charles licked his lips then began to leave hot open-mouthed kisses down her body. He ended his journey at the apex between her thighs.

She pushed her pelvis towards him. She knew what she wanted and where she wanted him.

He tsked. “Such a greedy girl, aren’t we?”

Sarah whimpered in distress. Her legs clenched around him, hoping to bring the friction she so desperately needed.

“Please, Charles. I need you. Please touch me.” She pleaded.

Charles’s mouth hummed against her causing her back to arch in pleasure. “I like it when you beg.”

His tongue darted out and licked her center pulling moan from her lips. He began to swirl, flick and lick until her legs were shaking against his head.

“It’s too much.” She tried scooting away but he clamped his arms down on her weak legs.

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“I thought I told you before, I’m here to take care of you. Now relax and let me do my job.” His words came out in between little tugs and swirls of his tongue.

Her hips began to move in the rhythm of pleasure against his mouth.

“There’s my girl.” He whispered against her. “Let your body go. I want you ready for me.”

“Charles.” She panted. “Charles.” His name was the only conscious thought she had. It was her lifeline carrying her through the waves of euphoria her body was traveling on.

“Yes, Charles, more!”

His tongue began to move back and forth faster over her center. Her hips were rising and falling against him. She was almost there.

She reached down between her legs and positioned his head just so, and she felt the tension sky rocket within her. With one final flick he sent her over her edge with a scream of his name.

Her legs flopped to either side of him as he sat on his haunches and looked at his work.

“You look quite proud of yourself.” Even her voice sounded weak and spent.

Charles beamed. “I am. But I’m just getting started. Now for the really fun part.”

Sarah's body tensed for a moment when she realized what was about to happen. But as soon as her eyes landed on his, her body relaxed.

She knew it would hurt, was told it would, but there was something about Charles that made her believe that no matter what, he truly meant it when he said he would take care of her.

He positioned himself in between her legs as he balanced on his forearms on either side of her head.

"Eyes on me, darling." He demanded.

Her eyes locked in on his as he plunged into her.

She yelped and grabbed a hold of him.

"Relax, love. That was the hardest part."

His arms began to shake around her.

"You can lay on top of me if your arms hurt." She offered.

Charles looked confused, before he let a smile free. "I take offense to your insinuating I have weak arms. I'm shaking because I usually don't go slow, but I have this need not to cause you too much pain."

He looked confused at his own admission.

Sarah reached up and took his head in her hands. "I thought I told you I'm made of sturdier stuff. Don't handle me with kid gloves, Charles. Make me yours the only way you know how."

Charles's eyes flashed with intensity that had Sarah second guessing her words. But as soon as his hips began to move the pain started to dissipate.

With each thrust she felt the energy begin to gather and build deep within her core.

His eyes were still focused on her as he raised himself up to a kneeling position, never once letting his thrusting stop. He placed her legs onto his shoulders as his hips pushed harder.

With this position he was hitting a spot Sarah never knew existed. She cried out, but not from pain, but in ecstasy.

“Yes, Sarah. Scream my name.”

“Charles!” His name tumbled from her lips as her hands gripped the duvet beneath them.

Sweat began to form across her brow. Her heart was racing, trying to keep up with the speed at which he was launching her towards her finale. She reached above her and placed one hand on the headboard, locking her in between it and her husband. The pushback caused both of them to moan in pleasure.

“You take me so well, darling.” He whispered between thrusts.

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Sarah preened under his praise. She wanted to please him, no, she needed to please him.

He took a hold of her legs and held them out, spreading her wider.

Sarah cried out as her pleasure was nearing her peak. Once again her body and mind began moving in sync. The chanting of his name matching the movement of her hips against his.

Charles's words turned into moans and grunts as his face tightened. "So... close... Sarah."

"Yes, Charles!" She tightened around him. Her eyes fluttered shut just as stars burst behind her eye lids.

She heard one final grunt and felt one more thrust before a significant weight fell on top of her.

Her eyes popped open and her arms came up to encircle his back. She intended to tell him he was too much but as her body came back down from the inexplicable high she found she actually liked his weight on top of her.

She felt safe underneath him.

His body was slick with sweat and still, she didn't ask him to move.

After a few moments, he rolled off of her and took her chin in his hand.

“Are you all right?”

Sarah shook her head. “Perfect.” She sighed.

He pulled a blanket that was at the foot of the bed and covered them with it. He gathered her into his arms, her head rested on chest.

They laid there as their breathing returned to normal. Sarah couldn’t remember a time when she felt more content in her life. She looked up and found Charles was already looking at her.

She made a face and hesitated.

“What?” He asked.

She rolled her lips. “It’s just, again, it didn’t feel like a punishment.”

His eyes widened as his arms went for her sides to tickle her. She yelped at the attack and their laughter filled the room.

Yes. She definitely felt like she finally found where she belonged and it was with him.

CHAPTER 23

Sarah rolled to her side and right into a brick wall. No. Not a wall, a body.

She opened her bleary eyes and blinked until her vision cleared of sleep.

Charles.

Her husband was sleeping with one arm underneath his head, his muscles flexing in his sleep. A blush bloomed across Sarah's face. It wasn't scandalous for a wife to see her husband in such an intimate state, but she felt scandalized all the same.

She lifted a finger to his chest and lightly traced random designs across his stomach and chest, playing with the chest hair that coated his wide chest.

A slow smile formed on the Duke's face. "Haven't you ever heard waking the beast? It usually doesn't end well for the instigator."

His sleepy voice was soft and gruff which awakened desire within her. Would she ever get enough of this man? Hopefully not.

"Who's to say that wasn't my intention?" She teased.

For a man who had just woken up, his reflexes were quick and surprised Sarah. One moment she's tracing his muscles, the next she's lying underneath him.

"Be careful what you wish for, my darling. Nothing would stop me from enjoying my wife, not even sleep." He ran his nose up the side of her neck and nipped her ear.

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Sarah giggled. She never felt so content in all of her life. She reached up to play with the hair that flopped over his forehead before cradling his face in her hands.

She pulled him down to her. Their kiss was sweet and sensual and everything Sarah longed for from her husband.

Charles leaned into her deepening the kiss when there was a knock on the door.

“What is it?” Charles growled.

Sarah had to cover her mouth with her hand to stop from laughing.

“Your Grace? Something has come up that needs your attention.” Samuels voice traveled through the door.

Charles looked out the window, dawn was just breaking. “Can’t it wait?” Charles groaned.

“I’m sorry for the interruption, Your Grace, but you had told me to find you at once when this news arrived.”

Charles sighed.

“What is it?” Sarah asked.

Her husband’s weight shifted as he rolled off of her. “Nothing too concerning. Just a local merchant causing some grief. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Charles stood from the bed and walked to a chair where he left his shirt.

While Sarah immediately missed the comfort of his body next to hers, she couldn't deny the view of a naked Charles standing in front of her.

Her eyes dipped as she bit her bottom lip.

"What's that look for wife?" Charles laughed.

Sarah shook her head. "Nothing."

Charles feigned shock as he looked down at himself. "I assure you, madame, this," he said gesturing to himself, "is not nothing. I'm sure I've proven that to you last night. Although, if you need a reminder, I'll happily oblige."

Sarah licked her lips. "I thought you had more pressing matters to attend to?"

Charles looked at the door and let his shoulders sag. "Yes, unfortunately for me, my happiness has to come after those of the duchy."

As he prepared for the day, Sarah contemplated his words. She knew that he went outside of the duchy for goods and services, which would directly contradict the happiness of the duchy. Perhaps he considered what they talked about dinner last week and he was now going to use his own people for services.

Sarah sat up in the bed. "This merchant contract that you need to take care of. Is it with someone from the duchy?"

Charles scoffed. "Heavens no." Charles sat on a bench to slip on his boot. "Well, the merchant in question is from the village. But I'm not using him, which is his problem. I've explained to him multiple times why it's not an issue. He does this every now

and then, it's nothing I can't handle."

Sarah worried her lip. She looked over to the empty space next to her and laid her hand over it. The mattress still held her husband's imprint and warmth. She knew by asking her next question, she may not see that imprint or feel that warmth again, but still, her constitution demanded wrongs to be righted.

"Why can't you use him?" Sarah's voice was steadier than she expected. Which made pleased her, if she was going to potentially ruin the afterglow of their coupling, she might as well go all in.

Charles held his other boot in his hand and leveled a look at her. "Sarah. We've talked about this. You don't know those people like I do. I trust you to look after the house. Trust me to look after the duchy."

He held her gaze for a moment longer before he continued with his boots.

Sarah nodded and rested against the headboard. An awkward silence hung between them and she chastised herself for bringing the question up.

Thankfully, Charles broke the tension. "What plans do you have today?"

"I think I owe William a trip to the modiste."

"William?"

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Sarah nodded. “Yes. It seems our footman and Miss Cordell, the modiste, have an interest in each other. I owe him a favor after that disaster of an outing at the orangery yesterday.”

Charles chuckled. “I must say, that boy has been in this household for years and I never knew his name or anything about him. Then you come along and I’m realizing how many people I actually have in my employ.” He sounded surprised at his own admission.

Sarah furrowed her eyebrows before she laughed at the ridiculousness of his statement. “Did you really not pay attention to those around you? Did you just think food and horses appeared before you when you wanted them?”

Charles shrugged nonchalantly. “Not necessarily. I just never thought about it.”

Sarah was taken aback by the candor in which Charles spoke. He states he takes care of his own, yet he’s not aware of the presence of those he most definitely should be aware of.

It was just one more contradiction that made up her husband.

“Anyway, I think I’ll invite Nora along with us. She complimented the ribbons I bought from Miss Cordell, I reckon she will appreciate a trip to the modiste. Plus, she really liked what I did with your study. She said she wanted to compliment Miss Cordell for her help in it.” Sarah stated with a wicked grin on her face.

Her eyes swept up to her husband who was no longer smiling.

“You will not take Nora with you.” He snarled.

Sarah’s eyes widened at the sudden change in her husband’s demeanor. “But she wanted-”

Charles abruptly stood and flung his jacket across his shoulders and slipped it on. “My word is final, Sarah. You’re in charge of the house, but I’m in charge of Nora. She is not to step foot inside the town. Do you understand?”

Hurt, pride and confusion all mixed in Sarah’s veins. “Why?”

“My word is final, I do not need an explanation.” Charles scowled.

Pride won out. Sarah threw the blankets off of the bed and jumped up. She did not care she was naked in front of her husband. Fire and rage settled over her, warming her body against the cool morning air.

“I am not a child and you do not have ownership over me.” She countered.

Charles took a step towards her. “I think our wedding vows beg to differ.”

Sarah was exasperated and threw her hands in the air. “If you would just tell me what happened between you and the townspeople and what it has to do with Nora perhaps I wouldn’t keep asking about this!”

She was at her wit’s end with this man. Every time she thought she was making headway with him, his stubbornness and pride had to get in the way.

Charles shook his head once and turned to go. “I will not entertain this conversation any more. I’ve said what I’ve said, if you can’t handle this arrangement, then perhaps you need to make other arrangements.”

“What?” Her voice squeaked. Her heart thudded in her chest. “What do you mean?” She reached out to grab his arm but he had already left the room.

She raced to the door and watched him walk down the hallway. “Charles!” She called out to him.

