



# The Duke and the Accidental Bride

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "Do not tempt me, little wife. You will behave for me."

Duke Duncan needs a bride—at least for one night. Only, the perfect candidate dares to refuse him. And he shall not be denied...

Trapped into acting as his betrothed, Isabella vows to make Duncan regret it. Until she digs her own grave by announcing they are to be wedded...soon.

Leaving him no choice but to claim her, Duncan is furious. For their marriage of convenience is nothing but an accident. Yet the way he needs to make this alluring hellion submit to him is no mistake...

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *The Duke and the Accidental Bride* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 97

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:35 am*

## Chapter One

“Itold you we should have brought an umbrella! I knew it!”

“Oh, it is notthatbad, Martha,” the Honorable Isabella Gouldsmith laughed as she hurried down the driveway, holding a hand above her head in a vain effort to blot out the rain. “Rather trivial in the grand scheme of things, wouldn’t you say?”

Behind her sat the carriage which Isabella had just arrived in. The journey had been beset by gathering storm clouds and high winds, holding off on rain until the second that Isabella arrived. And where it might have been smart to have turned back and sought shelter in the safety of the carriage... Isabella was stubborn to a fault.

“You’re all wet!” Isabella’s elderly maid and chaperone, Martha, rushed ahead of Isabella, heading for the steps which led to the front door of the manor. “And your uncle will not appreciate –”

“I do not care what my uncle thinks,” Isabella cut her off, hand still held above her head; an action which did little as the rain was falling thick and fast and, most importantly, wet. “I am infinitely more concerned withwhyhe has asked me to be here today.”

“Something you could also have found out whilst dry. Oh, this rain!”

“Little we can do about it now,” Isabella chuckled at her maid’s distress. “And look how wet you are. Here.” She swept in and attempted to shield the elderly maid.

“Do not worry about me.” Martha exclaimed. “You are the one who —”

“Does not even wish to be here.”

“Is getting wet!”

“Let us get inside then, shall we? Unless it is somehow also raining indoors.”

“Of course!” Martha was up the steps in a flash, fist already raised before her as she proceeded to hammer on the closer door. “Oh, come on now!” She knocked harder. “Where is he!”

“I should not be surprised,” Isabella muttered, beginning to shake a little as she felt her dress becoming soaked through. And that wasn’t to speak of what the rain was surely doing to her make-up! “Knowing Uncle Leopold, he is standing on the other side of the door right now, taking pleasure in the knowledge that we have been caught in this weather.”

“Miss! You should not say such things,” Martha gasped, again knocking loudly on the door.

Isabella snorted. “A harsh truth is still a truth, Martha. And my uncle is nothing if not deserving of such an observation. I would not even be here right now if not for his nature. Antagonistic and petty.”

“It is a strange thing,” Martha said, still hammering away on the door. Her blows were loud but the rumbling of thunder which seemed to shake the earth beneath them did much to drown them out. “His inviting you here, is my meaning. And you are certain you do not know the reason?”

“You read the same letter as I.” Isabella had forgone the effort to block out the rain

and was now rubbing her arms to keep herself from catching a chill. Soaked to the bone in what was an auspicious beginning to what was an auspicious meeting.

“Even still...” Martha clicked her tongue. “Lord Langham should not have requested to meet with you without first asking it of your mother. He should know better.”

“Ah, now who is badmouthing my uncle,” Isabella said with a wry smile.

Martha’s eyes widened and she began to stammer. “I did not mean – I am simply pointing out that – it is proper for --”

“Oh, I know what you meant.” Isabella waved the poor woman down. “And I agree with you. It is most peculiar. Alas, it is not as if I have much of a choice...” As she rubbed her arms, Isabella leaned back and looked upwards, observing the front of the closed-off manor as a sense of melancholy swept through her which had nothing to do with the chill.

Langham Estate always brought with it feelings of sadness and loss, even despair. As a young girl, it had been Isabella’s home, her late father’s before her, and before that his father’s and so on. But recently, just a few years ago now, her uncle had kicked her and her mother and sisters out without warning, wanting it for himself.

Leopold Langham was a cruel man. Not in ways that were typically evil, more selfish and self-aggrandizing. When Isabella’s father had died nearly a decade ago, her uncle had inherited his title and his wealth, leaving Isabella's mother to rely upon him as if they were stray dogs begging for scraps from the kennel master.

Not a true monster, he gave them enough to survive on, while ensuring at the same time that they knew their place and if he so wished it, he could end them without losing a wink of sleep.

Needless to say, when Isabella received a summons from her uncle, demanding that she present herself on his doorstep at this hour without informing her mother, she did not ask why or to what cause. She simply made sure that she was there.

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” Martha cried out. With both hands wide open, she began to beat on the door as if she was trying to knock it down. “Hello” she wailed. “Hello! Is anyone --”

The door swung open suddenly to reveal a young manservant who Isabella did not recognize. He eyed the two of them with a sense of dispassion, even trepidation when he saw how soaking wet they were. No sense, however, of apology for having kept them waiting.

“Welcome,” he said as he stepped to the side and gestured for them to enter. “Lord Langham has been expecting you.”

“It is about time!” Martha muttered. She stepped back and wrapped an arm around Isabella as she shepherded her inside and out of the rain. “I never in all my life...”

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“Isabella, welcome!” Lord Langham held his arms wide as he swept across the room to greet Isabella. “I know I say this every time that I see you, but you grow more beautiful with each passing day.”

Somehow, and considering the circumstances, Isabella very much doubted it.

The manservant who had ushered Isabella and Martha inside moments ago, directing them straight to the drawing room, had not bothered to offer them a towel to dry themselves with, leaving the two women looking like drowned rats seeking shelter from a sinking ship.

“U -- uncle,” Isabella shuddered from the cold as he took her by the arms, holding her back to get a better look at her. “It is wo – wo -- wonderful to see you, as always.”

“My God!” her uncle cried suddenly, as if only just now noticing how disheveled she was. “What on earth -- is it raining outside? I had no idea.”

“Just a little.”

“Renfield!” He looked past Isabella to his manservant. “Fetch some blankets and towels, won’t you? And be quick about it! Oh, come here, you poor thing. By the fire...” Still holding her by the arms, Isabella’s uncle led her across the room and sat her down on a couch by the fireplace. “There,” he purred as he helped her settle. “I am so sorry, if I had known what the weather was doing, I would have had Renfield wait for you outside.”

“It is quite alright,” Isabella said, shuffling forward on the couch so that she was

closer to the fire; the heat began to warm her, doing little for how she must look, but at least it made her feel a bit better. “I am here now.”

“Yes,” her uncle said as he stepped back. “And I am so glad that you came – and I must apologize also, for all this secrecy. And the demand!” he chuckled. “I cannot imagine what you must be thinking.”

“The same as I often think about you,” Isabella said before she could help herself.

Her uncle’s face dropped, quickly followed by a curving of his upper lip in a way that she recognized only too well. He did not like being talked back to, and he loved reminding those he thought beneath him that he was not a man to be spoken to in such a manner.

Careful now, Isabella. Uncle Leopold might be an insufferable old wart but he also holds the keys to Mother’s fate. And my own, for that matter.

She was about to apologize. Not something that she enjoyed doing, but she knew to be necessary. Best to at least try and be civil.

Only then, and most shockingly, her uncle laughed. “Ha! That tongue of yours...” He shook his head in jest. “You always were a sharp one, weren’t you. You’re like your mother in that way.”

Isabella balked at the response.

Leaning back, she glanced at Martha – standing on the other side of the couch in a bid to warm herself by the fire – who appeared just as shocked as Isabella was by this most strange reaction. It might have been the first time that she had ever heard her uncle laugh.

“Ah... yes, I am... glad to have come,” she said lamely, mostly for lack of an idea what she should say.

“And I am glad to see you here.” Her uncle was then quick across the room. “Shall I fix you a drink – where is Renfield with those towels and blankets?” He looked about the drawing room. “Honestly, good help can be so hard to find.”

“I am quite alright, concerning the drink,” Isabella said, now eyeing her uncle with extreme confusion. “I would rather speak of the reason that you have asked to see me.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Her uncle was by the liquor cabinet, where he poured himself what looked to be a glass of whiskey. He took a sip and smacked his lips before making his way back to her. “Again, I am so sorry for all the secrecy but in this instance, it was required. And I must ask that whatever is to happen here tonight, that your mother be kept in the dark. That woman...” He rolled his eyes. “I swear that she invented meddling.”

“If that is your wish,” Isabella said slowly, still eyeing her uncle as she waited for what was sure to be the punchline.

“Oh, not just my wish, but His Grace’s also.”

Isabella blinked. “His Grace?”

“Well, yes.” Her uncle looked down at her as if she was daft. “His Grace, the Duke of Fangsdale. The reason that you are here.”

Isabella blinked again. “I... what does His Grace have to do with this?”

“Why, he is the reason that I have asked you to come. Did you not wonder what he



was doing here?”

“Here? What are you...” Isabella turned around on the couch and swept her gaze across the drawing room, certain that her uncle had lost his mind.

The room was cloaked in shadow, the sole light source coming from the hearth which was blocked mostly by her body sitting before it. It left the corners of the room darkened, which was why Isabella had barely paid them any attention – far too concentrated on getting warm, and her uncle’s odd behavior.

Only now, looking closer, Isabella spied for the first time a man standing in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall, watching the scene unfold with a sense of what she might have mistaken for boredom and extreme disinterest was his stern gaze not focused so squarely upon her that it was as if she were a lamb, he a wolf, and he was eyeing her off as he waited for the perfect moment to pounce on and then eat her.

A sudden cold swept through her body; overpowering the heat from the fire. He was taller than her uncle, broader in the shoulders, wider in the back, thicker in the legs; a hulking specimen of a man that looked as out of place as if a tree had sprung up in the back corner of the room.

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But it was that cold, dispassionate gaze that brought with it a chill. Never mind how objectionably handsome he was. Dark eyes. Dark, wild hair. Square features all. His stare... it was so intense that Isabella felt it in her stomach like a hand was wrapping around her insides. Her heart began to race with what felt like fear, and where she knew that she should look away – for safety, if nothing else -- she simply could not bring herself to do so.

“Your Grace!” she gasped.

“Did I not...” Her uncle looked between them. “My God!” He gave his head a shake. “I am an absolute dolt sometimes. Too many late nights and early mornings. Work has been ravaging me, Isabella. My mind is in about a dozen different places of the moment.”

Her uncle chuckled as he looked toward the Duke as if expecting him to step forward from the shadows and introduce himself. He did no such thing, arms folded, his glare now fixed on her uncle.

“Right. Yes.” Her uncle cleared his throat and then held his hand out as if to wave the Duke toward them. “Your Grace, I would like to introduce you to my niece, the Honorable Isabella Gouldsmith. And Isabella, this is, of course, His Grace, the Duke of Fangsdale.”

Isabella was quick to jump to her feet, even if her entire body was shaking. But not from the cold. It was His Grace’s stare, the command that it embodied; the fiery discipline. It sent a shiver through Isabella’s body, again having nothing to do with the chill.

“Your Grace...” Suddenly, Isabella became very aware of her appearance, and as she stepped around the couch, she did what she could to flatten her dress and wipe away the smudged make-up on her face... a rather vain attempt for she knew she must look abhorrent. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“As it is my pleasure to have brought the two of you together.” Her uncle was quick to step between them, rubbing his hands together and laughing nervously. “His Grace and I have recently entered into business together, you see, and it was during one of our many long, productive conversations that he broached a topic with me that, to be perfectly honest, I was beyond grateful to be made privy to. The fact that he would even think to ask me of such a thing is beyond generous.”

Now Isabella understood why her uncle was acting this way.

He was and always had been the embodiment of a social climber, desperate to belong and to be accepted by those he thought above him socially, while harboring resentment toward them because he also thought himself their equals.

If there was a man more powerful and in the same room as her uncle, Isabella knew that her uncle would be the first to fall to the ground and lick his boots if so asked. And from the way her uncle was behaving right now, she got the distinct impression that few were as powerful as His Grace.

“But he did,” her uncle continued. “And naturally, your name came straight to mind. I considered your sister, Louisa too, of course, but I know what an idealist she is. Nowhere near as practical as you are. I told His Grace of you, he asked for this little rendezvous, and here we are.” He clapped his hands together proudly. “So, what do we think?”

Isabella frowned. “About what?”

“Oh!” her uncle’s eyes went wide. “Did I not say? Gosh, again, my mind is in a dozen places. I really am --”

“Langham,” the Duke suddenly growled.

It was spoken softly. Like the distant rumble of thunder on the horizon. But Isabella felt it shake the room, vibrating up her legs and through her body as if he had taken her by the arms and shaken her himself. The command in that single word. The force of it!

And her uncle, as if he had been struck by lightning, froze mid-sentence. He then turned and looked at the Duke, waiting for his orders, too afraid to say the wrong thing.

“So many words spoken, so little actually said.” The Duke pushed himself off the wall and started across the room; a tidalwave sweeping toward them. “I know fishwives who blather less than you do.”

“I am sorry, Your Grace! I was simply trying to explain --”

“You explained nothing,” the Duke snapped. He reached where her uncle was standing, and his physical size compared to her uncle took Isabella’s breath away. The man was a mountain! “Leave, now. I will take care of this on my own.”

“I... you wish for me to leave?”

“Do not make me repeat myself, Langham.”

His eyes went wide. “Of course!” He jumped in the air and spun about. “I shall check on Renfield. See where he is with those blankets!” Her uncle was quick to hurry to the door and throw himself from the room.

“And your chaperone too, please,” the Duke then said of Martha. He did not bother looking toward the elderly maid, keeping his hardened gaze fixed on Isabella in a way that made her knees tremble.

“Ex -- excuse me?” Isabella stammered.

“What I wish to speak of requires utmost secrecy.”

“Oh...” She blinked and glanced at Martha who still stood by the fire. “I assure you that Martha is not one to gossip.”

“And I assure you that I do not like to repeat myself. Now, if you do not mind...” He did not raise his voice. He did not appear angry or put out. He simply spoke the words, expecting them to be heeded, because that was who this man was.

“Ma -- Martha.” Isabella swallowed the lump in her throat. “If you will wait outside.”

“Miss, I do not know if that --”

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“It is quite alright, Martha,” Isabella spoke up. “I will be fine.”

Martha hesitated. She looked between them, clearly uncomfortable at the thought of leaving her alone. “Well... I will be right outside this door. Shout out if you need anything.”

Slowly, Martha walked across the room, stepped outside, and closed the door behind her, leaving Isabella and the Duke alone for the first time.

It was a strange sensation that crept inside of Isabella as she forced herself to meet the Duke’s gaze. Some of it was fear, for she suddenly felt powerless and completely at this man’s mercy. Alone as they were. The darkened room. Even the flames in the fireplace seemed to have softened, as if smothered by presence.

But there was something else... the way her heart raced in her chest... how warm she suddenly felt in her body... all while unable to look away, even if she felt that she should. Isabella was both terrified and entranced.

“I want to apologize for the subversion,” the Duke began; his voice deep and commanding. “Lord Langham handled this situation poorly.”

“Oh.” She blinked, caught off guard by the apology. “That is quite fine --”

“But it was necessary,” he spoke over her. “The fact is that I find myself faced with a dilemma, and after confessing it to Lord Langham, it appears as if you, Miss Gouldsmith, might be the perfect person to help me solve it.”

She hesitated, not certain if she should speak. But he raised an eyebrow at her, as if giving his permission. “Wh -- what is this dilemma that you speak of?”

“Next week, I am hosting a dinner with some members of my family. My mother and my grandmother to name a few. Who will be there is not important. What is important is your place at that dinner.”

“My place?”

He nodded. “I would like for you to attend, Miss Gouldsmith, at which time, when asked, you will confirm that the two of us are courting one another and have been doing so for some --”

“What!” Isabella blustered before she could stop herself.