Sarah turned back into the room and looked frantically for something to cover herself with. She grabbed the throw he had used to cover them with before they drifted off to sleep and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Peeking out into the hallway she looked both ways before she scurried over to her room. She rushed into her closet to put on the first dress she could find. It was a simple frock, it didn’t have many buttons, just a few at her collar, and a belt. She put it on, not even looking at herself in the mirror to fix her hair.

She ran out of her room and down the stairs.

“Good morning, Sarah!” A cheery Nora greeted her at the bottom of the steps. “Oh, my! Sarah! Are you all right? You’re a mess!”

Sarah didn’t have time to take any offense, plus, the girl was right, she could only imagine how she looked.

She took Nora by the shoulders. “Charles. Where is Charles?”

Nora eye’s roamed Sarah’s face with worry. “Sarah, what is wrong? Are you well?”

Sarah blew out a breath in frustration. “Charles, Nora! Where is Charles?”

“He stepped out for the morning, Your Grace. Is there something I can help with?”

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Sarah turned to see Samuels standing nearby with Mrs. Bates at his side. Both of them looked apprehensive and concerned.

Sarah let her head fall back as she let out a distressed scream. She closed her eyes to collect herself.

When she opened them she now saw Lizzie had joined Samuels, Mrs. Bates, and Nora.

Perfect. All we need is William here and word will spread to everyone on the estate that I am losing my mind.

“Is everything all right? I heard a scream from outside.” An out of breath William came barreling into the hallway.

Perfect.

Sarah rubbed her eyes. “Yes, everything is fine. I was just letting out frustration.” She looked to the small crowd curiously watching her. “I’m sorry for my state. It’s been an eventful morning.”

Mrs. Bates carefully stepped away from the group. “Come, Your Grace. Let’s restart the day, shall we? Lizzies will help you get ready, won’t you Lizzie?” She looked back to Lizzie who looked unsure if she could handle the obviously fragile Sarah.

“And while you two do that, Samuels and I will make sure breakfast is ready for you.”

Instead of being offended that she was being treated like a child Sarah just sighed and allowed the others to step in and take care of her.

“Very well,” she conceded.

Lizzie rushed forward and took Sarah’s arm. “Don’t worry, Your Grace. Once we wash your face and right your dress you’ll feel like a brand new woman.”

Sarah let Lizzie guide her back up to her room. Once they reached the top of the steps she heard someone pounding at the front door.

She turned towards the noise. “I wonder who that is.”

“Let Samuels worry about that, Your Grace. Come, let’s take care of you.” Lizzie ushered her into the room and closed the door behind them.

Lizzie was right, with a freshly pressed dress, her face washed and her hair done, Sarah did feel like a brand new woman. The tension that had clouded her mind had dissipated and she was left only mildly annoyed.

Regardless of how she currently felt, she knew that she would have to find a way once and for all to corner that man and get the truth of his relationship with the town out in the open.

She’s been trying to put her foot down for over a week, now it was time to assert herself. And if he refused to speak, well, then, perhaps she should find other accommodations.

Sarah’s heart squeezed in her chest. Heavens, she didn’t want to even think about that. They both said things they didn’t mean to say. Sarah stopped herself in front of the parlor. Well, she meant what she said this morning, she just hoped Charles didn’t

mean what he said.

She heard voices coming from the drawing room as she turned the handle.

Sarah pushed the door open just in time to see Nora jump into someone's arms.

A man's arms.

Not just any man, Eli's arms.

"Oh, Eli! I'm so glad to see you! Where have you been?" Nora squealed.

"Yes, Eli. Where have you been?" Sarah didn't realize she voiced her question until two sets of green eyes turned towards her.

All three siblings had the same green eyes. Sarah sighed.

Of course they did.

Sarah refused to drop her eyes. She held her gaze with Eli until he broke away and looked down at Nora..

A rakish smile shone on his face. Sarah squeezed her hands into tight little fists. What would she give to smack that smile off of his face.

"Nora, my love, could you give me and Sarah a moment alone?" Eli's casual tone irked Sarah for reasons unknown.

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Nora furrowed her eyebrows as she looked back to Sarah. “I suppose so. I’ll be in the library if you need me.”

Nora entangled herself from her brother and left the drawing room.

Sarah and Eli stood facing each other as if they were in a duel. Neither one of them took their eyes off of each other as Nora left, nor did they move after she closed the door.

Sarah lifted an eye brow in a challenge.

Eli pursed his lips and rocked back on his heels. “I owe you an apology.”

Sarah cocked her head to the side. After dealing with his brother, a man who rarely offered up his thoughts so freely, Sarah was not expecting such a forward opening from Eli.

“For what?” She mused as she walked over to a tea cart Mrs. Bates must have left in here when Eli arrived.

Eli pushed out a breath. “You have been around my brother for too long.”

Sarah scowled. “And whose fault would that be?” Sarah knew she was being obtuse and difficult, but she was done with the Brandon brothers and their ways. If the one she really wanted to rage at wasn’t here, his younger brother would do. Besides, Eli wasn’t innocent in all of this.

“I deserve that.” Eli admitted. “You must understand, Sarah, you did not want to marry me.”

Sarah dropped a sugar cube in her tea. “I did not want to marry your brother and yet here I am.”

Eli considered her words. “Why did you then?”

Sarah slammed the tea cup down onto its saucer on the cart. “You left me no choice! You humiliated me in front of the ton. Everyone we knew was at that church and you left me there. If you didn’t want to marry me why did you court me? Why did you ask me? Why did you let me walk down that aisle?”

Sarah’s throat tightened and tears prickled the corners of her eyes. Her pride was trying to stave off the flow of tears but after keeping all of this locked up inside of her for so long her emotions were getting the best of her.

Eli winced. “You’re right. I should have, but I was forced to find a wife.”

Sarah guffawed. “By whom?”

Eli stared at her. “Your husband.” Eli stated as he cocked his head to the side.

Sarah turned to Eli. “I don’t understand.”

Eli sighed and walked over to where Sarah stood by the tea cart. He picked up a tea towel and wiped up the tea that had spilled out of her cup when she slammed it on the cart.

“It is no secret that I am a man of many... let’s say, interests, yet being married was never one of them.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Yes. I was aware of your rakish ways, and yet I still said yes to you. What does this have to do with Charles?”

Eli handed Sarah her tea and gestured to the sofa in the drawing room. They both sat down next to each other.

“Charles was getting tired of my philandering ways so he demanded I get married and settle down or he would cut me off. So, I took the season to find the amiable girl I could to marry so I could get him off my back and still live the way I wanted to.”

Sarah’s cheeks heated in embarrassment. Hearing that she was simply at the right place at the right time cut her. Once again, she was reminded that she simply just existed for other’s benefits, and not because they want her.

Realization dawned on her. That’s exactly how Charles has been treating her. When he wants to scratch an itch, he comes to her, but when she needs her own opinions and interests to take precedent he shuts her down.

Sarah’s heart began to break piece by piece.

“Sarah, please don’t take this as an offense to your character. This says more about me than you. I’m not a good guy.” He shrugged lazily. “You would have been miserable married to me. I wouldn’t have taken care of you like Charles does.”

At the mention of his name a tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

Eli brought a finger up to her cheek to wipe the tear away. “Please don’t cry, Sarah. You are better off here.” He looked towards the door. “I only saw Nora for a moment but the fact that Charles even let you meet her tells me how much he revere you.”

Sarah’s laugh hiccuped. “I doubt that.”

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Eli lowered his eyes to try to capture her downcast ones. “It’s true, Sarah. Believe me, I know my brother. If you know and are able to speak freely with Nora, than my brother thinks highly of you, which, I’m sure you know is no easy feat.”

Sarah offered a shaky smile.

“Thank you, Eli. And thank you for telling me the truth. You are the first one in your family to actually tell me something true that has happened.”

Eli shook his head as he sighed. “I take it my brother is being his stubborn self again. He always thinks he knows what’s best and it’s his word and no one else’s.”

Sarah laughed. If you would have told her the one who would console her and make her feel better about her place within this household was Eli she would have laughed in your face. But here she was, feeling better and finding some comfort in his words.

Eli leaned in to take the tea cup from her and placed it on a side table. He gathered her in his arms in a brotherly hug. She let her body relax into his easy embrace and welcomed the support.

The crash of the door startled her.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Eli and Sarah jumped apart and turned to see a wild eyed Charles standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER 24

Charles slammed the door behind him. He was surprised it didn't splinter in half with the force he used.

His had just arrived back from his visit to the town when Samuels informed him that Eli was in the drawing room with Sarah. His world came to a crashing halt as he sprinted into the house, knocking over tables and housemaids alike.

"You both know I hate repeating myself." He spat.

The color drained from Sarah's face and her body tensed up. Meanwhile, Eli's body relaxed as he rolled his eyes.

"You were always so welcoming, brother." Eli said casually as he sat back into the sofa and crossed one leg over the other.

Charles's eyes tracked to Sarah who remained motionless.

"Sarah." He snipped. "What were you doing in a drawing room with my brother... alone?"

Sarah's dazed eyes began to clear as his insinuation dawned on her. Fire ignited within her eyes as shot to her feet.

"Tell me you are not accusing us of doing what I think you're accusing us of." Her voice rose with indignation.

Charles scoffed. "I absolutely am and with every right. I come back from taking care of a situation in the village and I find you in my brother's arms!"

Sarah's eyes closed for a moment and she took in a breath then pushed it out. "I know you are unfamiliar with the idea of comforting someone who is hurt so it is not surprising to me when you are met with such an image you immediately assume the worst."

A laugh erupted from Eli. "And here I thought your were amiable and pliable."

Sarah's eyes snapped to Eli. "You may have been forgiven for the farce that was our hasty relationship but you are not in the clear. And you'd ought not to forget that." She chastised.

Eli's eyes rounded as he put his hands up in defense. "My apologies, Your Grace." Eli turned to his brother. "We definitely misjudged this one."

What little restraint Charles had on his control snapped and he lunged towards Eli. Sarah jumped in between them and shielded Eli from his attacking brother.

"Stop this! I will not have you fighting with your brother inside like some wayward child." She scolded.

Charles stopped and stared at his wife. She literally threw herself in between them and raised her hands to shield Eli from any harm. Eli. The man who left her at the alter. The man that brought her to his home in the middle of the night, hurt and in need of help.

Charles's vision blurred as the instinct to lash out pushed him forward.

"You protect him. Him? The man that humiliated you? Who used you just so I wouldn't cut him off. This is the man you choose to protect?"

"You gave me no other choice!" Eli quipped from behind Sarah.

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Charles's eyes narrowed. "Look! He is still using you! He won't even face me, he needs to hide behind you." Charles sneered. "A disgrace."

Sarah lifted her chin. "I do not agree with either one of you. Both of you made poor choices in the past and, unfortunately for me, my life was upended in it all."

Eli stepped out from behind Sarah. "Brother, Sarah and I spoke and she forgave me for my missteps in our relationship."

The word "relationship" raked down Charles's spine like rusty nails. Just the thought of his brother having anything more than a casual acquaintance with his wife fueled his wrath. The thought of Eli touching her, kissing her, taking her to his bed had his rage just at the tipping point.

Charles stretched his neck causing little pops to sound. He stretched his fingers in front of him causing his knuckles to crack. He widened his stance and flexed his hands at his side.

The movements caused Eli's eyes to widen as alarm bells were surely going off in his head. However, Sarah was none the wiser to his ministrations.

Good. If she knew he was preparing his body for a fight, she would try to stop him again.

Eli put up his hands. "Charles. Stop. Whatever you're thinking it didn't happen. I came to apologize and she accepted. She seemed like she was having a tough time so I offered her a hug."

Charles snarled.

Eli's eyes widened even more as he shrank back. "A brotherly hug! I swear! I have no malicious intent or ill will towards either one of you."

"You shouldn't be touching her in any way!" His yell echoed throughout the room.

Both Eli and Sarah took a step back from him.

"Charles," Eli began.

"No. You have done enough. I have fixed your last mistake."

A small gasp escaped Sarah but Charles ignored her.

"You are to leave this estate and never return. I don't want to see you ever again. You are not welcome in any of our residences and I will instruct everyone who works for me to refuse your call." Charles took one more breath before delivering the final blow.

"You are done." He enunciated each word.

Twin flags of red peaked on Eli's cheeks. "You can't mean that, Charles. Everything is fine, we've moved on." Eli looked over to Sarah for help but she stood in shock.

"I always mean what I say, Eli." Charles rose a finger and pointed to Sarah. "The second you left her at the alter you sealed your fate."

The memory of a humiliated and confused Sarah pummeled Charles's mind. She looked so innocent and helpless in that moment. He swore he would never allow Eli to cause her that much pain again.

He looked over to his wife who was wearing the same expression as that day. Charles growled and looked back to Eli.

“Get out,” he bellowed. “Now! And don’t come back.”

Eli once more looked to Sarah for help but she was still frozen, staring at the ground.

Charles could see Eli fighting with moistening eyes and was surprised he didn’t let a tear fall for effect. Eli always had a flair for the dramatics.

Eli rolled his lips and rushed out of the room with his shoulders hunched and his head cast down.

“Coward.” Charles muttered.

He looked back to Sarah who was now looking straight at him. She was the personification of fire and fury.

“Am I a mistake to you?” She seethed.

“What?” Charles had the audacity to look confused.

“You’re not the only one who doesn’t like to repeat themselves, Charles.” She stated.

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Sarah clenched her muscles to stop her finger from shaking as she pointed to the door. “You just told your brother that you had fixed his last mistake. Am I a mistake?”

Charles heaved a sigh. “Sarah. How our marriage came to be is not a shock to you. It was a mutual arrangement. When I said I fixed his last mistake I meant the disgrace he brought onto this family by him leaving you at the alter.”

“Therefore, a mistake.” She offered.

“Exactly. I fixed his mistake.” Charles looked relieved.

Sarah’s eyebrows pinched together. “And by him leaving me at the alter, a mistake, you fixed it by marrying me. A mistake.”

Charles’s brow furrowed. “You’re taking my words out of context. I didn’t mean that.”

Sarah looked up surprised. “I thought you always say what you mean.” She countered.

Charles took a step towards her which caused her to retreat a step and put her hands up in a defensive manner.

“Sarah. In the beginning we agreed to marry to help each other. Neither of us wanted that charade of a wedding to haunt us. You yourself said it was a farce.” Charles spoke earnestly.

Sarah's voice held no emotion. "And you fixed it. Like you always do."

She could feel herself shutting down emotionally. Every word he spoke provided her with one more brick to build the wall around her heart.

Charles's breathing returned to normal and he shook his head. "Yes, you know I will fix any problems that comes our way."

"Whether we like it or not." She offered.

"Now hold on," Charles tried to interject.

Sarah steamrolled over his words. "No matter if it actually hurts us in the long run. As long as you get your way in the here and now, all is well with everyone and if it's not," she shrugged. "Then it is on them and they must be the problem."

"Sarah." Charles pleaded.

She pursed her lips, lost in thought. She felt as if she was wading through molasses, her mind became sluggish and she was having trouble concentrating on the man in front of her. She just wanted comfort. She was tired of fighting. Fighting to understand him. Fighting for support, for connection. She was tired of fighting for them.

"I can understand us." She waved a finger between them. "We're still new to each other. But I just watched you cut off your own brother, your own flesh and blood."

Charles shook his head. "You do not understand the damage that man has done to this family."

Sarah's laugh rang out, startling Charles. "Of course I don't understand. How could

I?You tell me nothing. You've trained your staff to be just as guarded. As if they whisper a single truth about your past then the whole world would come crashing down on the them. Even poor Nora, who is just a girl," she added, "is worried to express herself freely."

Fury propelled her forward. "You know who wasn't afraid to be honest with me? Eli."

Charles flinched.

"Eli. Your brother, who, yes, has made many poor choices in his life, but came to me under his own volition to make amends. You know what that shows me, Charles?" She taunted. "That shows growth and change and you" she poked his chest, "stand there and call him coward and throw him out of his home."

Charles stood his ground. "You will never understand."

More bricks for her wall.

"Ah. I see." She rubbed her clammy palms onto her dress. "That's it then, right?" She kept her tone conversational, even though it began to tremble.

"I have no recourse to that response, Charles. It's your way or no way. I can't understand if you don't let me understand." She shrugged. "But to do that you would have to open up to me. I'm starting to think even a wedding ceremony isn't enough motivation for you to do that."

She eyes drifted to the window then back to Charles. He was still standing, ever at the ready for the next attack. He was exhausting and she was tired.

Her shoulders sagged as she sighed. "Perhaps I shall take you up on your earlier

statement and I should find other accommodations.”

“What?” Charles’s voice was heavy. “What do you mean?”

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It took effort for Sarah to raise her eyes to his. Every part of her body felt weighted down with grief.

“Earlier today you had insinuated if I don’t like your way of handling things then I should find somewhere else to be-”

“I spoke in anger!” Charles’s eyes widened. “I didn’t mean it!”

A wistful smile crept onto Sarah’s face as she shook her head slowly. “Yet you are steadfast with your threats of always saying what you mean.”

Charles reached for her hand and she pulled away.

“You must have a busy day ahead. I have some correspondence of my own to see to.”

She turned quickly and made her way to the door.

“Sarah,” his voice cracked with her name.

Her hand steadied on the door handle as she turned her head to the side.

“Just give me some time to handle the situation in town, I was not expecting his call this early and it caused me undue stress. I just need to work some things out and then we can talk.”

Sarah nodded as she closed the door behind her.

Charles didn't seek her out that day to talk.

That evening Sarah put what she could into a bag. She wrote a letter to Charles and gave it to Samuels to deliver.

"The carriage is ready for you, Your Grace." Samuels's eyes were heavy and full of concern.

Sarah's lips trembled. "Thank you, Samuels."

He hesitated as he opened the door. "Are you sure you'd like to travel to your sister's so late at night? Perhaps in the morning we can have His Grace accompany you."

Sarah tried to swallow over the lump that had formed in her throat. "That won't be necessary, Samuels. His Grace needs some time so I figured some space would help our situation as well."

Her quivering lips strained her voice. She took a deep breath and willed her tears not to fall.

Samuels pursed his lips as lines formed on his brow. "Very well, Your Grace. William!" He called to the footman. "Please see Her Grace to her sister's home."

William nodded solemnly. "Of course. Right this way, Your Grace." William held his arm out to escort Sarah to the carriage.

"Your Grace!" Samuels called out.

Sarah took a breath as she turned back to a man she was fond of.

"Travel safe and I hope for your safe return."

Sarah released her breath on a hiccup. She could only shake her head in acknowledgment before she turned and entered the carriage.

She watched until the house was completely out of sight, then she let the tears fall.

CHAPTER 25

Charles walked into the breakfast room and found Nora sitting alone.

“Good morning, Nora.” He said as he touched his sister’s shoulder. “How was your night.”

Nora ignored him as she speared a strawberry onto her fork.

Shrugging off his sister’s insolence as normal young girl behavior Charles sat at his seat and unfolded the napkin. As he sat, he looked to Samuels who was standing by the door, he looked a bit stiffer than usual.

“This smells delicious. Is Sarah awake yet?”

Silence.

Charles narrowed his eyes at his sister. He’s heard of the emotional turmoil young girls put their families through but he was not one to be ignored. His eyes glanced at Samuels who remained stock still by the door. His eyes stared outward, it was as if Charles hadn’t walked into the room.

Was the old man losing it?

“Samuels.” Charles called.

Samuels inhaled as he turned to face Charles.

“I’m sorry, Samuels, am I that exhausting that in order to look at me you must steal yourself?” Charles snipped.

“Perhaps it is your demeanor that is exhausting, Charles.” His sister’s words clipped whatever Samuels was going to say.

“Excuse me?” What room did he walk into that he was met with such contempt?

Nora leveled a look at him. “I heard how you treated Eli. Perhaps Sarah is just as disgusted with you as I am.” She quipped.

Charles rubbed his temples. “Nora. Do not concern yourself with the matters of

adults. I'm sure you know how much scandal our brother causes and I'm tired of picking up the pieces."

Nora scoffed. "Is Sarah one of those pieces?"

Blasted, his sister sounded just like Sarah. His fingers tightened around his fork. How many times was he to have this conversation?

"Sarah knew the arrangement we were entering into when we got married." Charles paused. "Wait. How do you know about Sarah's role between Eli and I?"

Nora cocked her head. "So you can punish the person who told me?" Nora laughed. "I don't think so." She pointed her fork at Charles. "You didn't answer my question, was Sarah just a piece you needed to clean up?"

Charles sighed and leaned back in his chair. "No. And she knows that."

Nora chuckled.

"What was that for?" Charles demanded.

"You're not the best communicator. I wouldn't be surprised if Sarah was in her room right now waiting for you to leave the breakfast room she she could to come down and not have to see you first thing in the morning."

Charles's heart thudded at the thought. Would she avoid him? Admittedly they did not part on the best of terms yesterday.

Suddenly, his breath caught in his throat. He forgot to speak with her yesterday about the merchant. He furrowed his brows. Surely she would understand that matters of the duchy are serious and need to be handled promptly. She couldn't possibly hold

that against him.

Charles glanced at the door. She was just late in waking up.

Yes, that had to be it.

“And poor Eli. He not only came here to talk with Sarah, but to see me. I haven’t seen him in ages and the first thing you do is run him off.” Nora whined bringing Charles’s focus back to her.

“It is for the best.” Charles offered.

“For who?” Nora countered.

“For the family!” Charles’s voice boomed across the table causing Nora to jump.

Awkward silence settled between them.

“He needs to learn there are consequences for his actions. How he treated Sarah is unforgivable and the die was cast the moment he left her standing at the altar. He’s a disgrace and therefore should be treated as such.”

Nora huffed. “I heard Sarah forgave him. Shouldn’t the person who was wronged have the final say if he is thrown out for his transgressions?”

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Charles slammed down his fork. “I am the Duke. I say who is allowed in my home.” His eyes went back to the door and Samuels standing next to it.

Why did the bloody man look so awkward standing there? Did he always loom over them like that?

An itch started to climb up Charles’s spine. Something was wrong.

“And where in the dueces is Sarah?” He demanded.

Samuels lazily turned to Charles. He reached into his jacket and pulled out an envelope.

He walked over to Charles and laid it on his plate.

Charles looked up to Samuels, confused. “What is this? Why am I just getting this now? For the love of God, man, I’ve been sitting here for awhile now, why wasn’t I given this the moment I walked in?”