His Grace’s jaw clenched at the interruption. He paused, making sure she was finished. And then, he continued. “That we are courting. That we are happy. That we are enjoying one another’s company, as is right. And that as far as you are aware, we intend to remain in such a state until at least the end of the Season.”

He looked at her for a response, to which Isabella gave none.

Her mind spun at his words. She tried to fathom what he was saying. To make sense of it! Surely, she had misunderstood?

“Well?” he prompted.

“I do not...” She cleared her throat.... and again, attempted to flatten her dress and push her hair from her eyes. “I do not understand.”

“I was perfectly clear.”

“You wish for us to pretend to be courting one another?”

“For the evening, yes.”

“But why?” she asked in a fluster, her mind spinning faster than she could keep track of. “We do not know one another. We have never met or spoken – why me? Why any of this!”

Careful, Isabella. Do not become irate. When that happens, you tend to speak without thinking and I very much get the sense that His Grace is not the type to appreciate that.

“The reason is not important.”

“Of course it is!”

His jaw clenched again, and he fixed a warning glare on her. “What is important is that this will benefit you as much as it will me.” She almost laughed at that but forced it down. “I have been speaking with your uncle of your circumstances and --”

“My circumstances?” she cut him off again. Her eyes went wide, and she covered her mouth when she saw the side of his mouth twitching.

“Yes...” He growled softly. “Your circumstances. At twenty and one you have no suitors, nor is there any indication that this Season will change that for you. From what I have heard of you, there is good reason for it.”

“What does that mean --” Again, she caught her tongue, and again it was too late.

“If word spreads that you and I are courting, it will do wonders for your reputation,” he continued. “One night is all I ask. A single night of pretending and the effect it



will have on your life will more than cover the...” He clicked his tongue. “The moral quandary which I am sure you are feeling.”

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Isabella didn't know if she should have been angry, insulted, or grateful! All felt correct. What His Grace was saying made perfect sense and was true enough. But it was the way that he was saying it that struck her the wrong way.

“And if I do not care about any of that?” she said.

He sighed. “Then think of your uncle. I am more than aware of your family's situation, and I know personally how grateful your uncle would be if you were to do this for me. And how upset with you he would be if you did not.” He raised a knowing eyebrow at her, the implication of his meaning clear.

Isabella felt a flair of anger ignite inside of her such that she met the Duke's gaze with a glare of her own. And she might have done more than that... was she not wholly aware of the truth that he spoke.

He was blackmailing her. It was as simple as that. And considering the hold her uncle had over her and her family, it was a very effective form of blackmail to boot.

“So...” She continued to glare at him. As handsome as he was, she saw right past that. A cruel, manipulative monster is what the Duke was. A beast! “Those are my choices, are they? To be your... your plaything for the night, lest my uncle become upset.”

“Not the words I would have used,” he said without a hint of emotion. “But if that is how you wish to see it. So, do we have a deal?”

“Do I have a choice?”

He chuckled. "You always have a choice. But choices come with consequences, Miss Gouldsmith. Some good, some bad. Now..." Suddenly, he stepped in closer, so close that he was less than a foot away. Towering over her, she caught her breath, very nearly stumbled back and might have, had his hand not found its way to her waist. His touch sent a pulse through her body, and she gasped, eyes wide, heart racing with fear... and something else. That something else rose in her as he leaned in close, voice dropping to a whisper as his mouth moved to her ear. "Do we have a deal?"

Her mind was frozen. His hand on her waist... the feel of his body so close to her own... the power that radiated through him in ways that she had never felt before.

She stood with her mouth hanging open, her heart rate rising, her stare meeting the Duke's as if trapped by it.

"Well?" he asked.

Isabella wanted to say no. Of course she did! If for no other reason than to put the Duke in his place, for she was not one to be commanded and ordered about like a house-trained puppy! But she had heard the Duke's words, she recognized the threat, and she knew that if she was to say no... her uncle, as unforgiving a man as he was, would become even more so.

In short, she had no choice.

"Ye -- yes," she stammered, trying desperately to control herself.

"Good girl..." His breath was a whisper, and it had her skin breaking out into goosebumps. And then, suddenly, he stepped back and straightened and the spell he had cast broke. "I will leave instructions with your uncle. But I expect to be seeing you next week. Do I make myself clear?"

The Duke was not used to being told no. He was not used to not getting what he wanted. And this conversation, this request, made that perfectly clear. Isabella had met a lot of lords and even dukes in her life, but none were like this man. None radiated that sense of assurance and power and command like he did.

A natural troublemaker, Isabella yearned to say no and fight this. But one look at his eyes, that steeled gaze, and her legs became jelly and any sense of resistance she might have felt was destroyed such that she was reduced to exactly what he desired of her: a complacent plaything to do with as he so pleased.

“Yes,” she said weakly, utterly defeated. “I understand perfectly.”

As you will come to understand that I am not one so easily cowered. As regrettable as this situation is... I have no doubt that His Grace will come to regret it even more than I.

## Chapter Two

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Louisa said. She had a grimace on her face, and a fearful look in her eyes.

“It is not as if I have a choice,” Isabella said.

“Of course you do!”

“No.” Isabella swung about and looked at her twin sister. “I do not. Remember, it was His Grace who brought this on, not me. Anything that happens tonight is on him.”

Louisa did not look convinced. If anything, the fear present in her eyes only grew for no doubt she recognized the determined, and almost certainly mischievous, look on Isabella’s face. A look which told her that her sister was up to no good and that

nothing could be said or done to change her mind. Such was Isabella's stubbornness.

"But... but... but it is only for one night," Louisa begged. "And he is not asking that much. Not really."

"It is not just what he is asking of me, Louisa." Isabella turned back to face the mirror that she had spent the last five minutes looking into. "It was the way that he asked – you were not there. He was just so rude about it. Mean. And the implication behind what he said..." She scoffed.

"What implication?"

"That I should be so lucky! Well..." A self-satisfied smirk crossed her lips as she studied both her reflection and outfit. "He is about to learn firsthand that he cannot go about bullying people without consequences."

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“I just wish you would reconsider,” Louisa begged. “Even the dress...” She bit into her lip, eyes flicking down the length of the scandalous garment. “Perhaps something a little plainer?”

“You don’t like the dress?” Isabella’s eyes lit up. “Something tells me the Duke is going to love it.” Not that I care about such things!

At the risk of sounding pretentious, Isabella had always considered herself a beauty. Perhaps not in the traditional sense, for her blonde hair was a little too dark to be angelic, and her curvy body was perhaps not the norm for what she knew men liked. But even still, she was more than happy with what God had given her to work with. And in this dress...

The dress was scandalous to say the least. A low neckline and a tight waist. Certainly not appropriate for a dinner party with family and friends. And certainly a piece that the Duke was sure to take note of, hopefully be undone by, and be left regretting his decision to force her into this debacle in the first place.

But again, the Duke had brought this on himself.

It had been a week now since her meeting with the Duke. A week left to ponder. A week left to consider. A week left to plan! And plan, Isabella did.

She had run through that night a million times and above all else, what she was most annoyed with, was how quickly she had caved. So taken was she by the Duke’s presence, so overwhelmed by how assured and commanding he was, she had folded like a house of cards and succumbed to his every whim.

It was so unlike Isabella that it was startling – more her sister than herself, for Louisa had always been more agreeable.

But that was in the past and Louisa had to focus on the future. The dinner party was tonight, and Isabella had decided that if she was to go through with this farce of an evening, that the least she could do was make the Duke pay for it.

And pay he will...

“Just make sure that mother does not find out,” Isabella said, turning back on her sister.

“She won’t,” Louisa sighed. “As far as she is concerned, you are with a friend tonight, and I have reached out and made sure that the lie will hold. Oh, I hate having to do this!”

“I wish I could say the same...” Isabella pumped her eyebrows. “Alas, I would be made a liar if I didn’t say that I was almost looking forward to it.”

That was a lie. Isabella would rather had stayed home tonight, existing in a world where she had never heard of His Grace, Lord Duke Fangsdale. But that simply wasn’t the case. Rather, she would exist in a world where His Grace wished that he had never heard of her instead.

At least one thing will be certain. By the time tonight is through, I won’t have to worry myself with seeing His Grace ever again. Of that, I can be sure.

If it was not for the fact that Isabella knew His Grace to be a man of few words, she might have thought that he had been struck speechless. Perhaps he still was? Those few words he was going to say being knocked from him at the sight of her in that dress.

She arrived on time to his elegant manor; without a doubt one of the finest, and biggest estates that she had ever been in. A far cry from the London home she and her sister and mother were now forced to live in. She knocked on the front door, expecting a butler or servant to answer, only to find His Grace on the other side.

“Your Grace...” Her smile was over the top, as was her curtsy. “Thank you once again for this most wonderful opportunity you have given me. I cannot tell you how grateful I am.”

He didn’t speak. At least not straight away.

Standing in the doorway, as imposing and gigantic as she remembered him to be, he simply looked at her. His dark eyes narrowed slightly. His lips pursed together. He studied her, moving up her body, pausing on her waist and then her chest, moving to her face, and then her eyes, which he held unblinking.

The confidence that Isabella had been feeling all day and right up until now left her in an instant. Her mouth turned dry. Her body turned hot. And she began to fidget nervously.

Perhaps this dress was a bad idea?

There was something about this man that undid her. It wasn’t that she found him attractive –Ido not! Yes, he was attractive, but she wasn’t attracted to him. It was how detached he was, how easily he took control with no more than a look. Once again, she felt her own sense of power leave her and she began to consider in very real terms if tonight’s plan was worth going through with.

Or more to the point, if she were able to, such was the way she felt in his presence.

“You are late,” he said eventually.



“I...” She blinked, not sure what to say.

“But you are here, so it is of no consequence.” He stepped back and opened the door wider, indicating for her to come inside.

“Oh!” She gave her head a shake, trying to find her confidence again, and hurried inside. The closing of the door behind her had her jumping. “Sorry, I thought I was – I did not realize I was late.”

Well done, Isabella. Really asserting yourself, aren't you!

“It is no matter.” The Duke stepped in behind her, looked as if he was about to rest a hand on the small of her back, but then stopped. “We have only just sat down. So, if you do not mind...” He indicated for her to walk with him across the large foyer.

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“If we must.” Isabella forced herself not to look at the Duke, doing her best to instill herself with some much needed confidence.

“Before we begin,” the Duke started, falling in beside her but careful not to get too close.... strangely, in fact, how he walked beside her but away at the same time. “About tonight. You are not to speak unless asked a direct question. Is that understood?”

Isabella frowned. “I... surely, you are not serious?”

“I wish for tonight to be as drama free as possible,” he continued. “You will sit where I tell you. You will speak when I ask it of you. And you will agree with whatever is said. If we are lucky, that will be enough to satisfy and no untoward or probing questions will be asked of us.”

“And if they are?”

“Then I shall answer them,” he said. Quickly then, he hurried forward and stepped in front of Isabella, cutting her off. Like a tree springing up in the middle of the path, it was all she could do not to crash headfirst into him. “I know that you are not happy with what you have been asked to do.”

“Asked?” she scoffed. “That implies I had a choice.”

The Duke glared a warning at her. “This is not a game, Miss Gouldsmith. And I am not trying to play one. Remember what I said last week about consequences for one’s own actions? If at any time you feel the need to...” His eyes flicked over her. “To say

something which you are not certain of, think of that and then think very hard if the consequences will be worth the outcome.”

Still standing before her, still looking down at her, she could feel him trying to impose his will. Again, she got the sense that he was not a man who was used to not getting his way and the mere fact he was forced to beg as he was, had him reaching the end of his patience.

Isabella, having finally gotten control of herself, met the Duke’s warning glare and matched it. She looked up at him, raised her chin, and forced herself not to look away. She hated being told what to do. And she hated being treated like a child – an imposition! As if she was to blame for any of this.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she said with a flattering smile. “I will do as asked. You need not fear.”

He narrowed his eyes, a final warning. Then, he nodded once and stepped back around her so that he was by her side. “Shall we...” He held out a hand, leading her forward.

“We shall.” She straightened and began back across the foyer, toward the dining room.

“And by the way...” Walking beside her, she saw his eyes flick over her body and a slight smile work up the side of his face. “Nice dress.”

“I actually know your mother,” His Grace’s mother, the Dowager Duchess of Fangsdale, said pleasantly as she had a sip of wine. “How is she? It has been years since I last spoke with her.”

“She is...” Isabella glanced at His Grace who nodded once. “She is doing well, thank

you for asking.”

“I knew your father a little also,” the Duchess continued. “Such a shame what happened. Even after all of this time, I am sure that you miss him dearly.”

“I do,” Isabella said. She would have liked to have a sip of wine herself, but the Duke had not allowed her to have any. “My mother also, of course. She might pretend that she has moved on, it has been ten years now. But I know that she misses him.”

“They were happy then?” the Duchess asked curiously.

“I believe they were.”

She nodded her understanding, sighing as if saddened by it. “It is so rare nowadays to find love in marriage. And for it to be cut short like that, why, I cannot think of anything worse.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“I understand too that you have two sisters? An older sister who... now, who did she marry again?” The Duchess bit her lip. “Remind me, won’t you?”

“Mother...” His Grace looked at his mother. “Will you please stop with all the questions. Miss Gouldsmith has answered quite enough of them.”

“Oh, well excuse me for wishing to better know the woman who has stolen my son’s heart.” She scoffed and had another sip of wine. “What on earth was I thinking.”

“I had hoped that tonight might be spent speaking about other things,” His Grace said evenly. “And Miss Gouldsmith has been more than patient with you.”

“Patient!” the Duchess cried and looked at Isabella. “He acts as if I have been hounding you! I do hope you speak with your own mother in far softer tones than my son does with me? Not that it would be very hard to do so.”

“Mother...”

The dinner was an awkward affair to say the least.

When His Grace had spoken of it earlier, he had made it seem as if there would be a whole host of guests in attendance, enough that Isabella would be able to shrink back and disappear if she at any point felt overwhelmed or her tongue began to run away with her.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:36 am*

As it turned out, His Grace had grossly oversold the evening.

There were four people seated in the dining room. At the head of the table was His Grace, as was expected. Isabella sat to his right. To his left was his mother, the Dowager Duchess of Fangsdale, and to her immediate left was her own mother, the Dowager Marchioness of Martell. And that was it!

The Dowager Duchess of Fangsdale was somewhere in her sixties, elegant and regal in the way that she held herself and how she dressed, but also stern and commanding and a little harsh... much like her son.

The Dowager Marchioness of Martell was the complete opposite. At least eighty, she was tiny, withered, and adorable to say the least. A kindly old lady who sat there quietly, listening but saying little, her eyes shining with pride whenever she looked upon her grandson.

“It makes me think of the two of you,” the Duchess, His Grace’s mother, continued, ignoring the way her son glared at her. “Do we have here a love match? I would have to think that my son would not settle for anything less than perfection.”

“Mother, that is quite enough.”

“What did I say? Is it so wrong for a mother to wish the best for her son.” She turned her attention to Isabella. “You are a beauty, my dear, nobody is denying that...” Her eyes flicked over Isabella’s dress, and Isabella felt herself flushing pink with embarrassment.

What was I thinking with this dress!

“But beauty is not enough,” she continued. “My son, as I am sure you know, is smarter than he lets on. If he is to settle down, he requires an equal. Not a plaything who is good for little more than looking nice on his arm. Would you not agree?”

Isabella had to work overtime to stop her mouth from dropping. She had thought His Grace to be rude and to the point. But his mother was something else entirely!

Her leg began to shake under the table. That desire to say something – to defend herself. It was bubbling up inside of her, building, threatening to burst...

“I can assure you, Mother, that Miss Gouldsmith is more than my equal. And she is more than just a plaything. I did not court her by accident.”

“Oh, I know that,” she chuckled, again looking at Isabella’s dress. “I think we can all see exactly why you chose to court her.”

“Mother, that is enough.”

“What did I say! More than Miss Gouldsmith has tonight, that is for sure. Just do me a favor will you, Duncan? Although I am pleased that you are finally beginning to take your future seriously, make sure that the next one is a little more interesting. I know you, is why, and you’re likely to grow bored if you can’t find a lady who will challenge you.” She smirked across the table at Isabella. “No offence, dear.”

Isabella wanted to say nothing.

Oh, how she did.

She shut her mouth tight. She took a deep breath. She tried her best to keep the words

contained but... but... but she had her limits, and they had well since been reached.

Smiling as if something funny was said, she looked at His Grace as if to apologize in advance. His eyes widened in warning but she shrugged and then turned back to the Duchess.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, I have not meant to be so silent this evening but when one loves their own voice as much as you so clearly do, I find it best to let them speak. Lest the hot air inside them builds up such that they end up exploding.”

The Duchess’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

Shockingly, His Grace chuckled. But he flashed his eyes in warning at her. “She is only making fun, Mother. Surely, you can appreciate --”

“And I can assure you that I am more than your son’s equal,” Isabella continued, feeling a surge of adrenaline pulse through her that she knew to be bad because when she felt that it tended to have her doing and saying things that she should not.”

“Is that right?” the Duchess said coldly.

“Would you expect anything less from your son?” Isabella laughed as if it was all in good fun. “Oh, I know he is a man of few words, but they are always the correct ones.” Feeling an impulse, she reached over and rested a hand on top of the Duke’s. He went stiff but did not remove it. “It was one of the many reasons that I fell in love with him.”

“In love?” the Duchess cocked an eyebrow.

Isabella suppressed the urge to gasp, not having meant to say that. “Of course,” she said. Dammit, why am I so stubborn! “I get the sense that I am the first woman your



son has brought to meet you, perhaps ever. Why would he do such a thing if not for love?"

"I think that is enough for one evening." His Grace pulled his hand free and pushed his chair back. "Miss Gouldsmith, if you and I might --"

"I think you speak too quickly, dear," the Duchess said. She looked right at Isabella as if to provoke her... or dare her into continuing. "To speak of love as you are. You may think that you are special, but if my son thought as much of you as you claim, then he would have told me long ago. I am sorry to say."

"He was just being careful," Isabella shot back, matching her stare.

“I am sure that you hope he is.”

“I know him well enough to know otherwise.”

“Clearly that is not the case. Although...” She shrugged. “I must say, there is more fire in you than I suspected. A shame that my son does not see it.”

Isabella’s leg was still shaking. Her blood was still pumping. Her anger was still mounting. And so, as was predictable, she opened her mouth and found herself once again speaking before she could stop to think.

“Well then, you might be shocked to find out that...” She glanced at the Duke who was glaring a warning at her that earlier would have had Isabella shaking but now she hardly even took notice of. “That earlier, your son asked me if I would marry him.” She heard the Duke groan. “And I said yes!”

One could hear a pin fall, such was the silence that followed.

The Duke looked as if he could not believe his ears. Caught between anger and shock as he tried to work through his emotions.

The Duchess almost looked proud, as if she had seen this coming or, most likely, had baited Isabella into saying it.

Isabella, the adrenaline leaving her, blood filling her ears, suddenly realized what she had said, only to know it was too late to take it back, looked everywhere but at the Duke.

And then...

“He did? Oh, that is wonderful!” Lady Martell was on her feet, clapping her hands together, tears streaming down her face. “Duncan! Is it true! I knew you would one day! I just knew it!” She hurried around the table with far more agility than one her age should have possessed and wrapped her arms around her gaping grandson. “I am so happy! And your grandfather, if he was alive... oh! I am so happy!”

“Duncan, what is the meaning of this?” the Duke’s mother, the Duchess, asked as his grandmother hugged him incessantly. “How have you kept this from me? Well!”

Lady Martell’s cries of joy drowned her out, such was her happiness. She hugged her grandson, who hugged her back and smiled apologetically at his mother, because what other choice did he have?

Then he turned his sights on Isabella, and fixed Isabella her in a glare so cold that she felt it in her bones. Again, that sense of fear that he so often instilled in her rose through her body, and she couldn’t help but wonder why he hadn’t done so sooner. Then, at least, she might not have acted so brashly and foolishly.

“Yes, it is true,” Duncan said with much control as he pried himself from his grandmother. The side of his mouth twitched but he tamed it. “And Mother, I am sorry for all the subterfuge.”

“Subterfuge, he says!” the Duke’s mother cried out. “That is not the word I would have used!”

“Be that as it may...” Duncan was back to staring at Isabella and the look in his eyes made her stomach drop. “Before we continue this evening, I would like a word alone with my betrothed. If she does not mind?”

Isabella swallowed the lump in her throat as she wondered if now might be a good time to turn and flee, and then perhaps to make her way to London where she could join a shipping crew of some kind and sail as far away from here as possible. Anything to escape the wrath of the Duke... her fiancé.

“Ye – yes, that is fine,” she stammered. “Whatever about?”

“Just be quick,” his mother said. “We need to celebrate!”

“Oh, do not worry mother...” He did not look at her, his cold gaze still fixed squarely on Isabella. “This will not take long.”

### Chapter Three

They walked through the manor in silence.

Isabella walked ahead, her mind racing, her body shaking as the adrenaline from earlier left her, replaced now by fear as she was forced to reckon with the consequences of her actions. She did not know the Duke very well, but she knew enough. Enough to know that what she had just done, what she had just said, was bound to make him angry.

And this anger... a part of her wondered if it might be worth fleeing now before he had a chance to unleash it.

"I am so sorry," Isabella began as soon as she stepped through the door and into the drawing room. "I don't know what happened. I just started talking and – woah!" The Duke's hand wrapped around her arm, pulled her back, and shoved her against the door.

It wasn't violent. It wasn't aggressive. But it was done with command, power, a level

of control that was useless to fight against. Isabella felt herself stumble as her back pressed against the closed door and before she could fathom what had happened the Duke was on her.

One hand on either side of her face, trapping her against the closed door, he stood over her like a wolf might its cornered prey. She was so small compared to his hulking frame. So helpless. And where she might have liked to have stood up to him... well, one look at the demented rage that took his visage, and she cowered back like a lamb.

His eyes were bloodshot. His teeth were bared. His body trembled. She had never seen such rage! More than that, she had never found herself trapped before it.

“What. Were. You. Thinking!” He bit each word off as if tearing raw meat from a freshly slain carcass.

“I... I... I...”

“What were you thinking!” he snarled again, somehow getting closer to her. She could feel his hot breath on her neck. She could feel the thumping of his heart... or perhaps that was her own. “Engaged? Engaged! Have you lost your mind.”

“It was an accident!” she cried, unable to look at him.

“It was no such thing.”

“I did not – I did not mean it!”

“And yet you said it. Unprovoked.”

“Your mother --”

“Do not blame my mother,” he snarled again. “She baited you, I will admit it. But you...” His laughter was cold and cutting. “You walked right into it like a damn mouse sniffing at cheese. I have never seen one so easily trapped.”

She winced, still unable to look at him. “I just... it was the way that she spoke of me – of us. I... I... I have a bad habit of speaking without thinking.”

“Is that your excuse? Your uncle told me that you were smart. He told me that you were unlike most other women of this insufferableton.” More laughter, just as cold. “It seems that he vastly overestimated you. As did I.”

“I am sorry...” she said in a whisper.

“Sorry? You think that will make a difference?” He did not shout. In fact, he had not raised his voice once. But he did not need to. The fact that he was able to speak so calmly, with such anger still inherent in his words, made him all the more terrifying.

And indeed, Isabella was terrified. She knew there was no need, that he would not hurt her. But logic did little in circumstances such as this, and still trapped between his arms, still feeling his warm breath on her neck, it was all she could do not to scream.

“I --” She caught her tongue and tried for a deep breath. She even forced herself to look at him... although it was more a glance, unable to meet his eyes. “I can tell them that I have changed my mind. That I misunderstood. That I was wrong and that we are not engaged.”

“And you think that will work?”

“It is worth a try.”

“You still do not understand, do you?” He leaned in closer, and she pressed her body harder against the door. “Pandora’s Box has been opened and there is no closing it.”

“But we can try!” She forced herself to look at him again, this time meeting his eyes. The fury that was present in them earlier was fading, now taken by a sense of regret.

“We cannot.”

“But --”

“I said no!” He shouted, raising his voice for the first time. She gasped and looked away once more, shrinking down as if she might just slip through the crack of the

door if she wished it hard enough.

Shockingly, this was the moment that the Duke chose to calm down. As if he realized that he had gone too far. He dropped his hands from beside her head and took a step back. He cursed silently, ran a hand through his hair and turned his back on her.

“All you had to do was stay silent. And you could not even do that.”

“I am sorry...” Shame flooded her.

“Again, you say that you are sorry.” He chuckled coldly and turned around to face her again. No longer angry. No longer disgusted. Resigned, it appeared. Accepting the situation in a way that she had not yet been able. “I assure you, Miss Gouldsmith, you have not even begun to understand the depths of that word.”

“What... what does that mean?”

“It means that you have forced my hand. I have spent my entire life building a reputation that I take great pride in – one which I will not have tarnished because you could not keep your mouth shut for a single evening.”

“I –”

“My mother now thinks we are to wed. My grandmother thinks it. I told them it is so, and I will not go back on my word. We have no choice. We are to be wed.”

Isabella gasped.



## Page 11

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In all the excitement and shock of these last few minutes, she had not had time to consider the dire implications of what had she had done. Too busy fearing the Duke, too busy worrying about what he might do in the moment, she was yet to understand the consequences of her most wicked tongue.

Isabella had no desire whatsoever to marry. None. Her aspirations were aimed much higher than that, beyond what most ladies of her station might ever dream. But marriage? A family? If you had asked her yesterday about such things, she might have said that she would rather die.

Is that still an option?

“Oh, do not look so aghast,” the Duke scoffed. “As if this is not your fault.”

“There must be a way out,” she spoke quickly, mind now racing.

“Forget it,” the Duke said.

“But I do not understand why you are so insistent” she continued as if he had not spoken. “Yes, I understand your reputation and the worries you have there. But surely \_”

“I said forget it!” he snapped. Again, he came for her, this time stopping a mere foot away. “We spoke of consequences earlier, and I warned you --” He clenched his jaw and took a breath as if trying to keep his cool. “I warned you of what would happen if they were not heeded.”

“But marriage!”

“It is done,” he said. “As much as it pains me. And believe me, Lady Gouldsmith, pains me it does. But I will not have my name ruined because of you.”

She shook her head. “No... I... it cannot – I will not do it.”

“Excuse me?” There was a bite to his voice.

Isabella forced herself to look up at the Duke. Into his dark eyes, past the terror, past the fear, to the man who she hoped possessed something that came close to soul. “I said that I will not do it. And... and...” She steeled herself in the face of his mounting rage. “You cannot make me.”

She braced for the torrent of anger.

She readied for the shouting.

She prepared herself for him to throw the full force of his weight behind his authority and power and command and to bully her into submission.

Shockingly, he did no such thing.

“You are saying no to me?” He sounded confused.

“Th -- that’s right.”

He sighed and shook his head. A slight smile worked its way up the side of his mouth. She thought he was going to laugh. And Isabella, well she very nearly relaxed.

But then his hand struck out.

She gasped and shut her eyes, not knowing what to expect. But his touch was gentle. Soft. Cupping his hand on her cheek and just under her chin, he held it there as if he was cradling her face... as if he meant to kiss her but wanted to feel the softness of her skin before daring to make such a move with his lips.

Isabella's eyes were still closed as she reckoned with his touch.

It was warmer than she had expected, his large hand taking up nearly half the side of her face. And though she hated to admit it, the feel of his skin on her own had her body trembling in a way she might never have guessed possible. This man who terrified her... suddenly, she felt safe, even protected in ways that were anathema to who he was and how she knew she should feel about him.

"I understand that you are upset." He spoke calmly, his voice low. "And I do not blame you. But there is nothing that you can do now. I have made the decision this marriage is happening, and it is best that you accept it now. It will make things a lot easier."

Eyes still closed, Isabella forced them open and glared at the Duke. She mustered all the courage that she had as she looked at him directly.

"I will not marry you," she said with a snarl. "And there is nothing you can do about it."

And that was all it took.

His eyes flashed anger and the calm facade was gone. Hand still cupping her face, the grip tightened slightly as if he meant to crush her head. She tried to pull away, but he stepped in closer, leering over her once more.

Her body began to shake. Fear, she assumed it to be. Trepidation because she had no idea what this man was capable of. But she did not look away, her heart beating fast, her body running hot, her legs and her entire body shaking in ways that they never had before.

“You are impetuous,” he growled. “And a slow learner.”

“You have no idea,” she growled back at him as if tempting him toward further anger. As if she wanted it!

“I do not want to force you. I do not wish to...” He took a deep breath. His eyes then flicked down her body... lingered on her chest for a moment too long... and then he tore them back. “To do anything regrettable. But this marriage will happen. It is as simple as that.”

“And if I refuse?”

He clicked his tongue, again flicking his eyes down her body. “When will you understand? There is nothing that you can do to stop this. One thing you need to know about me, Miss Gouldsmith, is that once I come to a decision, it is final.”

“You want this more than you are willing to admit,” she shot back. “Now that I think of it, perhaps that as the true reason that you forced me to come tonight.”

“Is that what you think?”

She licked her lips. “I am starting to.”

His lip curled as he leaned over her. Hand still on her face, it moved around slowly, under her chin, and then over her mouth. He leaned in closer, putting his face, his lips, right in front of his hand so that their eyes were an inch apart.

“You are the one who brought this on us,” he said menacingly. Somehow, he stepped in even closer so that their bodies were pressed; his massive frame against her chest so that she could feel him. “And where I do not want it, I at least have some semblance of honor about me.”

She tried to speak but his hand covered her mouth so, caught in the moment, she did the only thing she could think. She bit him! The inside of his hand, she found some skin between her teeth and latched on.

He grimaced but did not pull away. Their stares held. His angered. Her own daring. Harder she bit into him and still he did not move his hand.

Rather, he leaned in so that his ear grazed her ear. This had her body shuddering in ways that touched deep inside her...

“Fight me all you wish, but know this...” His mouth wrapped around her ear and he nibbled on her lobe. She gasped and released his hand, and he nibbled harder before tearing his teeth back. “I have been gentle with you thus far, but do not tempt me. I assure you that you would not like it...”

Her eyes went wide at the implication. Fear, again! But something more. She knew that she should have been petrified, but the way her heart thumped, the way her body ran hot, the way her mind fixated on his teeth nibbling her ear... his hand over her mouth... his body on hers... it was not fear that she felt, but another sensation entirely.

“This is happening.” Suddenly, he dropped his hand and stepped back. Cool and composed once more, he made sure to be looking into her eyes so that there could be no mistake. “And for your own good, Miss Gouldsmith, I suggest you come to terms with it. Better that we do this the easy way, than the hard.”

His hand reached out again, and she gasped and held her breath for she thought that

hand would find its way to her waist... she hoped it might. Instead, he took hold of the door handle. He pulled it, forcing her to stumble forward, nearly tripped as he stepped through the open door.

“My mother and grandmother wish for a celebratory drink, which you will oblige them. I will give you a moment to compose yourself, however.” And then, without looking at her, he strode from the room, leaving the door wide open behind him.

As to Isabella? How to even describe what she was feeling.

Fury, for she did not wish to marry.

Frustration, for she knew it was all her fault.

Desperation, as there was nothing that she could do.