Samuels said nothing but returned to his post at the door.

What the bloody hell is going on in this house?

Charles’s heart began to race. He couldn’t help the feeling like he was missing a monumental piece of the puzzle. It was as if everyone else was playing a game and he did not know the rules.

He looked at Nora who looked just as curious as he did.

Charles's fingers shook as he opened the envelope and pulled out the paper inside. It smelled of Sarah and his heart began to tremble.

Her feminine cursive danced across the page but the words did not match their beauty.

His brows furrowed. He couldn't be reading this right. He read over the words again.

...needed time and space.

Care for you deeply, but...

...spend this time with my sister.

Charles crumbled the paper in his hands.

"What... what does it say, Charles?" He could hear the tremor in Nora's voice.

Charles looked up to Samuels, who was standing with his hands behind his back, knowing exactly what the letter said.

"Very well," he said, after clearing his throat. "It seems Sarah has decided to spend some time with her sister, Eleanor."

Nora gasped. "What did you do?"

Stunned, Charles looked up at her.

"She made life here bearable and you went and scared her off probably with your

brutish behavior! Why are you like this?" She screamed as she ran from the table.

Charles stood just as Mrs. Bates walked in.

"Let me go after her, Your Grace. Sometimes young girls need a more womanly touch."

Charles winced. He remembered Sarah saying a similar thing to him the night those boys harassed Nora, right before he shut her out.

The weight of the realization dragged Charles back down into his chair. He gestured to Mrs. Bates and she followed the girl.

"Did someone escort her?" Charles's voice felt like sand in his throat.

"William, Your Grace." Samuels offered.

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Charles tilted his head and nodded. He felt different. Had it gotten colder in here? His eyes tracked to the window. The sun was shining through the window pane and it looked like a beautiful warm day outside.

So why was it dark and cold in the room?

Sunlight streaked across Sarah's eyes causing her to wince. "It's too bright in here. It's hurting my eyes." Her voice was muffled in the pillow.

"Try waking up before the sun even rises and then you can talk to me how brightness hurts." Her sister's voice chastised her.

Sarah grimaced. "Does that make sense? You can't talk to me in riddles, I haven't had sufficient rest."

"And whose fault is that, traveling all hours of the night." Eleanor said as she sat on the bed, taking the pillow that was covering Sarah's face.

"I needed to get out, Eleanor. You wouldn't understand." She moaned.

Eleanor tsked. "My marriage may not have had the same beginning as yours but you're a fool if your memory is that bad you can't remember how well Derek and I got along in the beginning."

Sarah groaned. "I know. You two practically hated each other."

"Just about." Eleanor smiled.

Sarah sat up and both sisters winced at the sunlight coming through the windows.

“I know why the sunlight is hurting my eyes, what’s wrong with you?” Sarah asked while she shielded her eyes from the blasted sun.

“My darling daughter decided last night was the perfect time to test her lungs and sang us a song all night.” Eleanor yawned.

Her niece. Sarah couldn’t help but smile at the thought. Her life was an absolute mess, but the silver lining was she was about to spend some much needed time with her beautiful niece.

It was just then Sarah looked at her sister. Sarah could count on her hand the number of times when Eleanor did not look put together. Everything seemed to suit Eleanor perfectly. Except for today.

“Oh Eleanor. You look horrible.” Sarah breathed.

Eleanor laughed. “Thank you, sister. I’m so glad we just so happen to live close enough to the Duke that you decided to bless us with your presence and not mother.”

Sarah flinched. “I’m sorry, that was rude of me. I’m just not used to seeing you like...” she waved her hands around trying to put her thoughts to words.

“Like a mother?” Eleanor supplied.

Sarah smiled shyly.

Eleanor shrugged. “I must confess, after the first night with Angela I wrote to mother and apologized for all the trouble we had caused her while growing up.”

Sarah laughed. "I'm sure she was quite happy with that correspondence."

"She absolutely was. I think that's why she continues to send gifts for Angela. Not only is she her granddaughter, but the one person who made me realize how wonderful of a mother we have." Eleanor said with a chuckle.

Sarah stretched and pushed the duvet off.

Eleanor stood to give her some space and walked to the bag Sarah had brought with her.

"Would you like me to send up a maid to help you?" Eleanor pulled out a few of the dresses Sarah brought and laid them out.

Sarah shook her head. "That won't be necessary. I don't want to be a bother."

Eleanor furrowed her brows. "You're always welcome here, however, I must ask, how much thought have you given this?"

Sarah plucked at her bottom lip.

"Are you staying here until the air clears? Or are you staying here until..." Eleanor let her words die, insinuating a more permanent solution.

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Sarah shrugged. "I honestly don't know, Eleanor." Her lip began to tremble.

"Oh, Sarah. I'm sorry. It's too fresh." She waved her hands in front of her. "Never mind. Let's not worry about that now. Let's get you freshened up and we'll have some breakfast. Once we get some food in you things won't seem so bad."

Just then a loud wail sounded from down the hall.

"Oh look," Eleanor sighed. "I see my daughter is ready for her second act. And you're awake, so you get to listen to it as well."

Sarah giggled. "It's the most beautiful concert I've ever heard."

Eleanor paused in the doorway. "Just you wait, dear sister. We'll see how you feel about her wails after a few days." She winked. "Now, get dressed and I'll meet you in the breakfast room."

Sarah nodded as her sister closed the door behind her.

Sarah sat in the breakfast room waiting for her sister and Angela to come in. Their cook had made a buffet of eggs, biscuits, sausage, different breads and fruit. It was more than any one person could eat.

"Your Grace?" A voice called from the doorway.

William stood looking in, his hat in his hands.

“William! You’re still here!” Sarah was relieved. They arrived very late last night and she worried about him and the coachman driving back late into the night.

William nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. Their Graces were kind enough to let me and Cobbins stay the night due to the lateness of our arrival.”

“Have you eaten breakfast?” She gestured to the table of food in front of them.

William waved her off. “Of course, Your Grace. The staff here has taken good care of us.” He looked down at his feet before returning his gaze.

“I was just wondering, Your Grace, if, um, you’d be returning with us?” He sounded hopeful and it broke Sarah’s heart to be honest with him.

“I’m sorry, William, no. I’ll be here... for awhile.” Sarah’s heart sank at her own response. She already missed the staff at the estate but she could no longer live on the outside.

William shook his head sadly. “I understand, Your Grace. May I just say...” he paused to clear his throat. “I’ve enjoyed your presence in our home. I hope your stay here with your sister is enjoyable but that you’ll be home soon.”

Sarah bit the inside of her cheek. “Well, it would be lovely to have a home to return to, but first, it would need to feel like a home.”

William flinched, causing Sarah to sigh. She was taking it out on the wrong person.

“Please forgive me, William. You and the staff welcomed me into the home and were there for me when I most needed a friend. I can never repay your kindness. Thank you. Please tell Lizzie and Mrs. Bates that I miss them.”

William placed his hat on his head and nodded.

“And William? Please take care of yourself. And, court Miss Cordell appropriately. I hear she likes daisies.”

Her smile faded as William turned and left.

She watched the carriage leave from the window in the breakfast room. The further the carriage drove from the house, the heavier her heart felt. It took everything in her body to keep her seated while William was in here. She wanted nothing more than to put her pride aside and follow him back into the carriage.

However, she knew nothing would have changed and she needed to put her happiness first. Her romantic heart was breaking behind the wall of bricks it finished building last night.

It was time for her more mature, guarded heart to form and help her move onto the next phase in her life. If only she knew what that was.

CHAPTER 26

“Samuels!” Charles bellowed from his study. He pushed the papers around his desk, he picked up a book and tossed it across the room, narrowly missing his sister who stepped in through the door.

“What are you doing?” She asked.

Charles looked up. “You’re not Samuels.”

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Nora raised an eyebrow. “How astute. No. I am not Samuels. I told him not to come in here.”

Charles snarled. “Who are you to instruct my staff what to do?”

Nora straightened her back and pushed back her shoulders. “Your sister. I may only be thirteen but I have some say around here. You are being too mean and brutish to everyone, especially poor Samuels.”

Charles huffed. He knew his sister was right. He was being boorish to everyone but especially Samuels. The only reason Charles could figure out why was that Samuels was the last person to speak to Sarah before she left. In his mind, Samuels should have gotten him immediately, or at least done more to keep her from going.

“Samuels is tending to some other matters so I took it upon myself to see what you wanted before I fetch him. Perhaps I can help.” She said as she folded her arms impatiently.

Charles snorted. “You’re a child. You can’t help me.”

Nora rolled her eyes. “Suit yourself,” she shrugged.

She remained in front of him, rocking back on her heels.

Charles looked up from his desk. “Are you waiting for something?”

Nora took a breath and pushed it out.

“Since I have your attention, I do have a question.” Nora swayed back and forth on her heels, annoying Charles.

He waved his hand out in front of him. “Well, spit it out, as you can see I’m very busy.”

Charles gestured to the mess of papers on his desk. He then pulled at his cravat, the damn thing was nearly choking him.

Nora began fidgeting with her hands. “I, um, noticed the rooms upstairs were not being used.”

Charles looked up from his desk. “What rooms?”

“Sarah’s rooms.” Nora’s voice was small.

Charles quirked an eyebrow. “Of course, her bedroom is not being used. She’s no longer here.” He stood up taller. “Why? Do you want them? You’re hardly here.”

Nora rubbed her temple. “No. Not that room. Mother’s rooms.”

Charles collected more papers and fished through them. He tried focusing on the words that dotted the page but the script blurred in front of his eyes.

He cleared his throat.

“What of them?” He was having trouble concentrating on the conversation at hand. He pulled at his cravat again.

Nora sighed as she walked forward and sat in the chair in front of his desk. She leaned forward.

“Those are the Duchesses rooms, shouldn’t Sarah have occupied them?” Nora looked down into her lap. “She told me she used to paint. From what I remember Mother had a little paint studio set up.”

Charles swallowed. “I didn’t realize you frequented those rooms.”

Nora met his eyes and shrugged. “I usually don’t. But Sarah made my curious. She made this whole house feel like a home.” She dropped her eyes. “It never used to feel that way.”

Charles sighed and leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his eyes. He’d made a mess out of everything. And not just with Sarah, but with Nora. Actually, if he gave himself the proper time to think about it, he had messed up a big portion his life.

“I used to come here and we’d treat each other like strangers. We rarely ate together, we never would have gone on a picnic together.”

Charles looked up. “I spent time with you!” Charles was shocked at his sister’s interpretation of their past.

“Nora, you must know how fond I am of you. I would do anything for your happiness.” Charles pleaded. He knew he wasn’t the easiest to live with but he always made sure Nora felt welcomed here when she visited. He made sure she had excursions and he took her horseback riding.

“Except see to your own.” She countered.

Charles sat up in his chair. “When did you become so perceptive?”

A smug smile formed on Nora’s lips. “I have great role models in that area.”

Charles chuckled. “It sounds as though they could have been better.”

“Charles?” Nora reached and leaned onto his desk. “Why didn’t you allow Sarah to use those rooms?”

Charles waved her question off.

“No, do not dismiss me. Is it because of Mother?” Nora’s voice was timid but it struck him with such force nonetheless.

“Charles.” She chided. “Don’t you think it’s time to move on from the horrors of our childhood?”