And... something else. She told herself it was anger. She tried to convince herself it was hate and loathing for the man she was set to wed. But the way her thighs trembled... where her mind sat... her heart beating at the mere memory of what had just happened. Even Isabella was not such a fool to misunderstand what those sensations meant.

A shame then that she would never get the chance to explore them. I would rather die.

The Duke might have assumed that this marriage was now happening, but he did not know Isabella nearly well enough. If he had, he might have known that where Isabella was concerned, things were never that simple. And in this, she would find her salvation.

Chapter Four

“Can you please stop looking at me like that,” Isabella snapped at her sister, who was staring at her with an open mouth and wide eyes.

“Like what?”

“Like a fish who has found itself on land and is trying to breathe air for the first time. Honestly, there is no need to be so dramatic.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Louisa said with purposeful sarcasm. “What would you prefer instead? A hug, I suppose? Perhaps a congratulatory kiss on the cheek?”



“Stop it.”

“I know, I shall arrange a party. A celebration, for surely that is --”

“I said stop it! You are not helping!”

She snorted. “Is that what I am supposed to be doing? Helping?”

Isabella glared at her twin. “If I had known that you were going to be so... so frustratingly smug, I might not have bothered telling you in the first place!”

“Forgive me, Isabella. But it is not every day that one learns their twin sister had become secretly engaged after what was supposed to be an innocent dinner party. Good heavens, I can’t help but wonder what it was that His Grace put in the wine.”

“And as I explained already, it is not as simple as it seems – I did not mean it!”

“Oh yes...” She rolled her eyes. “The words simply tumbled out on their own accord. I have warned you, Isabella. Time and time again, have I not? That tongue of yours, and your insistence on using it so with such haphazard abandon, was bound to land you in trouble sooner or later. Sooner, it would seem now.”

“So, that is the way of things, is it? Rather than helping, you are going to mock me?”

Louisa shrugged. “Can I not do both? As tragic and truly shocking as this is...” Her eyes flashed and she pressed her lips together to keep herself from laughing. “You must admit, from where I am seated, it is rather amusing.”

“It is not!”

“On the contrary, sister...” A snort escaped her lips, and she covered her mouth.

In response, Isabella fixed her sister with a glare so cold that it could turn ice to water. Louisa, typically, felt no such effect, still struggling to keep herself from giggling, for she knew that deep down, Isabella was not angry at her. It was herself who Isabella was furious with.

Well, myself and the Duke... mostly him.

It was just last night that Isabella and the Duke had become unofficially engaged – although the way that the Duke’s mother and grandmother spoke about it, one would think it was written in stone.

Thankfully, the night had ended shortly thereafter, and Isabella had found her way back home where she had tucked herself into bed, closed her eyes, and prayed that when she woke all this would be nothing more than a bad dream from which she was yet to wake.

Typically, no such eventually occurred.

It was real. So very real. And having no choice but to accept it as such, when her twin sister whisked her back to her bedroom and demanded that she tell her of the previous evening, Isabella was only too happy to comply.

She told Louisa everything, her hope being that her sister might see a way out, a mistake made, a path forward that Isabella had not noticed but could be taken to get her out of this mess.

"What of mother?" Louisa had suggested. "Perhaps she will be able to do something?"

It is not proper that His Grace announce an engagement without first asking her.”

Isabella snorted. “Mother? She will be beside herself. You know she wants nothing more than for me to marry. And a Duke at that?” She shook her head. “No, I do not think mother is the one who will save me.”

“Then there is nothing to be done,” Louisa sighed.

“I cannot marry him!” Isabella cried. “It is absurd! Insane! Surely, he must see that!”

“I am certain that he does,” Louisa agreed as she stilled her laughter. “Unfortunately, and you know this to be true, now that it has been spoken of, there is little to be done to stop it. You said that his mother and grandmother both think of it as fact?”

“They do...” She pushed her lips together as she remembered the tears of joy in his grandmother’s eyes.

“That is it. His Grace is likely as trepidatious as you. But to go back on his supposed word like that...” She shrugged. “You know how men are when it comes to their honor. They would rather walk across broken glass than have it challenged.”

“There must be something I can do!” Isabella pleaded. “Mother is yet to find out. So far, only a few know of it. If I can convince him to change his mind somehow...” She looked at her sister with desperation, needing an answer. A solution!

“There is one thing I can think of.”

“Yes? Anything!”

“Marry the man.” Louisa looked flatly at her sister. “He is a duke. From what you have said, he is rather handsome --”

“I said no such thing!”

She felt her face flush and looked away, refusing to even allow the thought of such a thing to enter her mind! What had happened last night between them, what she had felt... it was not attraction! It was fear. Fear because the man was a bully and nothing more.

She winked. “You inferred it then. But truth be told, Isabella, you could do a lot worse than a duke. A lot worse...” She eyed her pointedly. “Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me that marrying His Grace will be as bad as you are trying to convince yourself that it is. That some semblance of joy cannot be salvaged from this mess?”

Isabella should have expected this reaction from her sister.

Louisa was the romantic one of the two. The one whose life seemed to revolve around finding a mate and settling down – likely, she was even envious of Isabella, as ludicrous as that was.

For Isabella, the idea of falling in love and settling down had never been a dream worth chasing. Truth be told, she found it rather pedestrian, even insulting. What she desired more than anything was to be treated as more than a mere object which might be used for social graces and political maneuvering.

Although only a few knew this of her, what she desired most was to be allowed to study as a man might be. To go to university, to give herself over entirely to a vocation of her own choosing, to push the boundaries of thought and intellectual

observation beyond what women of her station were allowed. Now that was a dream worth chasing!

But this? Marriage! A death sentence where independence was concerned, a complete waste of her life, as far as she knew it. No thank you very much.

“I need him to change his mind,” Isabella said, ignoring the look that her sister fixed on her. Not to mention the question.

Her sister snorted. “He will not do that. He told you as much, did he not?”

Isabella pumped her eyebrows. “He is a man like any other. And what do men hate more than anything?” She grinned. “Being told what to do by a woman. Oh yes, last night he told me that he would not have his mind changed. But I would bet my last gold coin that was only because I was the one suggesting it! If he was to decide on his own, however...” She pumped her eyebrows again, the idea forming into a most wicked plan.

Louisa frowned and leaned back. “So, you are to trick him into cancelling this marriage.”

“It is not a marriage yet,” Isabella said excitedly, seeing for the first time a way out. “Nor will it be. Not by the time I am done with him.”

“And how do you expect to do that? He already knows you do not wish for this. Surely, he will see right through your scheming.”

If there was one thing that Isabella knew she could rely on, it was a man’s ability to completely underestimate a woman. No doubt, His Grace thought of her as an ignorant, air-headed, highly silly woman who was incapable of scheming in the ways that would be needed to end this marriage before it began.

And that, Isabella now knew, was what she needed to lean into.

“It will be simple, really...” Isabella’s mind started to work as she considered the possibilities. “His Grace does not know me – not nearly as well as he thinks he does. But I know him. He is short-tempered. Stubborn. And most of all, he does not like it when he does not get his way.”

“Your point being?”

“What I need to do is show him a side of myself that he will find so abhorrent, so impossibly unbearable that he would rather deal with the fallout of cancelling our engagement than considering having to spend the rest of his life with me.”

“Perhaps if you are just yourself,” Louisa said dryly. “That might do it.”

Isabella ignored her as ideas began to form. “My dress last night. It wasn’t nearly as scandalous as it could have been. I saw him glancing at it, but he didn’t seem as put out as I would have liked.”

Louisa grimaced. “Any more scandalous and you might as well be nude.”

“He is proper, and I have no doubt that the idea of a wife who dresses like that will undo him.” Her mind raced with possibilities. “Also, he does not like being told no. So, if I argue with him or refuse to agree with anything he says, that will only serve to frustrate.”

“Isabella...”

“Yes...” She began to nod to herself. “I need to frustrate him! Men hate women who are too highly opinionated and who speak their mind. So, let us see how he likes one who shares every opinion she has ever had.”

“Isabella, are you sure --”

“Selina will be visiting us this week, will she not?” Isabella cut her off. “And she is quite pregnant...” Her eyes flashed. “I wonder how His Grace will like her mood swings, of which I will be sure to encourage and play in to. Oh yes...” She laughed menacingly. “By the time I am done with him, he’ll be considering moving country so as to put as much distance between myself and him as possible.”

It was a lot. Some might have said it was too much. But if there was one thing that Isabella was certain that she knew of His Grace, it was that he was as stubborn as she. He did not like being told no. He did not like being proven wrong. If this was to work, she would have to commit fully.

And if she was to have a little too much fun with it? Well, I shall try not to enjoy myself too much.

“I really think that this is unnecessary,” Louisa sighed. “Have you tried talking with him – an actual conversation? If you do that, you might find out that the two of you have more in common than you realize.”

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Isabella shook her head at that. The last thing she wanted to do was get closer with His Grace. She could still remember the previous evening, the way she had felt when he was pressed up against her, his hand over her mouth, teeth around her ear as he whispered to her...

It sent a warm flush over her body just to think about. A sensation she had never felt before, and did not want to again. Isabella was too smart to be taken by desires like that. She had plans. Goals. Aspirations that she would not simply forget about because there was a chance she might find a man attractive.

Better to avoid that altogether than risk the consequences. Consequences... she had dealt with enough of those as it was.

“No, no,” she said firmly, willing herself to believe this plan would work. “The next time I see His Grace, I shall be ready. And the next time I see him, shall be the last!”

### Chapter Five

Duncan was not looking forward to what he was about to do. What he had to do. But as was often the case in life, one had to put aside what they wished for and do instead what was expected and right. Regardless of how painful it might be.

A lesson I am learning all too well, of late.

He could see her waiting for him as he steered his horse down the driveway of Terrel House; a large townhouse sitting on the outskirts of London. Duncan had sent word ahead that he would be arriving this morning and, as was typical, she had made sure



to come outside and meet him.

It was her way of showing Duncan how invested she was in their relationship – not that he would call it such a thing. It was purely physical in every sense of the word. A fact which she knew too well, as he had been sure to remind her on multiple occasions.

“Your Grace!” she said pleasantly, waving at him in the distance. “I have been looking for you all morning.” Her smile was eager, her eyes sparkled, but she was refined and proper and made sure not to show too much outward emotion. That simply would not do.

“Juliet,” Duncan said with a reserved smile as he reigned his horse in. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

She laughed. “Did you think I would say no?”

Duncan pulled the horse to a stop and climbed down. Were it any other occasion, he would have the horse led around the home where there was a small stable to keep it for the day and the night, however long he planned to stay. But considering what he was here for today, he kept a hold of the horse’s reigns once his feet landed on the gravel.

This promised to be a short visit. Even if Juliet did not know it.

“I was so glad to receive your letter this morning,” she continued as she swept in toward him. “I was not expecting it. A wonderful surprise, I must say. And here I thought the day would be a boring one.” She reached where he was standing and leaned in to kiss him.

Duncan leaned back immediately “I am sorry, Juliet, truly I am. But I am afraid that

my visit here might not be as wonderful as you were hoping for.”

She frowned at his rejection of her kiss. Attempted a disarming chuckle, as if praying this were all a joke which she did not understand. “Whatever do you mean? Do not tell me, you have been called away? For how long?”

Duncan remained firm, showing no emotion or regret because he did not wish to give Juliet any sense of hope for her to cling to. “This will be hard for you to hear, but I am afraid it is an unavoidable situation of which nothing can be done. And please know that it is naught to do with you. It is, as with most things, simply the way of the world...”

Her frown deepened. “Wh -- whatever are you speaking of? Your Grace, please...” A nervous chuckle. “Speak plainly. You are scaring me.”

Her name was Juliet, the Dowager Countess of St. Vincent and for the past several months, she and Duncan had been engaged in a sexual relationship, one promulgated specifically to harbor no romantic or personal feelings between its two participants.

That had been Duncan’s intention, at the very least.

She was slightly older than Duncan, thirty-eight years, but one would not know it to look at her. Red hair. Dark green eyes. Pure white skin with a smattering of pink freckles across her chest which Duncan coveted. Her figure was slim; a narrow waist, supple breasts, not much to her at all. It was a body type that Duncan had always been most fond of, and one that he knew he would miss greatly.

A stark contrast to the ample curves that Miss Gouldsmith has. Those hips. Her bosom. She could not be more different to Juliet. Which in itself might pose a danger...

“This might come as a surprise to you,” Duncan began, keeping his voice plain. “But I have recently become engaged to another, and for that reason this relationship of ours must --”

“What!” Juliet cried in shock. She knew it was the wrong thing to do, as Duncan hated being interrupted. She gasped and held a hand to her mouth. “I am so sorry, Your Grace. I did not mean to interrupt you.”

“It is quite alright,” he said stoically. “The details of my recent engagement are... they are not important. What is important is that they are true and for that reason I have no choice but to end our relationship, effective immediately.”

“Oh...” She blinked in confusion. “That is... I... I was not...” She stammered through her response, unable to find the words to express how surprising this must have been.

“As I said, it is not you,” Duncan assured her. “It is a situation beyond my control, and it really is that simple. I thought it best to come here and tell you myself in person, for I owed you that.”

“Wait!” Suddenly, she grabbed him by the arm, her chin wobbling furiously as tears began to brim. “Please! I had no idea that – if you had wished to marry, all you needed to do was say as much. If this is some... a necessity that you need to fulfill, I would be honored if you might consider me as a candidate.”

Duncan frowned and leaned back. “Excuse me?”

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She forced a smile and looked at him hopefully. “I know that what we have been doing was never meant to be anything more than what it is. And for that reason, I have kept my mouth shut. But Your Grace...” She stepped into him. “If you wish to marry, I do not see why you and I cannot...” She laughed nervously. “After all, have we not proven how well he get alone?”

Duncan could not have been more surprised by the offer. He and the viscountess got on well enough, and the physical nature of their relationship was enjoyable, but not once had he suspected that her feeling toward him extended beyond that. He had made it clear to her that his did not, anyhow.

It was a frustrating revelation if there ever was one. The reason he had begun this affair with the countess was specifically to keep things at a surface level and free from emotions Or so he had thought.

Gently, he pulled his arm free from her grasp. “I have enjoyed our time together. Truly, I have. But as is the way of life, all things must come to an end. I wish you well, Juliet. And I hope for you all the best. Good day.”

“But –”

“I said, good day.” He raised a warning eyebrow at her and, as he expected from one such as Juliet, she knew better than to fight him or embarrass herself by begging. She knew the type of man that he was, and she knew that he did not take well to argument.

And so it is done, and was not nearly as difficult, nor as painful as I had thought it

might be.

Duncan climbed back atop his horse and left the countess in his wake. He could feel her eyes on him, and he could sense the tears in them, for she was justifiably upset. As for Duncan? He would miss their affair; he could not deny that. But as for being in love with Juliet? A laughable concept as Duncan did not have it in himself to fall in love with anyone.

One thing that did strike him, however, was how effortlessly that had been done. Juliet, for all her faults, knew better than to argue, and was in every way a perfectly submissive paramour, as Duncan preferred his lovers to be. He could not help but contrast her to his soon-to-be bride, Miss Gouldsmith, certain that such a conversation would not have gone nearly as well with her.

Miss Gouldsmith was a different case entirely. Argumentative. Combative. For some reason she was willing to fight him when most others he knew would not dare do such a thing. It was frustrating, to say the least, and it had forced him to rise to anger in ways that were.... that were regrettable to say the least.

Duncan did not like getting angry. And he certainly did not like using said anger to get his way. What he wanted was peace and calm and ease. All things that Miss Gouldsmith seemed intent on denying him.

There was another reason that Duncan did not like getting angry. And another reason that he especially did not like it where Miss Gouldsmith was concerned. He could not help but remember the way he had snapped and grabbed her the last time... unable to control himself, he had let his most base desires take over in ways that he knew could only lead to trouble.

Forcing those emotions to calm, he had managed to keep them contained – even if it had taken some serious effort. An effort that was made all the harder by that dress

that Miss Gouldsmith had worn and the way she had spoken and that feeling that her combative nature brought up in his --

No! Duncan gave his head a shake, refusing to think of such things now.

This was dangerous, he knew. And after all Duncan had been through in this life, danger was the last thing he wanted. For his sake, as well as Miss Gouldsmith's.

## Chapter Six

It was the following day when Duncan found himself arriving at Greenfield Manor in London. A townhouse similar to that which Juliet lived in, but nowhere near as grand or opulent in design as that. It was far smaller, a little too close to the city, and without so much as a back garden or even a driveway leading to the front door.

Duncan had sent a letter to the Dowager Viscountess Langham yesterday, informing her of his intent to pay them a visit this morning. It was his assumption that Miss Gouldsmith had told her by now of their engagement plans, so it behooved Duncan to make his intentions known to her mother. As was proper.

However, when he arrived at their home at the hour he had instructed, he was surprised to find that there was nobody waiting to greet him. He sat in the carriage, annoyance building, eyeing the front door as he expected at least a butler to step outside.

Fifteen minutes of waiting and he realized this was folly.

“An auspicious beginning...” He muttered to himself as he approached the front door and knocked. And then waited. And then, after a few moments, knocked once more.

It was subtle but he could have sworn that inside he could hear a commotion of some

sort... a wailing, perhaps? Screaming. He leaned in close to listen, brow scrunched tight, the noise inside building, only for the door to suddenly swing open.

“Your Grace!” It was the same elderly maid who had accompanied Miss Gouldsmith the previous week to Lord Langham’s home. “Our apologies! My mistress intended to greet you herself but has become distracted!” She was shouting the words in Duncan’s face, and for good reason.

The sounds coming from inside the manor were unlike any that Duncan had ever heard. It sounded like a woman screaming – but doing so because she was trying to be heard over another woman wailing as if in pain. Amongst that was shouting and yelling, stamping feet on wooden floorboards, and more screaming.

“Is this a bad time?” Duncan looked past the maid to see what on earth was going on.

“Not at all!” the maid assured him. She stepped to the side and waved him in. “Please, the viscountess is expecting you.”

Duncan hesitated before finally stepping over the threshold and inside. The door swung closed behind him, and the sounds of what were surely indicators that the world was about to end, grew even louder.

He was led down the hallway and into an open living space, the sounds growing louder the further in he walked. That was until they exploded upon him like a slap as he saw the source of the noise.

Not that he understood exactly what was going on.

“You cannot wear that dress!” a woman who could only be the viscountess shouted at her daughter, Miss Isabella Gouldsmith.

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“I will wear what I wish!”

“Why can’t you be more like your sister!”

“Do not bring me into this!” the third woman, presumably the sister for she was a spitting image of Miss Gouldsmith, shouted.

“Will the three of you please keep it down!” There was a fourth woman, heavily pregnant, sitting on a couch and in tears. “All this shouting is bad for the baby!”

“Tell her that!” Miss Gouldsmith decreed, pointing an accusing finger at her mother.

“That dress! You will go up and change right now. Before the Duke arrives – think of your sister! This is her day! You will embarrass her!”

“I do not mind,” the sister said. “What do I care what Isabella wears?”

“See!”

“Please!” the pregnant woman wailed. “Peace and quiet! The baby! I cannot... I cannot... oh!”

I have wandered into the gates of Hell.

Duncan stood frozen in the doorway. Wide-eyed. Mouth hanging agape. Caught between announcing himself and fleeing the scene as if his life depended on it.



Before he was able to come to a decision, however, the dowager viscountess caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye. Her eyes then went wide, her mouth dropped open, she spun about quickly, and then did what she could to straighten up, to silence her daughters, and to appear as if Duncan had not just witnessed the beginnings of a war that had the potential to consume all of London.

“Your Grace!” she cried out. “My apologies! I did not realize the time!” She rushed toward him, patting down her gown, before offering a deep curtsy. “I had meant to wait for you outside.”

“It is quite alright...” He spoke carefully, eyes flicking about the scene; the pregnant woman was still sobbing loudly, the two sisters still standing back.

“And further apologies for what you just witnessed,” the viscountess continued. “One pregnant daughter and another more stubborn than a mule, and it makes for hostile viewing...” She attempted a nervous laugh. “But I assure you, this is far from the norm.”

Doubtful.

“I am certain that is the case.”

She smiled and offered another curtsy. “I was so glad to receive your letter yesterday evening, Your Grace. Truly, it is an honor for you to even consider my daughter as you are.” She spun about, facing her two daughters. “Louisa! Will you --” She widened her eyes at her daughter, Louisa. “Here, now girl.”

Louisa frowned at her mother. “Why me?”

“Why do you think!” The viscountess then turned back and smiled apologetically at Duncan. “It has been a bit of a rush this morning. We have hardly had time to prepare

– not that we are not grateful, and eager. As I assure you, my daughter Louisa is very much.”

Duncan looked past the viscountess at her two daughters and immediately saw the look of triumph in Miss Gouldsmith’s eyes. They danced with victory and then she stood straight, hands behind her back, making sure that he took note of her dress...

The dress was highly inappropriate. The neckline was plunging, and the waist was so tightly cinched that her chest threatened to spill out. Even more scandalous than the previous one that she had worn, it was clearly chosen for a purpose. And it sent Duncan’s pulse racing.

“Forgive me, Lady Langham, but I believe there must be some sort of mistake...” He pulled his eyes from Miss Gouldsmith... and that dress! “It is not your daughter, Louisa who I wish to marry.”

The viscountess blinked. “Excuse me?”

Duncan groaned and rubbed his eyes, the frustration starting to build. “I had assumed – I was under the impression that your daughter might have by now explained to you the circumstance that has brought me here this morning.”

Still, the viscountess looked confused. “According to your letter, you wished to speak with me about my daughter. The implication, as I read it, was that you may be interested in courting her. A surprise, to be sure, but not an unwelcome one. And I think you will find that Louisa is --”

“Again, there is the mistake. It is not your daughter, Louisa to whom I was speaking of.” He caught Isabella’s eyes, and she flashed them at him; the delight only too clear. “It is your other daughter, Isabella who I was speaking of.”

The viscountess's mouth dropped. "Isabella? Are you certain?" She turned and looked at her daughter as if she could not believe it. "But... but... but how?"

"And it is not a courtship which I am interested in." He made sure to be looking right at the viscountess so there could be no mistake. "I intend to marry her."

"What?!" The viscountess spun around. "Isabella! Explain yourself!"

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She shrugged. “I think His Grace did a rather fine job.”

“When were you planning on telling me this?”

Another shrug. “Now seemed like a good enough time.”

“Louisa! Did you know of this – you did!”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Don’t blame her!”

“The embarrassment you have both caused me!”

“Please!” the pregnant woman began to cry again. “Can you please -- the baby! Is it too much to ask for --”

“An engagement! How has this happened – and that dress!”

“I rather like it!”

“The baby! The baby!”

The three women shouted back and forth, devolving into a state of hysteria once more, leaving Duncan standing alone in a state of awkwardness that saw his temper rising, his frustration building, and the desire to double guess this entire circumstance settling on him in ways that were becoming harder and harder to ignore.

He managed to make eye contact with Miss Gouldsmith, to which she smirked proudly as if she was taking pleasure in the chaos that had been brought upon this household. Duncan tried to silence that smirk by hardening his glare, but this only seemed to encourage her.

Whatever this was, Duncan sensed it was far from over and that his marriage to Miss Gouldsmith was set to test him in ways that he could not even imagine.

## Chapter Seven

"I must say, this is all very surprising," the viscountess said.

"Hopefully a welcome surprise," Duncan responded pleasantly. "My intent was not to cause you any duress."

"Certainly not," the viscountess assured him. "A surprise but one that I could not be more over the moon for – truly, when I read your letter yesterday evening, I had assumed that you were referring to Louisa." She chuckled. "But that it was Isabella to whom you meant, well..." She glanced at her daughter. "Even better."

"I am glad," Duncan said simply, doing his best to not look at Isabella. "Of course, I did not mean for things to transpire in this manner – my intent was never to insult or assume. But sometimes..." He forced a smile. "To put it simply, the heart wants what it wants and in this instance it has spoken."

"And it shall be heard." The viscountess was quick to raise her glass; filled with water, but the gesture was what mattered. "A wedding, a most wonderful occasion, and indeed a reason to celebrate. And might I say, Your Grace, welcome to the family."

And what a family it is.

Things had calmed down dramatically since Duncan had first arrived at Greenfield Manor. There was no more screaming. No more shouting. And no more crying, thank God. The pregnant woman, who he learned was the viscountess's oldest daughter, the Duchess of Northwick, had retired to a spare bedroom so that Duncan and her mother might talk in peace and work through this most unexpected misunderstanding.

They adjourned to the drawing room, joined by Miss Gouldsmith. Duncan took a place on the single couch while mother and daughter squeezed onto a couch across from him.

Once settled, Duncan explained carefully what it was that had brought him here in the first place – the details of his and Miss Gouldsmith's engagement. It was a story he had expected the young woman to have already gone over with her mother, only to learn that she had decided to keep her mother in the dark for reasons that Duncan did not have to guess very hard at.

As such, he did all the talking, while Miss Gouldsmith watched him with a devilish look in her eyes that he worked hard to ignore.

Obviously, he could not tell her the true nature of their engagement, opting to lie instead. A tale of love at first sight. An accidental meeting whilst he was visiting their uncle. An unexpected but deep connection which saw him propose because he had been unable to imagine living in a world that did not involve the newly found love of his life.

“Isabella?” the viscountess had confirmed, sounding somewhat shocked by this decree.

“Could there be any other,” Duncan had said. “I confess, our pairing might seem strange...” He had then looked to Miss Gouldsmith and smiled before turning away. “But it works. And who are we to question the peculiarities of love? Rather, I say that

we simply enjoy them and thank God that we were lucky enough to find one another as we did.”

“I could not agree more,” the viscountess had then purred.

The lie was a necessary one. This entire engagement was predicated on the need to save face and hide from the truth, so what better way to lean into the concept of love at first sight and hope that stuck.

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Of course, that would require Duncan and Miss Gouldsmith to play their role enough that they could fool the viscountess and everyone else into thinking that they were in love.

“That brings us to the next point,” Duncan continued, keeping his attention firmly on the viscountess. “The date for the wedding. Your wonderful daughter and I have agreed that we wish to wed as soon as possible. So, I shall organize the banns for the first available date, which should not be longer than a few weeks.”

“Perfect,” the viscountess purred.

“Hold on a moment,” Miss Gouldsmith spoke up suddenly. She had been quiet until this point, a blessing it had seemed, the slim chance that maybe she had changed her ways and resigned herself to this fate without seeing the need to argue.

So much for that.

“Is something the matter, Isabella?” the viscountess asked her daughter. Her smile was friendly but the look in her eyes spoke of a silent warning.

“Do I not get a say as to the date of my own wedding?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “This has all happened so quickly and I might wish to double check a few things first. If that is agreeable with you, Your Grace?” She fluttered her eyelashes again, the look behind them speaking volumes to her intent.

“Of course,” Duncan said. He shifted where he sat, bracing himself. “Although as we both discussed, best that the ceremony is scheduled as soon as possible, no sense



delaying.”

“But what is the rush,” she said with a smile that was as mischievous as it was wicked. “It is not as if our love will falter in that time. If anything, a delayed wedding might see it grow – giving us a chance to better get to know each other.”

“I think we know one another well enough.”

“Oh, there is always more to learn.”

“Which we will have the rest of our lives for.”

“Exactly, so why the rush?”

Combative. Argumentative. Purposefully frustrating. She was as Duncan remembered, and that was a problem that he could not ignore. Made all the worse by the way his eyes refused to behave themselves, constantly glancing at her in that dress, feeling his pulse quicken, and then looking away before he lingered for too long and lost control of himself.

Ordinarily, Duncan was not attracted to more curvaceous figures. But Miss Gouldsmith... his eyes strayed to her hefty bosom, he could not help but look at her curves, and the way she sat forward, pressing them together as if trying to lure his eyes and tempt him. Well, Duncan was only human.

He felt his heart begin to pound in his chest as his eyes strayed further. Sweat beading on the back of his neck. Legs tingling, up the thigh and toward his groin and --

No! Duncan could not allow himself to get distracted. And he certainly could not allow himself to rise to the bait and lose control. What he needed to do was get through this meeting, and then decide how he was going to deal with Miss

Gouldsmith and her troublesome ways.

“Isabella!” the viscountess snapped, thankfully. “His Grace is correct. No sense delaying, now that the engagement is official. I am so sorry, Your Grace. She is just excited, is all.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“And another thing,” Miss Gouldsmith spoke up suddenly. She shuffled forward on the couch, pushing her beasts closer together. “I do not know how I feel about a June wedding. It is bad luck.”

“Bad luck? Whatever do you mean, girl,” the viscountess said.

“Well, I was speaking with my friend Charlotte about this, and she agrees that June marriages tend to yield the most unhappy of marriages. She was telling me of her sister, Audrey, married in June also. And her cousin, another June wedding, both of which have been nothing but calamitous and Charlotte cannot help but wonder if the month is the reason for it. Naturally, I thought this a little silly, but then I asked another friend of mine and --”

“Isabella!” the viscountess snapped. “What have I told you about listening to gossip? You are being silly, girl.”

“Am I?” She flashed her eyes at Duncan. “Just repeating what I have heard. I do wish for this marriage to be as wonderful and perfect as I know it can be and I would hate for anything to ruin it. Silly me, I suppose.”

She was acting this way on purpose. He was sure of it. As if she might be able to annoy him into cancelling the marriage. It might have been a good plan had she not underestimated how stubborn Duncan was.

Besides, it wasn't as if he wished for this marriage either! He was doing it because he had to, because that was the sort of man that he was – one with honor! Regardless of how much she antagonized him, nothing was going to change. And she needed to realize that.

“I am sorry to hear of your friend's sister and cousin,” he spoke, careful to meet her eyes and not look south. “But I am afraid that we cannot base wedding preparation, nor can we assume the future of our marriage, around something as tangential and unquantifiable as the month in which we are married.”

“I do not see why it would hurt.”

“We will marry as soon as we are able,” Duncan said sharply. “And that is the end of the discussion.”

“And I could not agree more,” the viscountess said.

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“Oh, I just want it to be perfect!” Miss Gouldsmith cried out suddenly. She scrunched her face into a ball, looking as if she might burst into tears. “Surely, that is not too much to ask!”

“And it will be,” Duncan said, but with a bite. “Of that, you do not need to worry.”

“But I am worried!” she continued. “Yes, our love is strong – my heart yearns, Your Grace. Do not doubt that. But if it is not a perfect wedding then I fear for our future. I... I... I...” She sniffed and wiped her nose. “Oh, look at me! Getting all emotional.” She sniffed again. “I am just so happy! Please, do not blame me. I know you feel the same way!”

Again, she was prodding him. Poking. Trying to get him to rise to the bait. And Duncan very nearly did. He wanted nothing more than to scold her and tell her to stop being so foolish – that he would not accept such childish behavior.

He did not, of course. He stayed calm. Reasonable. Took a deep breath and continued to put on airs of a man very much in love with his soon-to-be bride.

“Of course not,” he said. “In fact, I admire just how open you are with your feelings. It shows heart, which was one of the reasons I fell for you in the first place.”

Her face dropped and her lip curled and Duncan raised an eyebrow at her as if to say ‘Nice try.’

“Perhaps we should turn back to the date?” the viscountess spoke up. “Never mind my daughter, Your Grace. I assure you that she will be thrilled with whatever date

you come up with.”