Charles’s eyes swelled as his throat closed. “You don’t understand, Nora. The way they treated her and I just...”

“You were a child yourself. You had just lost your father, you inherited a duchy when you were barely sixteen. Then your mother died and you were in charge of a small child.”

Charles shook off the emotion that was settling over him. His skin began to itch and his cravat felt as if it was cutting off his air. He pulled at the cravat and tugged it off. He bounded out of his chair and began pacing the room.

“Charles. You did everything you could with what you had. Yes, from what I hear, and the things I’ve personally experienced, the townspeople haven’t been the most understanding but do not take it out on Sarah of all people.”

Nora remained sitting in the chair as Charles stalked the room pulling at his shirt. He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. Did someone light a fire in here? The room became stifling.

Obviously he was the only afflicted by this phantom heat. Nora sat calmly in the chair, nonplussed.

“I’ve only known her for a few days but anyone could tell she has a heart of gold and only wants the best for those around her. Even you cannot deny her that, Charles. Plus...”

Charles stopped and looked at his sister. He wiped the sweat that started to bead across his brow. “Don’t stop now, dear sister. Speak your mind.”

Nora’s shoulders sagged. “Plus, I really like her.” Nora’s voice began to tremble. “She was fun, and understanding, and I feel awful for shutting her out that one night.” Nora’s watery eyes looked up and met hers. “Do you think it’s because of that night that she left?”

Sobs wracked the young girl’s body. Charles rushed to his sister and gathered her in his arms. He was not good with the emotions of others, but seeing his sister cry was the one thing he could not stand.

“Shh, Nora. No, it was not you. It was me. I shut her out to protect you.”

Nora sniffled into his chest. “I don’t need protecting any more.”

Charles looked down at his sister. “Then why were you upset that night?”

Nora wiped her tears. “You’re right, I was upset that night over what those boys said. But you reminded me what Sarah told me about letting other people control my emotions.” She looked up into her brother’s eyes. “Charles, you, too, have given other people too much control.”

Charles squeezed his sister tighter before letting her go and holding her out at arms length. “I assure you, Nora, I do not let other people control me.”

Nora’s eyes widened as she pointed at him. A wide smile spread across her lips. “That’s it. That’s why you are the way you are. It’s not because you’re not capable of emotionl, it’s that you let other people control your emotions!”

Nora jumped and clapped like she just solved life’s greatest mystery.

Charles huffed and walked back to his desk to sit down. This conversation, full of its ups and downs, was starting to give him a headache.

“Nora, I have no idea what you’re talking about and I don’t see what this has to do with Sarah.”

Nora walked over to him and leaned across his desk. “You are so worried about how others perceive us your preemptively push people away. It’s not that you’re obtuse with other people’s feelings, it’s just you’ve been on the defensive side for so much of your life you immediately assume the worstof people.”

Charles furrowed his brow. “I do not care what people think of us.”

“Yes, you do!” Nora’s face lit up. “You absolutely do! Why else would you make sure I was protected-”

“Because I didn’t want to see you upset!” Charles interjected.

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Nora didn't let the interruption stop her. "True, but you always took it one step further. You changed trade routes, you went out of your way to punish the people that you're supposed to protect just because they hurt my feelings."

Nora jumped back when Charles slammed his hand on the desk. He knocked over his chair when he pushed out of it.

"It was more than just hurt feelings, Nora. Our mother..." Charles looked down as emotion swelled in his throat. "When our mother needed them most, after all she did for them, they turned their back on her. I will never forgive them for their behavior."

Charles's vision blurred with unshed tears. He hated thinking of his mother's final days, how broken and lost she looked and there was nothing he could do to help her.

Nora took a deep breath. "Charles. They didn't understand and a lot of time has passed. We're all different people now. I think it's time to move on." She lifted a slender shoulder. "I have."

Charles hung his head. The buzzing sound was back in his mind and his whole body was humming with regret, anger, frustration, and despair.

Small arms reached around him and enveloped him in a hug.

"It's not too late to correct this, Charles."

A tear rolled down his cheek and onto his sister's dark head. He quickly wiped it so his sister wouldn't see. He looked at his wet finger for a moment. When was the last

time he cried?

He shook his head side to side. "I'm not so sure about that."

"Truly, Charles. There was nothing you could do for Mother, but you can fix this with Sarah." Nora pleaded.

She tightened her arms around her brother. Her strength settled him. As Charles stood holding his sister, he started to understand, that in this moment, for the first time in his life, he allowed someone to comfort him.

It wasn't a terrible feeling.

Sarah sipped her tea while trying to hear the rushed whispers of her sister and brother-in-law who were currently standing in the hallway outside of the breakfast room.

It's been a few days since she arrived and while her sister was more than welcoming, Derek seemed to have an entirely different opinion.

"She is your sister, and while our home is always open to your family, you need to find out her plans. I may run into Stoleton and I don't want it to be awkward." Derek's hushed tone carried down the hallway.

Her sister's laugh drowned out his whisper. "And where are you going to run into him? Neither one of you are social butterflies. Is there a Duke Club I'm not aware of where introverted Dukes go to make friends?"

Eleanor's squeal reverberated into the breakfast room.

Sarah was happy Eleanor found her happy ending with her Duke. If only the same

could be said for Sarah.

She sighed and put her cup back on the saucer. She added another lump of sugar and began to stir the cup.

“Good morning, Sarah.” Her sister’s voice rang out.

Sarah turned to her sister and accepted the kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning, Eleanor. You look well rested. Angela sleep through the night?”

Eleanor shook her head. “She did. Derek keeps insisting we let the maids tend to her overnight, but I just don’t want to miss out on anything. I can’t imagine not being there for her when she cries, or not being the first person she sees when she wakes up. As long as I remember that, the long nights don’t seem so bad.”

“You’ve always had a good night’s sleep so your memory of those awful nights aren’t as fresh, but trust me, my love, they are the worst.”

Derek sauntered in after his wife and sat across from her.

Sarah couldn’t help but think back to the first time she met the formidable Duke Graynor. He wanted nothing to do Eleanor or her family and here he was the doting father and husband.

Sarah’s throat tightened. She had her own stubborn Duke to deal with. Sadly, she seemed further from her happy ending than Eleanor was at this point in her marriage.

Eleanor swatted at her husband from across the table. “Oh you, stop it. Those nights aren’t so bad. Plus, you’re not the one who gets up. I do.”

Derek raised an eyebrow. “Yes, but when my loving wife leaves the bed she takes all the warmth with her.”

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Sarah watched as a blush blossomed on her sister's cheeks. She got caught up in their moment she didn't realize she was still stirring her tea until the spoon hit the cup.

Eleanor and Derek both looked to Sarah, it was if they had forgotten she was in the room.

Sarah couldn't blame them. If Charles looked at her the same way Derek looked at Eleanor, she wouldn't look anywhere else.

"Please excuse us, Sarah. We're being rude." Eleanor offered.

Sarah waved her off. "Nonsense. I find it endearing. I only hope to have the same one day."

Eleanor's eyes flashed to Derek's.

"About that. Now that it has been a few days, have you given any thought as to your next steps?" Eleanor's voice was tender, which Sarah appreciated. It made up for the lack of understanding written on Derek's face.

Sarah blew out a breath. "I honestly don't know what to do, Eleanor. Every time I begin to think about it I end up crying."

As soon as the words left her mouth the familiar tremble began in her lower lip.

"I wish he wasn't so closed off. Or at least if he was completely closed off, I wish he wouldn't give me glimpses of what it could be like." Sarah pinched the bridge of her

nose to stem the flow of tears that threatened to fall.

“I think that is the worst. When he smiles, or tells me a story, or the day we had the picnic by the lake? He was so carefree then. It was lovely and it gave me hope. Then he had to go and ruin it by shutting me out when his sister got upset at those boys.”

Sarah blinked a few times and only after she was sure the tears would stay put did she open her eyes.

“What happened with his sister?” Eleanor asked.

Sarah shrugged. “I’m not even sure myself. She had gone off to pick some flowers and before you know it, she’s back crying. I’m assuming she ran into some boys from the village who said something distasteful to her but what, I wouldn’t know.” Sarah sat up, anger was quickly taking over despair.

“No, it’s that I don’t know, it’s that I’m not allowed to know. I tried being there, for both of them, but they pushed me out. Him more so than her.”

Eleanor took a sip of tea. “How odd. I wonder why he would do something like that. And you said he wasn’t friendly with the townspeople?”

Derek snorted. “I don’t blame him there.”

Eleanor and Sarah both looked to Derek in earnest.

“Care to elaborate?” Eleanor prodded.

Derek looked at both women. “Oh, well, I mean, after how they treated his mother, I’m not sure I would not go out of my way to bend to their needs.”

Sarah leaned onto the table. Anticipation rushed through her mind like waves crashing against the shore. She shook her head to clear the chaos that was swirling around her.

“What do you mean, how they treated his mother?” Sarah held her breath, she didn’t want to risk the sound of her breath distracting her from Derek would say next.

“Oh,” Eleanor exclaimed. “You know, I do remember hearing something about his family now that you said that. I remember Mama and Papa talking about it when he got sick.”

Sarah’s patience had reached its end point. “Will someone tell me what happened with his mother?”

Eleanor’s eyes widened at her sister’s outburst, while Derek merely raised a bored eyebrow in her direction.

“I remember Mama saying that the Dowager Duchess had lost her husband and just over a year later gave birth to a healthy baby girl. But, due to timing, there is no way she could have been the late Duke’s. So...” Eleanor’s words trailed off when she looked to Sarah.

Sarah could feel all the color drain from her face. Her throat ran dry and her hands shook.

Honora.

Piece by piece the scraps of information she picked up started to take shape.

She knew from the stories she was told his mother was once beloved by the town. After her husband’s death she became pregnant, which would have been quite the

scandal.

Scandal!

Charles was always saying how their family couldn't afford another scandal. Honora's birth was the scandal.

The town must have turned their backs on his mother which would have been devastating considering how much she cared for them when she could. It must have torn Charles apart seeing his mother being treated like that.

"Do you know how she died?" The words tumbled out of Sarah's mouth clumsily.

Eleanor chewed her bottom lip. "I'm not sure I remember."

Derek cleared his throat. "I think it may have had to do with the birth of the child. There were some complications that she never fully recovered from. I think she passed a year or two after the child's birth."

Sarah's heart shattered at the thought of a young Charles, who had lost both parents, who was now left a duchy and a small child. He must have felt so alone. And if the town had turned against his mother, that means they must've turned their back on him in his hour of need.

Sarah slumped back in her chair. Her soul ached for the loss that young Charles must have felt.

She looked out the window. It wasn't too late. She could go home now and talk with Charles, tell him she knows everything and nothing is a secret anymore. He can be

open with her and she'd still be there.

Sarah met Eleanor's eyes. She found comfort, understanding, and patience in her sister's eyes.

Just then, Sarah had a thought. Eli.

She had seen the way Charles dismissed his own brother and he surely knows all of the families secrets. What's to say even if Sarah would tell him she knows and understands that he won't just continue to shut her out when he feels it necessary?

Melancholy seeped into her bones and settled in.

What good is knowing the truth, if the person who is hiding from it, doesn't want to acknowledge it?