“I am sure she will be.”

“I am afraid, however, that I must be off.” He stood quickly. “So much to do, as I am sure you can imagine. Really, today was more about confirmation and making introductions.”

“Oh. Are you sure?”

“Yes, are you sure?” Miss Gouldsmith agreed. “Perhaps if you would like to spend the day? With all of us? I know what a treat that will be.”

“I would love to but am unable,” Duncan hurried. “But soon, my sweet, we have all the time in the world. I promise you.” He rose from his chair quickly. “I will make sure to write once the dates are set and we can begin to organize the affair.”

“But --”

“Until then, as always, it was a pleasure seeing you again and I shall...” He grimaced. “I shall think of you every minute of every day.”

He was quick to leave after that. A hastily said goodbye, not even stopping to allow Miss Gouldsmith or the viscountess to stand before he was down the hallway and making for the exit.

His mind spun as he stepped outside. A marriage that he did not want, made infinitely more difficult to comprehend because his bride-to-be was set trying to make him change his mind when she should have known such a thing could not happen.

He climbed into the carriage, glad to be free of that calamity, while wondering with

great resignation what the woman was bound to try next. He did not know her well, but he knew her well enough to suspect that today was not the end but only the beginning --

The carriage door swung open suddenly and Miss Gouldsmith climbed in.

“Miss Gouldsmith!” he cried. “What on earth are you --”

“We need to talk,” she said as she closed the door behind her. “Now.”

## Chapter Eight

“Miss Gouldsmith!” the Duke cried in shock as Isabella shut the door behind her. He looked about the carriage and back to the house, making sure that they were alone. “This is highly inappropriate.”

“As I said, we need to talk.”

“We just did.”

“Alone,” she said as she settled across from him. “Without my mother there to influence you.”

“Influence me?” He raised an eyebrow at her. “If you think that your mother’s opinion has any effect on me, Miss Gouldsmith, then you clearly do not know me at all.”

“Oh, please...” She rolled her eyes.

“As I have told you time and time again, this wedding is a result of your interference and my honor. Anything I might have said just now that seemed designed to appease

your mother was done simply because I do not tolerate insubordination and silliness.”

“Is that so?” she scoffed. “The way you spoke of us just now. One would think that we were star crossed lovers in league with Romeo and Juliet – and I know why you did it, by the way. Do not think I am such a fool to not understand.”

“Please, enlighten me.”

“So that she would agree to this wedding without argument.” Isabella looked smugly at him. “You were so darn convincing that I am starting to wonder if you are truly as against it as you claim.”

Oh, he does not like that!

Isabella could see the look of fury in his eyes, a subdued temper that she brought out in him with a little too much ease. And where Isabella knew it was not smart to do so... if annoying him such that he cancelled this wedding was her only option, it was one she would gladly take.

And the fact that a small part of her took pleasure in that fury? A pleasure that she did not fully understand but had been unable to stop thinking about since the last time they had spoken... she supposed that was a risk she needed to take.

"I said as I did because I had no choice," he explained patiently. "As I have already explained to you, but I will do so again because you are even more dense than I expected --"

“--- I am not --”

“-- you are the one who brought this on us,” he spoke over her, a deep growl in the back of his throat, paired with a warning glare that told her interrupting him was not the best of ideas. “All I am doing is making sure that we come out the other side with our names and reputations still in one piece. I am sorry if you were not happy with



the way I spun our little tale but if you were not being so obstinate, I would not have had to do so. Now..." He leaned forward and opened the door. "If there is nothing else, I think it is best if you go back inside. As I said, I will write to you once the banns have been confirmed and a date is set. Until then, I see no reason for us to speak."

The smart thing to do was to take his cue and leave.

What the Duke said made enough sense, and even Isabella did not think that he wished for this marriage any more than she did. She was just trying to bait him! As she had been doing since he first arrived.

Further to that point, Isabella still refused to admit that there was no way out of this – the Duke was just being stubborn, a trait she knew well. Yes, it would be messy. And yes, for it to work, she might have to push the Duke to the very edge of reason until he saw no way forward save for ending this engagement, even if it meant embarrassment and shame.

But if that is what it takes, then that is what it takes.

"I have to say, Your Grace, I am a little bit disappointed."

His Grace, still leaning forward with one hand on the open door, frowned. "What do you mean?"

Isabella hesitated. She realized suddenly that what she wanted to do and what she could do were two entirely different things. Yes, flirting her way out of this might have been an option, but she did not know what that meant. Or if she had the inane ability to do such things.

He cheeks flushed furiously as she sat herself up and pushed her chest out. "You did

not compliment me on my... my dress.” She could not even look at him as she spoke. “I wore it just for you and I had hoped you might notice.”

His eyes dropped to her body but looked away just as quickly. “That is not... the dress is highly inappropriate.”

“Inappropriate. How so?”

He seemed overly careful not to look again. Licking his lips, brow turning red, she could see the effort it was taking him. “I know what you are doing.”

It’s working... I think it is. Surely, this is what flirting looks like?

“An -- and what am I doing, exactly?” She forced herself to meet his eyes, even if she was feeling less than confident about this whole thing.

“And again, I must make it clear...” He cleared his throat. “There is nothing that you can do to change my mind. This marriage will happen.”

“Yes, you have said that. I was just asking for an opinion.”

“Once we are married, you are not to dress this way again. Do I make myself clear?” He spoke those final words in an angered growl which washed over Isabella’s skin like a wave.

She very nearly faltered. She wanted to! Suddenly aware of how alone the two were, this entire plan of hers was becoming more and more foolhardy by the second! A shame then that she was so stubborn.

“Oh...” She bit into her lip as she considered what she might say next. “Should I wear less? I confess, any less than this and I might have to wear nothing. Is that what you

are implying?”

It was working. She could see that it was. He was beginning to sweat. He was turning flushed in the face. Body shaking slightly, she could literally see the fight within as he struggled not to rise to anger.

That’s it... let it come... get angry... understand that this is what is in store if you do not change your mind...

He took a deep breath. “I suggest you stop now, Miss Gouldsmith. And I suggest that you do as I ask and leave this carriage, immediately.”

“Or what?” she shot back, dropping the façade and turning her attention back to anger where it belonged. “You wish to know me better? You wish to understand who it is that you are so set to marry? This is me. And if you cannot handle that, well...” She met his eyes and cocked an eyebrow at him as if daring him to bite. “I am sorry to say there is not much you can do now, is there. You saw to that.”

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She watched him closely, certain that he was about to snap at her. And she braced herself, half-fearful, half-excited. He might get angry, but it would pass. And when it did, he would realize how foolish this endeavor was and hopefully do what he was too cowardly to admit needed to be done.

The Duke took a deep breath and closed the door.

Then he took another, leaning back in his seat and fixing his gaze on her. It was steeled and intense and predatory. Not angry. Not filled with uncontrollable fury. But dominant and powerful and assertive in ways that had Isabella suddenly wondering if this was such a smart idea after all.

He was bigger than she had remembered. In this small carriage, he took up over half of it; a hulking figure that if he stood might just burst through the roof. Those wide shoulders. That heaving chest. Thighs so thick and arms so round, it was a wonder he was able to fit into clothes.

Double guessing herself – if only for a moment -- Isabella leaned back slightly as her heart began to race.

“I know what you are trying to do,” he said calmly, even if there was a bite to his words. “And know this, it won’t work.

“Wh -- what I am trying to do?”

“You are trying to upset me. You have this foolish notion that if you anger me or frustrate me that I might see the error of my ways and call off this wedding?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“I should let you know, that will not happen. Where indeed you might cause me to anger, the result will not be a cancellation of this wedding.”

“Is that right?”

“It will be...” He sucked through his teeth as if to force a calm. “Regrettable, to say the least. But not in ways that you might imagine.”

Her heart began to beat faster as she dared to imagine what that could possibly mean. Flashes back to the other night... memories of what he had done.

Is that what he means? Surely, he is not so worried about that?

“It is a good thing then that you are wrong about my intent.”

“Do not lie to me. And do not treat me like an idiot.”

His words were sharp, and they shot through Isabella in a way that struck her right to the core. She felt them low in her stomach, a pang that radiated to her thighs which now shook.

She attempted to straighten. “I am simply being myself, and if you do not like that about me, there is nothing I can do about it.”

“Yourself? Is that who this is?”

“Yes,” she said with little conviction. “This is who I am. Is that a problem?”

“It will be, if you continue to behave like this.”

“I am not behaving like anything,” she said. “It is who I am --”

“Do not lie to me.”

“I am not!”

“You are stubborn.”

“As are you.”

“You are a foolish girl who refuses to admit when she is beaten.”

Her eyes flashed anger. “And you are a... controlling, idiotic male who thinks that the world revolves around him!”

The side of his mouth twitched. “And you have a mouth on you that you would do well to keep tamed.”

“And if I do not? What are you going to do about it.” She sat up and fixed him with a glare. Her body was growing hot. Her anger was building. And where good sense told her to back down, the other more stubborn side wanted to see what it was exactly that His Grace seemed so scared of. What this warning pertained to.

“Not cancel this wedding.”

She laughed coldly. “Oh, now I see what is really the cause here.”

“Which is?”

She smirked and flashed her eyes as a thought came to mind. A most dangerous one. “It is quite simple, really. All this time, I thought that you were just being stubborn and needed a little extra convincing. But now I see what the real problem is.” She looked right at him. “You are a coward.”

He stiffened. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.” She licked her lips, knowing that what she was about to say was the wrong thing, but unable to help herself. But what else is new? “You are a cowa – oh!”

The Duke was on her.

He leapt across the carriage and mounted her. Pushing her back against the seat, his legs straddling her and pinning her down, his large body trapping her beneath its weight. His size was even more noticeable now, the way he leered over her, the power that he had... a sense of knowing that he could do literally anything he wanted with her, if he so chose.

Isabella’s eyes went wide. Her body trembled. The first instinct that swept through her was fear and terror because she was completely helpless and at this man’s mercy. But then...

... a different sensation began to build inside of her. It came with the beating of her heart. The sweating of her body. The tingling in her loins as she yearned for him to hold her down and remind her in ways that were not proper what might happen if she spoke to him like that again.

What on earth is that!

“I have been more than patient with you,” the Duke growled. He lowered his mouth so that it was inches from hers. “But my patience is very slowly running out.”

“A -- and?” she stammered. “What are you going to do about --”

“I understand that you are not happy with this arrangement,” he cut her off, his words biting. She could feel his crotch pressed into her leg and it made her quiver and moisten. “Nor am I. But unlike you, I have chosen to be the bigger person and accept it. I suggest that you do the same.”

“And...” She swallowed as she tried to meet his eyes, forcing herself even if the anger in them made her gasp. “And if I do not?”

His laughter was cold. “I have warned you what will happen. And I was not speaking out of turn, Miss Gouldsmith. You will behave yourself because if you do not...” He sucked through his teeth and then leaned in closer, his mouth going to her ear. “I promise that I will make you behave in ways that I will enjoy very much. Is that understood?”

She did not answer but she gasped at the implication, goosebumps breaking across her skin. Body turning stiff and cold yet somehow also warm. That sounded like a threat. Yet, why does the thought of it excite me so much?

“Answer me,” he growled.



“I understand,” she stammered.

“You will behave?”

“Y -- yes.”

He pulled back and reached under her chin. A single finger rested beneath it, and he lifted her chin so that their eyes were meeting. He held them, letting her see that he was being as serious as a man could be.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me, Miss Gouldsmith?”

“I am,” she said in a whisper.

He smiled and flashed his eyes. “That is all I ask. Now...” He leaned in and she thought he was going to kiss her! Her first instinct was to pull away but her second was to take it, to accept it, to submit to his will because what choice did she have?

He did no such thing.

Rather, he leaned into her ear. His tongue ran up the inside of it. He nibbled it gently, just enough that she gasped. And then he said clearly so there could be no mistaking his words. “Get out.”

The Duke pushed himself back and sat down. He glared warningly at her, the anger within still very much present but also controlled. And Isabella, shaking where she sat, barely able to breathe, unwilling to look the Duke in the eyes, did as he said. Perhaps for the first time.

She threw herself from the carriage, tripped and stumbled and then made for the door. By the time she reached it, the carriage was gone and she was on her own.

She did not calm right away. Nor did she go back inside. Her entire body was shaking in ways that she had never felt before as she pictured what had just happened, trying to reckon with their meaning. Both the Duke's words, and her own response to them.

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Although she could not comprehend most of it, for she was still too rattled to think clearly, there was one truth that even she was forced to finally admit: she had vastly misread the Duke.

Duncan cursed himself as the carriage pulled away from Miss Gouldsmith's home. He cursed himself!

What was I thinking! She was baiting me! I knew that she was! Yet like a horny, impetuous simpleton ruled by his manhood rather than his brains, I fell for it. Dammit, I wanted to!

He had known exactly what she was doing. From the moment he had first seen her today, wearing that dress, possessed of an air that told him that she had her mind set to one task and one task only: to upend him. She had not been subtle in her goals and for that reason, Duncan had underestimated her.

Or perhaps I have overestimated myself.

Duncan was not a naturally violent man by any means. He did not need to be. Born into a world where he almost always got what he wanted, what need was there for violence when every man living did as he was commanded without question?

And yes, he had a slight temper. But raising his voice and snapping at someone who refused to listen was generally enough to see him get his way. And besides, there was a huge difference to raising one's voice in anger than to what had just occurred between himself and Miss Gouldsmith.

He had thought earlier to how dangerous Miss Gouldsmith was, and that belief had just been proven unequivocally.

When it came to Duncan's sexual proclivities, he loved being told no. He loved having to turn a no into a yes. He loved disobedience which begged for reprimand – which demanded it! -- because it was a type of power-play which he was so unused to in his day-to-day life.

Consensually, of course. And that needed to be noted. What he wanted was a woman who knew how to push his buttons, who did so on purpose because she knew what was coming if she did – who enjoyed it just as much as him. That, to Duncan, was the very definition of bliss.

It had been years since he'd last had that. Over a decade ago, now. She had been a commoner, someone who had been able to look past who he was and not feel intimidated like women of the ton so often were. She had played into this perversion of his, relishing it, baiting him constantly and forcing him to punish her in ways that they both enjoyed more than words could describe.

That relationship was years ago now and its unfortunate end had broken Duncan such that he had promised to never give in to such temptations again.

Enter Miss Gouldsmith...

She had not done so on purpose, but the result was the same. The way she had denied him. The way she had cowered him. The way she had seemingly begged him to reprimand her was more than Duncan could bear! He had not wanted to lose control like that, yet she had forced his hand and was likely now terrified of him. As she should be.

She did not want to marry me before. Now, I am quite certain she would rather marry

a rabid hound than dare to share my bed...

Duncan took a deep breath as he attempted to clear his mind and settle his still beating heart. If he had the choice, he would simply do as they both wanted and put an end to this engagement. But that ship had long since sailed.

Now, with this marriage going ahead, Duncan would do what was right and commit fully –What else can I do?What he wanted, what he prayed for, was for Miss Gouldsmith to have heeded his warning and to behave herself. But if she did not...

I need to learn control. No matter what she does, or what she says, I cannot allow myself to become that person again. For her safety, as well as my own.

## Chapter Nine

Isabella did not sleep well that night, although that should not have come as a surprise. Hours removed from her encounter with the Duke in the back of his carriage and still her mind was as transfixed on that interaction as if it had only just occurred. And if not her mind, then her body was certainly still there.

She tried not to think about how she had felt in those moments when he had been on her. Easy to dismiss it as fear, but there was a part of Isabella which wasn't so certain that fear quite summed up the deluge of feelings that were swirling about her even now as she lay in bed.