CHAPTER 27

Sarah sat in the library staring at the same page she'd been looking at for the past hour. She had hoped time away from Charles would help clear her mind and put things into perspective. Unfortunately for her, it has only muddled her mind more.

"Sarah?" Marie, Eleanor's maid, stepped into the library. "There's someone here to see you. Niles escorted him to the parlor. He is waiting for you there. Would you like me to get Her Grace to accompany you?"

Sarah sat up. Her heart skipped a beat. Could it be Charles come for her?

"Do you know who it is, Marie?" Sarah couldn't hide the hopefulness in her voice.

Marie pursed her lips. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, I do not." She looked thoughtful for a

moment. “He looks about your age, perhaps a year or two older. Dark hair, beautiful green eyes...” Her voice drifted off when she caught herself getting lost in her recall.

Her cheeks brightened to a pink. “Excuse me, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to say all that.”

Sarah chuckled. “It’s all right, Marie. We all get lost in eyes sometimes, especially when they’re green.”

Sarah brushed the wrinkles out of her skirt as she stood. She followed Marie down the hall and towards the parlor. All the while her mind was going through the men she knew that would pay her a visit.

Sadly, a man her age was not Charles. She knew plenty of men with dark hair, but only two with dark hair and green eyes.

“Eli.” She whispered as her eyes met his from where he stood in the parlor. “What are you doing here?”

Eli turned at his name and sheepishly greeted her. “Sarah. I hope you’re not upset I came to see you.”

He rubbed his hands together in front of him, he looked uncertain of his next step now that she was here.

Sarah lifted a shoulder. “I don’t see why I would be. Is everything all right?”

Eli ran a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up in some places. He blew out a breath. “I was hoping we could talk.”

His words trailed into an awkward silence.

“About what?” Sarah furrowed her brows.

“Charles.”

Sarah’s heart thumped at the sound of his name. Not more than a moment ago she had hoped he was standing here, but now, at the mention of his name, she was frozen. What had he come to tell her? Did Charles make amends with Eli and then asked him to break the news that Charles no longer wanted her?

Sarah pinched the bridge of her nose. She has to stop reading such dramatic novels, they are causing her imagination to run wild. Charles can barely look at Eli let alone send him on personal missions.

“What about Charles?” She asked timidly. She doubted Eli had seen Charles since they parted but, with Eli, she could never be sure of what his true intentions were.

Eli blew out a breath and pointed to the window. “Would you care for a walk? I find conversations flow better when one walks.”

Sarah looked outside to the sunny summer day. She sighed. “Very well.”

They walked outside and Sarah led Eli down the path to the small flower garden Eleanor had planted outside of her home.

Eli kept his hands behind his back while they walked side by side along the path.

“This is a beautiful piece of property. It looks like your sister and-”

“Why are you here, Eli?” She interrupted his mindless chatter.

Eli smiled. “I definitely misjudged you when we first met. For that I apologize.”

Sarah squinted against the afternoon sun. “You already apologized for your part in our past and I have accepted. Why are you really here?”

“You’re right. I have apologized for misjudging you, but Charles has not. Which is why I’m here.”

Sarah stopped to look at Eli. “Are you here to apologize for him?”

Eli guffawed. “Heavens, no. The old sport can do that himself. However,” he adjusted his cravat, “I am here to shine some more light on my family dynamics.”

“This is all good and well, Eli, but I feel even if I were able to relive your family’s past with you, your brother would still not approve of my knowing about it.”

The broken pieces of her heart rattled within her chest. It hurt knowing that Charles didn’t allow her in or that he didn’t give her a chance to understand.

Eli’s laugh was a bit more subdued this time. “You’re not wrong. He’s very protective of our family. And I have made us an easy target these past few years.”

Sarah grimaced. “I agree.”

They continued to walk, making their way to a bench that sat next to a fountain.

“Our father’s death changed Charles.” Eli said as he motioned to Sarah to sit on the bench. He continued to pace in front of her.

Sarah bit her cheek from smiling. It seems pacing is another common trait amongst the siblings.

“Not only was he a newly appointed Duke, our mother did not handle his death well. She was distant and despondent. Then one day she wakes us up to tell us that she will be having another child. We would’ve been shocked but life returned in our mother’s eyes. She was happy and had purpose again. Charles and I didn’t push for details to risk losing that.”

Eli stopped and looked down at his boots. “That’s when life became really difficult. Rumors started circulating in the town and mother’s trips to help those in need were rejected. It shattered her. It was like losing our father all over again. The taunts and ridicule she received was abhorrent.”

He rubbed the back of his neck as he brought his eyes to look up to the sky. Sarah sat still on the bench, wanting to know more, but at the same time wanting to hug the young Eli who had to go through this. And, yet, even through his retelling, Sarah couldn’t help but wish this was all coming from Charles.

“It affected Charles and I differently. I figured if people were going to make up rumors the pressure to be the perfect in the eyes of the peerage was pointless. So I went and had my fun, not realizing I was making it more difficult for Charles.”

Sad, green eyes met hers. “Where I was soft and having fun, Charles was hardening himself against the world in order to protect what he could. Our livelihood is that duchy and if anything happened to it we would be done for. Everyone was waiting for him to make a mistake.”

A small sigh escaped his lips as he dropped his eyes to the ground. “I guess they still are.”

Sarah fought to swallow over the lump that formed in her throat. She bit her bottom lip to stop it from quivering. Her hands clenched into fists to stop her from reaching out to him, to stop from lashing out against the world for being so cruel.

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“I wish your brother had told me this.” Her words were broken, her throat felt like shards of glass.

Eli let out another deep laugh. “That is the point of me telling you this.” Eli came to her and pulled her up to stand in front of him.

“He has spent almost fourteen years fighting for this family, protecting it from any ill intention from every direction. The concept of someone from the outside being on his side is foreign to him. In his mind, you shouldn’t exist. You confuse him. Hell, you might even scare him.” He said with a wink.

Sarah couldn’t help but smile from his words. And she had to admit he was rather charming when he wanted to be. She could see how so many women fall into his trap.

She let out a cleansing breath. “Thank you, Eli, truly. Thank you for seeking me out, again, to let me in. It’s honestly all I’ve ever wanted.”

Embarrassed by her truth she lowered her eyes.

Eli lifted her chin with his hand. “Come now, he’ll come to his senses. I promise you. It’s the one thing Charles is good at is not letting loose ends go.”

Sarah chuckled. “First a mistake, now I’m a loose end.” She teased.

Eli laughed at her joke as he rolled his eyes. “You are a smart one. He definitely won’t let you go.”

His words sobered Sarah. “Do you think so?”

Heavens, she hated how small her voice sounded.

Eli cocked his head to the side and looked at her. He nodded solemnly. “I know my brother. He cares for you but he has trained himself to expect the worst in people.”

Sarah’s shoulders sagged.

Eli’s hands reached out to her shoulders. “Look at me, Sarah. He’ll come around. I just know it.”

Sarah forced a smile as his arms wrapped around her in a soul soothing hug. She relaxed against him and let the comfort of a friend take hold of her.

Just as her eyes fluttered shut she saw the outline of a giant step into the sun and place one enormous hand onto Eli’s back.

“Why is it every time I see you, you are hugging my wife?” Charles snarled as he grabbed Eli and pulled him back so forcefully Eli went tumbling behind them.

“Charles!” Sarah’s eyes widened. “What are you doing here?”

Eli laughed from where he landed. “See? I told you he’d come for you.” He coughed a few times as he tried to stand up.

Sarah’s eyes rounded. How hard did Charles throw him?

Charles ignored Sarah’s question as he stomped over to Eli.

“I thought I told you I didn’t want you anywhere near my family?” Charles lunged

down and picked Eli up by the collar. Holding him at arm's length Charles pulled his one arm back, ready to punch Eli.

Sarah yelled as she darted to jump in between the men.

“Sarah,” Charles seethed through clenched teeth. “Get out of the way.”

Sarah scowled. “I will not. Once again, Eli has shown progress and has come here to make amends, on your account, mind you. If you want to be mad at someone be mad at me for hearing him out. But, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here talking with you.”

Charles lowered his arm, and raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“He gave me some much needed insight into your family's past.”

Charles's eyes darted behind Sarah to look at Eli.

Sarah moved her head so her eyes clashed with Charles's. “And before you start throwing your weight around here, may I remind you that I am a part of this family now. Eli came to me as a brother to tell me some important information about why my husband is the way he is.”

Charles's shoulders went up and his rose a hand. “Wait just a minute...”

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Sarah took a step towards him. “I have waited enough minutes, Charles. I have let you keep your secrets for far too long. It is now my turn to talk.”

Charles stood astonished while Eli snickered behind her. “I think I’m done here.”

Sarah reached behind her and pointed to the bench while keeping her eyes on Charles. “Sit down, Eli.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Eli slinked around Sarah, avoiding Charles and made himself comfortable on the bench. “Come to think of it, I’d rather like to see my big brother get the proper dressing down he deserves.”

Sarah and Charles both raised an eyebrow in his direction.

“That’s enough out of you.” Charles chastised.

“Charles.” Sarah took his hand. “I understand why you reacted the way you did to my finding your mother’s rooms, to your sister’s interaction with those boys, to my questions, however,” she shook her head out of frustration, “I just don’t understand why you couldn’t talk to me. As someone who never shies away from a conversation I find miscommunication and avoidance tiresome.”

Charles rolled his lips. Sarah watched as this cravat bobbed with his swallow.

His voice cracked when he started to speak. “It’s been a long time I had someone I could trust. My parents were my rock, then when my father died, and my mother lost herself, it was like I lost both parents. Then word of her pregnancy spread and it...”

His cravat bobbed again.

Sarah reached out to pull him to her. She wrapped her arms around him as his head bowed over hers.

She rested her cheek on his chest. “You don’t need to go into details right now. My sister and Derek told me what happened and Eli filled in any missing pieces.”

Charles stiffened.

Sarah pushed away from him. “No, don’t do that. Do not freeze on me, Charles. If we have any chance of making this work you need to let me in. You can’t barge into someone else’s home and accost the guests,” she said as she gestured to Eli. Who, had the insight to smile arrogantly and throw a little wave at his brother.

“You can’t be upset if people talk to me and tell me what’s going on in their lives. And if their lives just so happen to intersect with yours all the better!”

Sarah’s racing heart was about to leap out of her chest. Her chest was heaving with each gulp of air she took. She felt frantic, she felt energized, but most of all, she felt like it was now or never to lay it on the line for Charles.

“We are husband and wife, Charles. If I recall, you said yourself, what happens to me happens to you. Then how do you not understand what happens to you happens to me!” Her voice strained against her dry throat.

She waved her hands in between them. “You cannot refuse to let me in but then take me when you want. You cannot hide things from me, but then claim me as your own.”

Sarah’s voice began to tremble as tears clouded her vision.

“You cannot shut me out but make me love you.” The tears spilled over and raced down her cheeks.

Charles stepped forward. “Sarah.” His voice broke. “Sarah, do you...” He lifted her chin with his finger, his thumb wiped away the tear that had just fallen.

“Do you mean that?” His words were full of wonderment.

Sarah blinked the tears away and pulled her head from his grasp. “Mean what?”

A bright wide smile broke on Charles’s face. “You do, don’t you!”

His arms reached around her, pulling her towards him in a crushing hug.

“Oof. Charles...” Her voice was muffled against his chest. “What has gotten into you?” She finally asked when he released her.

Her held her head in his hands. “You love me.”

Sarah opened her mouth but Charles’s mouth swallowed any words she was about to say.

When they broke apart Charles’s eyes were wide with joy. “Say it again.”

Sarah smiled and shook her head. “I love you.”

Charles scooped her up and swung her around.

“Charles,” she squealed. “Put me down!”

Her feet hit the ground but he still had her enveloped in a hug.

“Well, I can see my services are no longer needed.” Eli stood and began to move towards the house.

Charles’s hand flew, hitting his chest to stop him. “Just a minute, brother.”

Eli sighed. “Seriously, Charles. You have your wife. It seems like she has forgiven you, let this go.”

Sarah pulled away from Charles, cautiously. Eli was right, she supposed she did forgive him, however, she was interested in what Charles had to say to his brother. Was he still upset with him for telling her? For coming here?

“I want to say I’m sorry.” Charles offered.

“I’m sorry what?” Eli asked the same time as Sarah’s, “Really?”

Charles smirked. “I know.” He looked down to Sarah. “It seems my brother isn’t the only one making changes around here.”

His eyes met his brother’s. “Eli. Thank you for having the foresight to come here and tell Sarah what she needed to know. I...” he cleared his throat, “it seems I have to get

used to having more people on my side.”

Eli smiled and shook off his brother’s apology. “Don’t mention it. But, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll be mentioning this for awhile. I love the idea of having something over you.”

“Eli.” Sarah warned.

The rakish smile returned on Eli’s face as he held his hands up. “I’m joking, I’m joking.”

He held out a hand to Charles. “All is forgiven, brother. On to bigger and better things, yeah?”

Charles took his hand and shook it. “Absolutely.”

Sarah sighed in relief. “Well, now that is taken care of, Charles would you like to, whoa!”

Her words were cut off by Charles picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

“Charles! What are you doing? Put me down this instance!” Her tiny fists didn’t make a difference as they beat his back. Although, secretly, she didn’t mind being manhandled by her husband. However, this was not the time or place for those kinds of thoughts.

“Not a chance in hell, my darling. We have some catching up to do, both in conversations and in other areas.”

Sarah was grateful her face wasn’t visible for anyone to see. She was sure it was as red as the dawning day.

She heard a laugh behind her and she picked her head up to see Eli laughing at them.

Sarah raised a finger to point at him. "Make sure you find your way back to the estate. We have more to talk about!"

Charles halted his hurried steps and he turned towards his brother, rather abruptly. Sarah clenched the back of his jacket to stop herself from falling.

"But do not come any time soon. I will need several days to reacquaint myself with my wife."

Sarah gasped at his insinuation to his brother. "Charles! That is inappropriate to say to your brother in my presence!"

"You may need a week, brother, she seems like a talker." Eli quipped.

Sarah raised her head to see a laughing Eli. "Eli! That is inappropriate to say to your brother in my presence. Honestly, who raised you both?"

Her laughs were muted by her husband's back as he carried her to his carriage.

"Where are you taking me?" She managed to say in between giggles.

Charles opened the door and plopped her inside. He climbed in after her, and reached a hand outside to tap the roof, signaling the coachman to go.

“Home. I’m taking you home.”

CHAPTER 28

Charles could barely contain himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt this much energy coursing through him. Ever since his talk with Nora, getting back to Sarah was his first priority. There were things that needed to be addressed at the estate first, but as soon as those issues were taken care of he left in the next breath.

Sarah sat looking at her husband, her eyes were wide in shock. He brought a hand up to his hair and winced. His must have looked atrocious, his hair hadn’t seen a brush in days, and there was scruff on his cheeks.

“Charles, what has gotten into you?” She asked as the carriage pulled away from her sister’s home.

“You.” He said quite simply.

Sarah scrunched her face. “Me?”

Charles nodded. “Of course. Well, you and some much needed sense.”

Sarah offered a small smile. “And where did this much needed sense come from?”

“My sister.”

“Ah. It seems your siblings are putting more work into this marriage than either one of us.” Her voice dipped and she lowered her eyes. The rush of adrenaline seemed to have settled within both of them, leaving them in an cumbersome silence.

Charles moved to sit next to her on her side. His size didn’t make it easy, but she shifted as far over as possible so not to be squished by him.

“No. You tried, Sarah. You tried so many times, I see that now. I was the one who stifled our marriage. I saw it as a means to an end, something to quiet any rumors about my family, but what I didn’t count on was...” His voice trailed off as he looked into her eyes.

She licked her lips and held her breath.

“I did not count on my falling in love with you.”

Tears gathered in her eyes.

He took her small hands into his. “It’s true, Sarah. And that truth terrified me.” His eyes focused on their joined hands.

His eyes squeezed shut as he took a deep breath. He knew this moment was coming, that the grand gesture of showing up to bring her back wouldn’t be enough. Nora pointed out that Sarah was a lover of words. She could spend reading the written word and get lost in its stories. Actions were one thing, but she needed words.

“None of this is easy for me to talk about.” His voice came out gruff. “You must understand, I’m a man of action, not words. I don’t know how to tell you about my life, or how to open up about my past. It does not come as easily for me as it does for

you.” He opened his eyes but focused them on the floor of the carriage. “I know only know how to do things.”

Sarah slipped a finger and pulled his chin up so she could look into his eyes.

“You love me?” Her voice whispered.

He shook his head. “Very much, I’m afraid.” He felt lighter saying the words, but her expression gave him pause.

She sat silent for a moment, searching his face. With a nod to herself she leaned forward.

“Then show me.” She said with an raise of her eyebrow.

Surprise flooded his system. “What?” He cocked his head to the side.

“You said you are a man of action. So show me how much you love me.”

His eyes searched hers. Could she really accept him so easily after all that had transpired between them?

He cradled her head in his hands and tipped her head back to take her mouth.

She leaned into his kiss as his tongue pushed into her mouth. A moan escaped her mouth as his arms reached down around her to pull her closer.

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The carriage hit a bump that jostled them apart. Both were breathless as Charles reached around and situated Sarah so that she was straddling his lap.

Charles looked up to his wife and was transfixed on the most beautiful woman he ever saw. Here in the carriage, separate from the outside world she let her instincts control her and she never looked more beautiful.

Her eyes became heavy with lust as her cheeks flushed from their kiss. She pressed her hands into his chest as she leaned down to capture his lips in another bruising kiss. He pushed up against her sending an electric shock through his body.

Her hips pushed down against him causing a delicious friction. Heat began to pool in his core as the bumpy carriage ride assisted in their movements.

Charles clawed at her skirts, pulling them up, so he could touch her.

“I’ve missed your touch.” His words formed over their kisses. She ran her fingernails against his scalp, moaning when his body quivered under her touch.

“Your soft skin.” His lips found her throat and sucked causing Sarah to gasp.

His hands reached under her skirts and found her hot and wet. “I’ve missed you.”

He plunged two fingers inside of her. Her back arched at the intrusion before nestling into his neck as his fingers worked in and out of her. Her hips moved against him faster and faster as the gathered heat began to melt his core and turn into molten lava.

“That’s it, darling.” He cooed into ear, knowing how much she liked the pet name.

Her whimpering against his neck proved it was still a favorite of hers.

Charles felt as if his body was going to explode. He needed more than this and by the way his goddess of a wife was moving against him, she wouldn’t last much longer..

Charles started frantically moving, trying to lift her and her skirts, all the while trying to undo his trousers.

“What are you doing?” Euphoria had slurred her words and made them soft.

“I’ll be damned if you come over my hands and not my cock.” He raised her just enough to undo his pants and reveal himself.

Hovering above him, Sarah looked at him cautiously. “How do I...”

Charles grabbed her hips and slowly lowered her down on to him.

Sarah’s head fell back as her eyes rolled to the heavens. She felt as if the man had completely filled her up. There was no her, there was no Charles, they were no longer two separate beings. It felt as if they were forever entwined, no one could tell where she ended and he began. And it was perfection.

Her hips bucked against his and she screamed. Her vision blurred as she continued to ride his thrusts. The carriage hit another bump seating her to the hilt. She screamed out in ecstasy in unison with Charles’s own moan.

She squeezed her eyes shut to concentrate on the intoxicating sensation growing within her. The tension continued to build with each thrust of her hips.

“You’re so tight, Sarah. So perfect.” The words tumbled from Charles’s lips as he kissed her neck. One arm steadied her while the other massaged her breasts. His lips moved down her throat leaving little bite marks in his wake.

Sarah’s head began to swim in her euphoric state. Her breaths were shallow puffs of air as the tension knotted in her stomach. Her legs began to shake from effort, but she needed more of him.

Her grip tightened around his neck as she continued to ride to her limit. Her head once again flew back as she screamed his name.

Bursts of color exploded behind her eyes as her hips slowed their movements. Charles was close after her, thrusting a few more times into her shaking body.

Her body lost all sense of strength and form as she melted into his body. Sweat trickled down her cheeks and into the tangled mess that was her hair. She could only imagine what she looked like, a heap of loose clothing, knotted hair, and a flush faced.

She felt a kiss on her forehead and she smiled into Charles’s chest.

“I love you, Sarah.” The vibrations from his voice rumbled against her cheek. “I may not know how to always say it, but I will always show you. I promise.”

Sarah lifted her head to look up into the sparkling green eyes she’d come to love.

“I love you, too, Charles. We’ll find a way to make this work. Together.”

She took his gigantic hand in hers and reveled how his enveloped hers.

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“I have something to show you when we get home.” Charles spoke into her hair.

Sarah shifted to remove herself from his lap and Charles held her down.

“Ah. I didn’t say you could move. I like you here like this. My wanton wife.” He said with a wicked grin.

Sarah blushed. “Charles, what if someone sees us?”

Charles looked out the window to the passing scenery. “Who will see us? Besides, let them see what a happy Duke looks like. I’m sure they will be astonished.”

Sarah giggled. She rarely saw this side of Charles and her heart squeezed at the thought that he truly had made it his mission to be more open with her.

Charles rested his hands on her still shaking legs. “Oh,” he grimaced. “Right. You’re such a slight little thing, this may be uncomfortable.”

Without much effort, Charles lifted her and brought her legs together so she sat with her legs across his lap.

Amusement danced in Sarah’s eyes. “And I forgot just how strong you are.”

Charles nipped her neck. “I’ll gladly remind you of my manly strength any time you’d like.”

Sarah laughed and swatted at his chest before sobering. “Truly, Charles. Can you

have changed this much in only a few days?”

Charles shrugged with an easy smile on his face. “I think I have been changing ever since you almost knocked over Samuels to get to me the night Eli left you. I just didn’t realize it and when I did I did my best to shut you out.”

Sarah dipped her head. “Careful, Your Grace, I think you’re starting to express your feelings.”

Charles pinched her side and she yelped. “It seems you have changed me more than I would care to admit.”

Sarah rose her chin. “I am not ashamed of that accomplishment.”

After their laughs died down, Sarah looked at Charles intently.

“You said you had something to show me at home?” She asked.

Charles’s eye brows rose. “Right! I almost forgot. Yes, I worked on something while you were away and I’d like to show you.”

The carriage slowed down and Sarah saw the familiar woods that lined their estate. Charles helped her off his lap. He tried helping with her hair, but his big hands were more in the way than helpful.