Her body ran hot while somehow shaking as if cold. Her skin tingled, a light pulse which trickled up her thighs and made her shift and squirm. And a deep desire to be put in the exact same situation again, to experience what it was that the Duke was suggesting he would do to her.

What is happening to me?

It was a mystery to Isabella, and one that she wasn't so sure she wanted an answer to. As such, she forced herself to focus on what she did understand, and what she believed that she had some semblance of control over.

She had upset the Duke. She had pushed him. She had brought him close to breaking. He was being stubborn, a trait that she recognized well, but he could not hold out forever, and she was certain that if she was to keep at him in the same fashion then before this wedding happened, he would understand that he had no choice but to call on it to end. He had to!

So, that was what she decided. Isabella put aside the physical peculiarities which she did not fully understand and concentrated on the practical; what she was going to do to finally force the Duke's hand.

It would not be pleasant. It would likely upset him further and cause him to more anger. But that was a risk she was going to have to take... a risk that she could not help but imagine the consequences of as a smile worked its way up her lips when she finally drifted off to sleep.

"... I do understand the reasoning, Your Grace, but perhaps you might consider a bigger ceremony? I had it in my mind that this would be akin to the event of the Season." Isabella fluttered her eyebrows at the Duke.

The Duke remained stoic. "And as I have just explained, a smaller affair will serve our purpose perfectly well. I do not see much point in flaunting --"

"Flaunting?" she cut him off purposefully. "I do not know if that is the word I would use. It is more a case of demonstrating to theonhow important this engagement is to the two of us. That this isn't some..." She looked pointedly at him. "Marriage of convenience, but a love match. Surely, that is to be considered of import?"

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“It is...” The Duke spoke slowly and carefully, meeting her pointed stare with his own. “On that same note, what does it matter what people think or say? We know what this marriage is --” He raised an eyebrow at her. “-- and that should be enough to suffice. If we try too hard it might have people questioning why. So, a smaller ceremony makes more sense.”

“Oh, I just have so many people whom I wish to see attend,” she pouted and pretended to look upset. As she did, she pushed her arms under her chest; another low-cut dress, showing off plenty of skin. “Who I would love to see me at my very best. And to see you too, of course, and to know how truly taken you are with me.”

“I am marrying you, am I not? I would think that should be indication enough of my feelings.”

“But why be subtle?” she shot back. “Again, a bigger ceremony is --”

“Isabella!” her mother snapped. “His Grace said no! Honestly girl, what has gotten in to you!” She widened her eyes in warning at Isabella before softening her features and turning to the Duke. “I am so sorry, Your Grace. Sometimes, she does not know when to keep her opinions to herself.”

“It is quite fine, my lady,” the Duke assured her mother with a stiff smile. “She is simply excited. And I cannot blame her for it. In fact...” He looked right at Isabella. “I encourage it. It is, if nothing else, further proof of how much our pairing means to her. As it does to me.” He held his stare on Isabella, a cold a glaring one, daring her to say something.

Isabella fixed him with her own, one that spoke to her frustration, for this was not going at all how she had planned. Not even close!

It had been a full week since she had last heard from the Duke. Long enough that a small part of her had wondered if maybe, just maybe, his mind had been changed and he had since cancelled their wedding...

A girl can dream but at one point she must wake up.

He had been busy organizing the banns and applying for their right to wed. With that now settled, he promptly returned to Isabella's home and announced that the date had been set for two weeks hence. It was happening and as he was certain to make sure she understood that there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Not that this dissuaded Isabella. Not one little bit.

The Duke stayed for the afternoon as he and her mother began to discuss the coming ceremony and what was to be expected from it. This, Isabella decided, was the perfect time to continue what she had started doing last week. That being, proving to the Duke that he would be better off dealing with the fallout of a cancelled engagement than the perils of what were to come if they went through with it.

Or rather, that had been the plan.

"We shall have the after-ceremony breakfast at my estate." The Duke had seated himself beside Isabella's mother, not beside Isabella, and he focused on her as he spoke. "It is near my parish, so it will make for an easy journey back for those who shall be returning."

"At your parish?" Isabella was sure to whine. "I was hoping it would be at my own? Mother..." She pouted and set her chin to wobbling. "Do you not think it would be



nicer for us if it was there? More familiar, is my meaning.”

“Not at all.” Another warning glare from her mother. “And His Grace speaks sense.”

“Oh...” She scrunched her face up. “But I have always imagined that when I wed, that would be where the ceremony was held. Picturing it in my mind, as one does, I have dreamt of this day since I was a little girl. Your Grace...” She turned the pout onto the Duke. “Please, do not deny me this.”

She heard him suppress a groan as he turned to look at her. And despite her forlorn heavy pout, his stare was like ice. “Is it really that important to you?”

“It is,” she said, pushing her lips even closer together. “So important that I might cry, if I am not to get my way.”

The side of his mouth twitched, and she saw his leg begin to shake. But a deep breath and he forced the faintest hint of a smile. “So be it. Although it might make for a slightly more awkward post-ceremony journey back to my estate, if that is what my bride wants...” His smile dropped. “Then that is what she will get.”

The Duke was having a hard time controlling his temper, but he was managing well enough. Purposefully, it seemed to Isabella.

He must have suspected what she might try and do -- not a surprise, as he had called her out on such acts the previous week. And although his warning to her still sat firmly in Isabella’s mind, she had since convinced herself that the warnings couldn’t have been real. After all, what could the Duke really do...?

Her body shuddered when she considered such things, as if a cold had swept through the drawing room.

She glared at the Duke instead, determined not to be intimidated by him. Certainly not to do as he commanded her! There must be something I can say that will upend him! A chink in his armor I have yet to attack.

“You are being too kind,” she purred.

“Anything for you, my dear,” he responded coolly.

“Anything...” An idea suddenly struck her. “Now that I think on it, shall we discuss what I shall wear?”

“Oh...” For the first time, the Duke look flustered. His eyes dropped to her chest... paused for just a little too long, and she was certain that he licked his lips as they did... and then he looked away. “That is not up to me to discuss. I am certain that whatever you decide with your mother will be --”

“Because I know that His Grace likes me intightlyfitted dresses...” She flashed her eyes at the Duke, and he shifted uncomfortably. “Not to mention ones that are a little lower-cut. Similar to this --”

“Isabella!” her mother cut her off. “Now is not the time to speak of --”

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“I am simply bringing up what it is that I have noticed,” she cried innocently. “Whenever I dress in such a way, the Duke’s eyes wander – yes, like that,” she said when she caught him glancing again. “I simply thought it might be best to ask if he would like me to dress in such a way again?”

“Isabella...” Her mother warned her; a tone that Isabella recognized as she brought it out in her mother often. “This is – I have never been so mortified by --”

“It is quite alright.” The Duke firmed himself as he sat up and fixed Isabella with a steady gaze. “To answer your question, I am certain that whatever decision that you make will be the correct one. I would prefer something a little more traditional, as is expected, but if you wish to embarrass yourself by wearing half a garment, I will not stop you.”

She flushed with embarrassment. “I am not -- will not be embarrassed. I just pray that you will not be.”

“It will take a lot more than that to embarrass me.”

“That sounds like a challenge,” she said.

“An observation.”

“It is lucky then that we have the rest of our lives to find out its truth.”

“A lifetime that I am looking forward to.”

“As am I,” she shot back.

The Duke made sure he was looking at her. A pregnant pause as a cocky smirk rose up the side of his face. His eyes then flashed knowingly as he whispered so softly that Isabella was quite sure that only she could hear it. “More than enough time to teach you how to behave.”

That word... it sent a shiver up her spine that left her body tingling. She felt the inside of her thighs grow warm as her breath caught in her throat and she very nearly choked.

That warning again... another shudder.

He was just trying to scare her. That was all it was. It had to be. He knew what she was doing and he was trying to make her stop. Most likely, she forced herself to believe, because it was working. She just had to try harder.

It was two days later when the Duke stopped once more. This time to check on how preparations were coming along, and to confirm guests and other minor details.

“Surely, you have sent word to the King?” Isabella asked, more demanded to know. “As a Duke of England, I am certain he would love to attend.”

“And I can assure you, he would not.”

“Will you write to him anyway? For me?” she pouted and battered her eyelashes.

Again, the Duke rose above it. This time he was stoic to a fault, not once rising to the many pieces of bait that she lay out for him.

Three days after that, the Duke invited Isabella and her mother to his estate for tea – a

better chance to get to know the family. Isabella insisted on bringing Louisa who she then started a fight with for no other reason than to antagonize the Duke.

And Louisa, being the good sister that she was, went along with it... even if convincing her to do so had been a task unto itself.

“You have always been jealous of me!” she had found herself accusing Louisa. “Admit it!”

The Duke was far too controlled. Calm. Rational. Purposefully aloof and dispassionate, as if he was watching mice squabble over a piece of cheese, something so insignificant that there was no need to rise to the bait and lose control of his temper.

For Isabella, this pushed her beyond the realms of simply not wanting to marry the man because she did not wish to marry. She was beginning to dislike him. To hate him. Better the man who accosted her in the carriage than one who barely even looked at her because he thought so little of who she was.

Her plan wasn't working.

The date of the wedding was drawing closer and closer.

She was forced to finally admit that there would be no tricking the Duke into backing out of the engagement. If Isabella wanted out of this marriage, there was but one thing left for her to do.

She was going to beg.

It would not be her finest hour, but desperate times called for desperate measure and with the wedding only a few days away, Isabella had become very desperate indeed.

Chapter Ten

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:36 am*

Duncan was just about ready to turn in for the night when he heard a knock on the door to his study. Typically, he assumed it to be a butler or servants, so he simply called out.

“It’s open,” he said without standing or looking up; too transfixed on what he was doing. He noticed the figure move through the door, and he heard the door close softly behind them.

That set him to frowning, which had him glancing up, which had him pausing on the figure as his frowned deepened.

The figure was dressed in a hooded cloak that covered them from head to toe. Standing by the closed door, they were hesitant and clearly nervous but focused on Duncan in a way that suggested their reason for being here was not one that either would enjoy.

Duncan was quick to act.

Sensing danger, he was up from his chair and throwing open the desk draw as quickly as he could move. Inside the drawer sat a loaded pistol, which he snatched up and had pointed at the figure before having taken so much as a single breath.

The pistol cocked and --

“Your Grace!” the cloaked figure cried out and threw their hands up in surrender. “Please! I did not mean to startle you! I only wished to talk! Please!”

He recognized the voice immediately. Not that this brought with it any comfort. If anything, he felt a sudden desire to turn the gun on himself.

“Miss Gouldsmith?” He could not believe it! Anger flooded Duncan, for he did not like being made to look like a fool. “I hope that you have a darn good explanation for --!”

“We need to talk,” she said again, stepping further into the room, face still covered. “And I could think of no other way.”

“Be that as it may...” The side of his mouth twitched, and he realized that he was still pointing the gun at her. He was quick to put it down on the table, holding her in his glare as he did. “This is beyond inappropriate – this is myhome!Who are you here with? How did you get inside?”

“I came with my maid, Martha. She is waiting just outside for me. As to getting in...” She shrugged. “It was rather easy, to be fair.”

“I had not thought to lock it against troublesome woman intent on harassing me at all hours. I knew you to be an incorrigible sort, but this is...” He scoffed derisively. “You should not be here.”

“As I said, I had no choice.”

“Does your mother know of this?”

She shook her head. “I snuck out. Martha is the only one who knows my whereabouts, and she will not tell. You have my word.”

“Your word,” he scoffed again. “Forgive me for saying but that means little to me. I would rather trust a broke bookie than yourself.”



Duncan might have been utterly shocked to find Miss Gouldsmith in his private study at this hour of night but based on everything that he knew of the woman thus far, he probably should not have been.

In fact, this right here was perhaps the most logical transgression yet.

She had been at him these past weeks like a hound nipping an escaped hare's tail. Needling him. Antagonizing him. Doing exactly as she had promised not to do because she thought it was her only chance to put a stop to this marriage.

She mustn't have taken my warning seriously either. Dammit how I wish that she had... for both of our sakes.

And now she was here!

Duncan remembered too well the warning he had given her. The way he had straddled her, held her down, and whispered in her ear that she was to stop this and behave herself. Now, she either hadn't believed him or she was doing it on purpose because she wanted what he promised --

No! Don't even think about that...

"As I said," Miss Gouldsmith continued. "We need to talk, and this was the only way that I could think to do it without the presence of my mother. We need to speak freely -- I need to speak freely."

"You could have sent word and requested such a meeting."

She shook her head. "You would have refused."

"I would not have."

“Or my mother would have been present – I needed to speak with you alone.” She was still wearing the hood of her cloak, making it impossible to see where she was looking.

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“If you are to ambush me like this, Miss Gouldsmith, you may at least do me the service of removing your hood when you speak. One rudeness a night is enough, I would think.”

“Oh, I am sorry...” She was quick to remove the hood and the moment that she did, Duncan realized his mistake.

She looked as beautiful as ever. Her dark blond hair pulled back in a tight plait. Her big, deep brown eyes that were intelligent and rebellious, a little too clever for their own good. Soft, porcelain skin that shimmered in the lighting from the fire. And those plump, juicy lips that Duncan saw in his dreams.

The cloak was loose and full-covering, and he had that to be thankful for, at least.

“Better?” she asked with a cocked eyebrow.

Duncan swallowed. “Much better. Although the fact that you are here at all severely undercuts that fact.”

“You cannot marry me,” she said suddenly.

Duncan sighed. “This again? We have spoken of it already. You have asked and I have --”

“I have been trying to trick you.” She spoke over him, desperate to make her point. “I have been trying to rattle you, to annoy you, to make it clear that I should be the last person you would wish to marry. I have done everything that I can think to force you

to concede!”

“I am aware, Miss Gouldsmith.” He crossed his arms and looked at her. “Which surprised me. I had thought that you and I had come to an understanding.” He made sure to be looking right at her, and that she was looking at him. “Our discussion in the back of my carriage two weeks ago, Surely, you have not forgotten.”

Isabella breathed in sharply, and then swallowed. “You -- you cannot marry me,” she said again, taking a step into the room. And then another. “Please.”

Duncan’s eyes flicked over the cloak and despite himself, he wondered what she might be wearing underneath... if anything at all. That was assuming that she had come herebecauseof his warning. Because she wished to put it to the test, thinking that was the way to end this?

Would she really do such a thing? Surely, even she is not so desperate as that?

“Miss Gouldsmith, I suggest that you leave now.” He forced himself not to take a step toward her. To keep his distance. “Do not make me say it again.”

“Please!”

“What we spoke of last week.” He licked his lips, eyes dancing over the cloak. “That was not an idle threat. You promised me that you would...” He swallowed. “Behave. This is as far removed from what you promised as could exist. Now, leave and pray that I forget this ever occurred.”

Please leave. For the love of God, go.

“I know what I promised,” she said stubbornly. “And for how I have behaved last week, I wish to apologize.”

“Apologize?” Duncan repeated. “Apologize for what?”

“This past week. It was wrong of me,” she said, bowing her head. “And immature. I thought I could annoy you into wanting to leave me.” She chuckled at the notion. “Now, I know that was never going to work. You are set on this marriage and your mind will not be changed.”

He hesitated, certain it was another trap. “I am glad that you finally understand. It will make things going forward a lot easier.”

“That is why I am here.” She took another step closer, less than five feet now separating them. “No more tricks. No more games. Just me, standing before you, asking that you... that you look inside your heart and understand that this marriage -- that us! That we cannot work. And despite what may happen if you renounce me, it will pale in comparison to what will happen if it do not.”

“And what will happen exactly?”

She bowed her head. “I cannot say for sure but knowing me, nothing good. That much I do know.”

It was, perhaps, the first honest thing that Miss Gouldsmith had ever said to Duncan. The first time that she had not been trying to annoy him, or anger him, or trick him into saying something. It was, in every sense, the truth.