The carriage halted outside their residence and Charles helped Sarah out.

“I wanted to have you close your eyes as soon as you got out of the carriage, but Nora suggested I wait until you were upstairs.” He offered.

Sarah stood looking at her husband. From the shock of his appearance at her sister’s

home, to him throwing her over his shoulder, to their time in the carriage, she never really got a good look at her husband.

He was standing in front of her with boundless energy around him. Her once formidable husband was literally shifting his feet, waiting expectantly for her to take his hand so he could lead her inside. He looked younger, freer, happier, and it warmed her soul.

She slipped her hand in his and allowed him to lead her into the house and right to the steps.

They passed Samuels and Mrs. Bates, who both looked relieved and happy to see her. She managed to dip her head in acknowledgment before Charles hauled her up the steps.

He turned and placed his hands on her shoulders. His eyes closed and he took in a deep breath.

“Sarah,” he said as he opened his eyes. “I am sorry for the way I treated you in the beginning of our marriage.” His words were genuine but seemed rehearsed. Sarah rolled her lips to stop from smiling too widely. He was not a man of words and what he wanted to say obviously meant a lot to him.

“Even though our marriage started out as somewhat of a business deal, you have broken down my walls and made a home in my heart.” His words were rushed and a slight pinkish tint colored his cheeks.

Still, he persisted. He took her hand and led her to the first door, his mother’s study. He opened the door and ushered her in.

“You are my family now and that means what happens to me, happens to you and

even more so, what is mine, is yours. These rooms should always have been yours. I hope you like them.”

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Sarah couldn't take her eyes off of her husband. "Was that rehearsed?"

Charles pursed his lips. "Nora may have helped me." He shrugged carelessly. "I'm trying."

She rose onto her toes and kissed him. "Thank you, Charles. Thank you for coming for me, for trying, for..."

It was then her eyes saw the room they were standing in. Bright pink curtains and ruffles adorned the windows while the room was painted in a soft pink color. Pink satin pillows sat on pink ruched chairs, while pink linens covered the end tables by the doors.

"Oh my." Sarah said, her eyes wide with shock. "This is... pink."

Charles laugh echoed off the bare walls. "I figured you'd enjoy the idea of our study's matching." His wink set off a fit of giggles within Sarah.

"You can change it if you want. You can do anything you want. It's all yours." He gestured to the room. "Everything is yours. I'm yours."

Sarah smiled as she looked back up into his eyes. "That's all I ever wanted, Charles."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and picked her up in a twirl. "Then it is me you shall have."

She leaned in and captured his lips in a soft kiss.

At last, the pieces of her life fit together. There was no more push or pull for control. Sarah and Charles were the perfect blend of the eternal romantic with a giant heart and the cautious businessman who protected his family.

Together, they would balance the scales of love in their favor.

EPILOGUE

Sarah set the paintbrush down and stretched her back. She'd been working on this particular landscape for a few hours now and she was starting to lose her light.

She stood up and began to gather her paints.

"How's it coming along?"

Sarah looked up to see her husband leaning on the doorjamb.

She smiled as warmth rushed through her body. "It's going well. I'm a little rusty, but I think it's not bad for my first time painting in years."

Charles stepped into the room and strolled over to the painting, wrapping his arms around her waist. The two of them looked at the unfinished artwork in front of them.

"It's the lake from the point of view from under the willow tree."

Sarah nodded and smiled. "You were so relaxed that day. It is one of my favorite memories, well, until those boys showed up."

Charles sighed into her hair. "Yes, well, boys have a habit of showing up when they're not wanted."

“Knock! Knock! Anyone in here?” A voice drifted in through the door that connected the study.

Sarah sighed as she leaned into her husband. “Your brother is still here?” She whispered.

Her husband planted a kiss on the top of her head. “Yes, but, he has good news.”

“Ah. There you are.” Eli’s voice was light and cheerful.

“Hello, Eli.” Sarah composed herself. She had come to adore Eli. Once you got past his devilish charm and somewhat selfish ways, he had a very good heart with intelligence and good humor to spare.

“Your brother tells me you have good news.” Sarah picked up her paint pots and put them on a tray.

Eli pouted. “Charles. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Charles did not find his raking charm amusing. “Get on with it. Sarah and I have things to attend to.”

Eli rolled his eyes. “Isn’t the honeymoon period over? My God man.”

Sarah laughed. “May I remind you both that this is a highly inappropriate conversation to have in the presence of a lady.”

Eli and Charles looked at each other.

“Well, when a lady shows up, we’ll stop. Won’t we Charles?” Eli quipped with a smirk.

Sarah guffawed and swatted at him. “Oh you! You’re incorrigible.” She eyed her husband. “You let him talk to your wife that way?”

Charles raised his hands in his defense. “I’ve learned the hard way that my wife is more than capable of holding her own and if she wants to give someone a proper dressing down, who am I to stand in her way?”

Sarah grinned and took her husband’s face in her hands. “And that’s why I love you.”

Eli gagged. “Enough. We’re talking about me, remember?”

Charles turned Sarah in his arms and once again wrapped his arms around her middle. “Go on, then.”

Eli cleared his throat. “I’ve decided to go back to London when Nora heads back.”

Sarah jumped out of Charles’s arms. “Oh how wonderful! Er um, for you!”

Eli pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. “By all means don’t hide how you truly feel.”

Her smile grew at his jest. “I’m sorry, you’re right. You will be missed. You bring a certain energy to this home.”

“Yes, one that we can do without for a while.” Charles muttered.

Sarah waved him off. “Pay no attention to your brother. Why this sudden change? I thought you were going to spend a few months with us while you sorted some things out.”

Eli’s head wavered back and forth. “Yes, but I find the country life just isn’t for me. I miss the hustle and bustle of the city.”

Sarah cast a doubtful look in her brother-in-law’s direction. “Hustle and bustle, huh?”

Eli scoffed in mock offense. “Are you insinuating I will go back to my nefarious ways?”

Sarah shook her head at his dramatic ways. “I said no such thing. We just want the best for you, that’s all. I just hope all the hustle and bustle isn’t too tempting for you.”

Eli’s features turned solemn for a moment. “If I’m honest, I can’t say that same thought hadn’t crossed my mind. However, call it insight, or maturity,” Eli ignored Charles’s snort, “but that way of life just doesn’t entertain me like it used to. Perhaps seeing how I misjudged you made me realize there are good women out there that deserve more than what I was giving them.” A mischievous smile crossed Eli’s face as he leaned in towards Sarah.

“After all, you are the one that got away due to my grave miscalculations.” He batted

his eyes causing to Sarah to giggle.

Charles snarled and pulled his wife to his chest. “That’s enough. You had your chance, brother. She’s all mine now.”

Sarah reached around her husband and tightened her hold on him. “Sorry, Eli. I’m afraid your brother has captured my heart.”

“Hello?”

The three turned to see Nora stepping through the doorway.

“Here you all are. Mrs. Bates has been looking for you all. She wanted to let you know that dinner will be ready soon.”

Nora walked up to the painting Sarah was working on.

“Oh, Sarah, it’s gorgeous. I love the blur of the hanging branches in the foreground. You should definitely display this where people can see it.” Nora’s eyes soaked in the painting as Sarah walked over to a stack of paintings next to the doorway.

The other day her and Charles went through all the paintings in the room that were stacked against the wall. They picked out their favorites and had them hung around the house but there were a few that she held back.

“Nora? Charles and I were going through some of your mother’s paintings and we thought that perhaps you would like a few of them to take back to London with you. That way you’ll have a piece of her with you.”

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Sarah looked up to see Nora standing with tears in her eyes. Sarah brought the painting of the lake to Nora.

The young girl gasped. “The lake?”

Sarah nodded. “You said that the lake was one of your favorite spots and,” she gestured to her own painting, “as you can see, as soon as I finish this one, we’ll have a painting of the lake. It was your mother’s favorite spot and one of yours. We’d love for you to have it.”

Nora handled the painting as if it were a fragile piece of glass.

“I don’t know what to say.” She held the painting to her chest. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” Her eyes were closed as she chanted the words.

Charles came to stand beside Sarah and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “There are two unfinished paintings of mothers you’re welcome to have. No pressure to finish them, we just thought that perhaps you’d want them.”

Nora opened her eyes. “I would love that.” A tear rolled down her cheek as Eli enveloped her in a big hug.

“Look at us,” he laughed, “who would have thought our family would be openly crying and consoling each other. We’ve come a long way.”

“Yes, and if that long way could make it down to the dining room that would be helpful. I’m sure Mrs. Bates and Samuels will send a search party for us if we don’t

show up soon.” Charles chided.

“Kill joy.” Eli rolled his eyes. “Can always count on Charles to bring us back down to earth.”

They started for the door. Eli helped Nora carry her mother’s paintings.

“Eli, can you tell Mrs. Bates that Charles and I will be down shortly? I need his help cleaning up these paints before they dry out.” Sarah called out.

“Do you need more help?” Eli asked sincerely. He truly was changing for the better.

She shook her head. “No, we’ll be able to manage. Thank you.”

He dipped his head and escorted his sister out of the studio and into the hallway.

When she heard the door click shut she turned to her husband who was gathering the brushes and putting them in the solution for cleaning.

She took a deep breath and walked towards him. “It’s wonderful about Eli.”

Charles made a noncommittal noise as he folded the towels and set them next to the paints.

Sarah rolled her lips. “Um, Nora seemed to really like the paintings. I’m glad we could give them to her.”

Charles looked up at his wife. There was a sparkle in his eyes that stole her breath every time she saw it. Luckily for her, she’s been seeing it a lot lately.

“Me, too.” He paused as he looked outside at the darkening sky. “You know, it used

to be so hard to talk about my mother and the time before that I just assumed that's how it always would be."

His eyes tracked back to Sarah. "And it can still be hard, but I find myself wanting to share stories about her with you. With Nora." He shook his head in disbelief. "Sorry. I'm still getting used to this."

Sarah walked over to him and took his face in her hands. "Never apologize for saying how you feel, not with me."

Her hands left his face and found his. She always loved when they held hands. His giant ones holding hers always made her feel safe and secure.

"I must say, I will miss Nora and Eli. These past few weeks have been entertaining having everyone here. There was always someone to talk to, or walk with. It was nice."

Charles nodded in agreement. "Yes, but sometimes there were too many people around." He said as his eyes darkened.

A knowing smile crossed Sarah's face. Her hands left his and reached up to encircle his neck.

"I agree. Plus, if they didn't leave soon I'm not sure how we all would fit."

Charles's brow furrowed. "What do you mean? Everyone has their own room. It can get a bit rowdy at night with everyone milling around but-"

As he spoke Sarah took one of his hands in hers but this time she placed it on her stomach.

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Charles stopped talking and stared at her hand.

Sarah was amused watching the range of emotions dance across his face. For someone who bemoaned sharing his thoughts, his facial expressions certainly did not have the same affliction. Confusion, to denial, back to confusion, to surprise, then he finally landed on exhilaration.

“Are you joking?” His voice cracked in the most charming of ways.

She nodded enthusiastically.

He lifted her up and spun her around.

“We’re going to have a baby!” He shouted.

Extreme joy and gratitude washed over Sarah. “I’m so glad you’re happy.”

Charles lowered his wife. “Of course I’m happy. I’m with you. I’ll always be happy with you.”

The End?