She really was desperate.

It gave Duncan pause as he considered the situation more fully. Trying, perhaps for the first time, to see things from her point of view. And where he could now understand her plight a little more clearly, sadly, it changed nothing.

“It is not as easy as you wish it,” he sighed, the anger he had been feeling at Miss Gouldsmith having broken in like this fading. Turned now to pity.

“But it is!”

“No, it is not. Miss Gouldsmith...” He took a step toward her, feeling a desire to embrace her but resisting that urge. “I do not wish to marry you either, as I have told you a dozen times. I, as is the same for you, have no choice.”

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“You didn’t give me a choice!” she cried.

“Nor did you give me one,” he shot back with a hint of frustration. “All I asked of you was to be my guest at dinner and you took that simple request and brought this calamity upon both our heads. Leaving me to clean up the mess.”

“But it was an accident.”

“Even accidents have consequences. All we can do now is face them, head on.”

She shook her head. “I... I don’t accept that. There must be a way --”

“There isn’t.”

“You can --”

“I cannot.”

“Then I --”

“Will do nothing,” he cut her off with a snarl, for even Duncan’s patience had its limits. “You have done enough already.”

Her calm facade was fading. She had come here with her hat in her hand, prepared to drop to her knees and beg if she had thought it would change his mind. For how much she seemed to think she knew about him, she should have known that such weakness shown would never work on somebody like Duncan.

Finally, having come to understand how hopeless the situation was, the change was taking her. And because of that, Duncan felt an express desire to be anywhere but in the same room as Miss Gouldsmith. The man only had so much self-control, after all.

“You should leave...” He swept past her and made for the door. “Your point has been heard but it was for nothing. I am sorry.”

“I hate you,” she said, not moving to follow him.

“Excuse me?” He turned around furrowed his brow, as if he had not heard her.

“I said that I hate you.” She stormed across the room, coming right for him. “You asked what is in store if we marry, well now I will tell you. Hate. Antipathy. You wish for a subservient, obedient wife? Ha! I vow, Your Grace, that I will be anything but!”

Duncan felt a pang radiate in his stomach. Like a match being lit, it flooded him and warmed him and had his inner urges peaking to the fore in ways he knew to be dangerous. Legs shaking. Sweat beading. He took a deep and calming breath...

“Be that as it may,” he said as he continued toward the door, reaching for the handle to open it. “This is a conversation best saved for --”

“For now!” She walked around him and cut him off from opening the door. “You will not throw me out – when we are wed, you will not be able to. So, best that you understand fully what it is that you are signing up for!”

Duncan’s body was shaking. The anger was rising. That desire to put Miss Gouldsmith in her place was building. But he knew he could not do it. It was a side of himself that once let out from its cage was nearly impossible to put back in.



“I understand too well...” He spoke slowly, refusing to look at Miss Gouldsmith. “Now, if you do not mind, I ask that you leave. I will see you again --”

“I am not going anywhere,” she cut him off with a snarl. “Is this how you plan on treating me when we are married? If I upset you, you will throw me out? Or better, run and hide!”

His body turned stiff at the insult. “You do not wish to play this game.”

“This is not a game, You Grace. This is my life! Now, either treat me with respect – as you would your wife! Or admit that this is folly and cancel the engagement!”

She was standing up to him. Either because she had not taken his warning seriously or because...

Duncan dared meet her eyes and he saw the fire in them. The way that she shook while fighting it off because she had to stand up to him. Because she wanted to be reprimanded. Was it possible that she knew what he would do and wanted it?

“You wish to be treated as my wife?” he said carefully. “You might not enjoy that.”

“I know for a fact that I will not. Just as I know you will not enjoy being my husband.”

“I do not know about that.”

She took a step closer, less than a foot away, her face right in his. “Cancel our engagement.”

“I told you, no.”

“And I told you, I will not marry – woah!” she yelped as Duncan grabbed her by the arm, stepping into her quickly and taking her by the waist, lifting her as if she weighed nothing, and then pushing her against the wall.

He stood over her. One hand on her hip, the other still holding her arm pinned to the wall. She was so small and fragile when compared to him, so delicate that he felt as if he could break her in half if he so pleased. The shock of him lifting her had her gasping, eyes closing shut and body trembling.

She turned her head away from him and exposed her neck...

“You seem to forget how we found ourselves in this situation in the first place,” Duncan growled in a whisper as he hovered his lips over her neck. “And I am speaking of before you made the foolish decision to announce our engagement.”

Miss Gouldsmith had her eyes closed, refusing to look at him. “You – you threatened –”

“I did no such thing,” he cut her off, his voice still a whisper, his lips lingering above her neck. “Your uncle was the one who brought us together and I know how disappointed he will be if this marriage does not happen. Would you not agree?”

Her eyes shot open, and he could see the realization in them.

“Now, tell me truly, is that something you will be able to...” A hand grazed her

waist. "... stomach. If I was to do as you have begged me, to cancel this wedding, how will that look? What will happen to you and your family?"

"Is that a threat?"

He chuckled deeply, intoxicated by the fight in her voice. "An observation. I know your uncle as well as you and I know he will not be happy. Not one little bit."

She bit into her lip, a sense of hope building behind her eyes, only to be dashed as she considered the situation further. For all the fighting and scheming she had been doing lately, Duncan knew that she hadn't considered the reality of this situation as much as she should have.

They would marry. There was no other choice. Miss Gouldsmith was just a little slower to realize that than he would have liked.

"This isn't fair," she said, almost a snarl.

He chuckled deeply, again grazing his lips over the soft skin of her neck, wanting so badly to bite down but keeping himself from doing so. "Now you are beginning to see."

"I will never love you."

"Do I care?"

"I will hate every minute of it!"

"That is fine. I only ask one thing..." His tongue ran up her neck and he relished the taste of her. Nearly as much as he relished the way that she shuddered. "Are you going to behave yourself?"

He waited for a response, but she gave none.

“Answer me!”

“I -- I am sorry,” she stammered.

“Sorry for what?”

“For... for... for misbehaving.”

“Good...” He purred, his hand tightening around her waist. “I am sorry for what has happened, Miss Gouldsmith, I am. But know this, I will not be spoken to like that again. Is that understood?”

“I --”

“That is not an answer.”

“I am sorry.”

“This wedding is happening in two days' time and I expect you to be on your best behavior. Do I make myself clear?”

He wanted her to say no. To argue with him. To push him just a little bit more. That was what he liked, after all. A sexual partner who fought him and demanded punishment.

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“You --” She hesitated and for a moment, he thought she was going to fight him. She clenched her jaw and scrunched her face and he held out hope...

“You do,” she said instead, eyes still closed, even if her body no longer shook. Her breathing became firm and steady as if she was starting to relax. Even enjoy it. “I will behave. I... I promise.”

He moaned at the words.

Still holding her, he eyed her exposed neck. He knew he should stop.... step back... leave now! But that neck... before Duncan knew what he was doing he was leaning in, wrapping his lips around the soft, moist skin of Miss Gouldsmith, and sucking on it ever so gently.

“Ah...” she moaned. “What are you.... urgh...” She moaned further as his teeth bit in gently. “Your Grace...” He felt her body relax further, her breathing steady, and her heart rate quicken.

He pulled his lips free. “Do you promise to behave for me?”

“I...” She licked her lips, eyes dancing wildly. “I promise.”

Duncan let go of her arm. Then he released her waist, giving her room to step forward from the wall. She held his eyes as she did, a sense that she was beginning to understand what was happening.

Duncan reached one finger out and held it under her chin, raising it as he looked

down on her. “Good girl,” he growled and stepped in quickly, dropping his finger, wrapping a hand around her throat and squeezing as he pulled Miss Gouldsmith in to kiss him.

Their lips met in a fiery, heated clash. Isabella gasped and Duncan moaned as he opened her mouth with his lips and dove his tongue inside, exploring every inch of her that he could. Tasting her in ways that had him turning hard and his breathing becoming staggered.

And she kissed him back! He thought she would fight him but the second their lips met she accepted it as if it was oxygen. Her mouth latched onto his, their tongues wrestled, saliva dripped down their chins as he devoured her, already thinking about what he would do next --

No! What are you doing?!

Duncan wrenched himself free and Miss Gouldsmith gasped and stumbled back. The look in her eyes was confused, caught between fear and arousal the likes of which she had probably never known.

“I should go,” Duncan said quickly, filled with shame as he pried the door open behind her.

“Wh -- what?” Miss Gouldsmith stammered as if coming out of a dream.

“I take it you are able to find your own way home?” he asked without looking at her.

“Yes, I can but --”

“Good. That will be all, Miss Gouldsmith.” He took a step forward, out the door, and then paused, still looking ahead. “I will see you at the wedding.” He spoke shortly,

quick to leave the second the final word was out of his mouth.

Duncan's mind raced. His heart pounded. His body rebelled. And the excitement he felt within as he raced down the hallway as if fleeing a crime scene... that scared him more than anything.

Miss Gouldsmith was right. This marriage could not work. Only not for the reasons that she thought.

## Chapter Eleven

"See, it wasn't so bad now, was it?" Louisa said smugly. "The way that you have been behaving, one would think that you expected to burst into flames."

Isabella was not paying her twin sister any attention. That was saved for her now-husband, the Duke. He was standing on the other side of the ball room, surrounded by well-wishers who each spoke to him, rather than at him. He seemed disinterested in whatever they were saying, as if he wanted to be anywhere else but here.

Good. I hope he is having a horrendous time.

"But you did not burst into flames," Louisa continued. "And the world did not come to an end, for that matter. One might wonder if you will take any of that into account from here on out."

Isabella and the Duke had barely spoken a word to one another since their previous nightly encounter. In fact, the Duke had barely so much as looked at her. Even just now, during the ceremony which saw them become man and wife, he was careful not to meet her eyes when possible.

And Isabella could not have been happier. At least that was what she told herself, as

that seemed easier than admitting the other thing. That which two days later she was still yet to fully comprehend.

The Duke was a monster, of that she had no doubt. But was that such a bad thing?

What happened between them the other night... pressed against the wall... reprimanded and warned... only to accept his kiss because deep down that was what she really wanted. She knew that she did.

His lips around her neck. His hand around her throat. His ravaging, hungry kiss.



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A tingle ran through Isabella's body and she shifted nervously.

“Isabella?” her sister took her by the arm. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Huh?” Isabella tore her eyes from her husband. “I am sorry, you were saying something?”

Louisa sighed with frustration. “I was simply pointing out how uneventful the ceremony was, a sure sign that your marriage is likely to be much the same. Not the horror show that you have been bracing yourself for.”

Oh, Louisa, if only you knew the truth...

“It was fine,” Isabella said quickly. “But it is a ceremony, Louisa. Not a marriage. And besides...” Her eyes flicked to the Duke. “What could possibly happen with so many people about? Mother, especially.”

Louisa frowned. “What are you saying? That you expect once His Grace has you alone, he’s going to transform into some sort of... of beast!” She laughed and slapped Isabella’s arm. “Honestly, Isabella, you are the height of absurdity. Marriage is not a cage or a nightmare. It is a wonderful thing for which you should be grateful. I might even go so far as to say that I am jealous of you.”

Isabella rolled her eyes. “You should have said so. I would have gladly stepped aside for you.”

“No, no, he is your husband. I will find my own.”

Isabella nodded vaguely and went back to watching the Duke.

There were three score of guests gathered in the ballroom and all seemed to be gravitating around her husband; desperate to show him that they had come, that they were here, and that it should be recognized. Isabella almost felt like an imposition at her own wedding ceremony and wondered if anyone would notice were she to leave.

“I know that mother is relieved at least,” Louisa sighed. “I think she expected you to do as Selina did and tear down the very sky in an effort to escape – what are you looking at?” She followed Isabella’s eyes and smirked. “Oh, I see. You know, for someone who claims to be in mortal peril, you are doing a rather good job of playing at being smitten.”

“I am not!”

“And yet you cannot stop staring at your own husband. With a look that I know very well.”

“Oh, what do you know aboutthat?”

Louisa’s cheeks flushed. “I do too know!”

“He is not as wonderful as you think...” Isabella went back to watching him, a warm pulse radiating through her body. “And now I am trapped with him.”

“Ah, I see what this is...” Louisa giggled. “You are scared of what must be done tonight.”

“Tonight?” Isabella was back on her. “What is tonight?”

Her sister looked at her flatly. “Oh, come now. You know...” She pumped her

eyebrows. “Your wedding night...”

It took Isabella a second.

“Oh -- oh!” Her eyes went wide and she was back to watching her husband; she could feel the blood draining from her face as she began to consider what this meant... what tonight would bring.

The wedding night! How had I forgotten that? Her heart began to race.

“I have heard it is not something to fear,” Louisa explained. “And surely it will not be so bad. For all your complaining, be grateful that the Duke is at least handsome. It is more than can be said for most.”

She watched her husband, thoughts of their last interaction now screaming in her head. The kiss had been nice. What he did to her neck, also quite lovely. But everything else...

She would be alone with him. He would not hold back – he would have no reason to. Her breathing turned short as he filtered between panic and excitement.

No. It couldn't be excitement. She was mistaking it for fear, because that was what any logical person would be feeling. Fear of what the monster, her husband, might do to her. Especially if I misbehave...

“Isabella. Isabella, are you listening?”

She was not. Still watching her husband, he turned suddenly and their eyes met across the room. Isabella fixed him with a glare for no other reason than she had no idea what else to do.

“I know that look,” a voice spoke over Duncan’s shoulder. “It is the look of a man besotted with his wife!”

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Duncan shook his head at the comment but even he could not help but smile, as he recognized the voice immediately. Having been caught eyeing his wife across the ball room, he turned around and put his back purposefully to her. If for no other reason than to try and keep her from the fore of his thoughts for a few peaceful minutes.

“Richard,” he greeted his good friend, Lord Deveraux. “I was wondering where you had gotten to.”

“Just basking in the glory of this most beautiful day,” Richard said simply, no sense that he was joking or even exaggerating.

Duncan groaned. “I had wondered whether to invite you, Richard. Now, I am beginning to think that I made a tragic mistake.”

“The only mistake that I can see is that you are not with your gorgeous wife right now, arm in arm, refusing to be parted for even a moment because such an experience might kill you both.”

And for a second time in as many moments, Duncan groaned.

Richard was an old friend of his, perhaps one of his closest friends to boot. A tad too serious at times, little humor in the man, he was kind where Duncan wasn't, understanding and compassionate, and existing of infinite patience. Really, he was the perfect foil to Duncan's more hostile and short-tempered sensibilities.

He was also recently married and, from what Duncan had been told time and time again, loving every minute of it.

“Which begs the question,” Richard continued. “Why are you not with that dear thing right now?” He indicated over Duncan’s shoulder. “She has not been able to stop looking at you all day.”

Maybe she is hoping that if she glares at me for long enough, I might just catch fire.

“There is no rush,” Duncan assured him. “We have the rest of our lives to spend together.”

“It sounds like a long time, but far from it...” Richard’s eyes turned dreamy. “And I can guarantee that in years to come you are going to regret not having spent as much time as possible with the woman you hold so dear. For example...” He pumped his eyebrows again and indicated for a second time over Duncan’s shoulder.

If the circumstances were different, Duncan might have taken his friend’s cue and gone to stand with his wife. At the very least, the sake of appearances demanded it! But things simply weren’t that easy.

And you have only yourself to blame.

Duncan had made a grave mistake the last time the two had been alone together. He had let his emotions get the better of him, succumbing to urges which now bubbled beneath the surface whenever he thought of or even looked at his wife.

He dared a glance over his shoulder and their eyes met. In them, he could see the hate that she bore for him, the rebellion! It had his pulse quickening in a way that made him want to storm over there right now, take her by the arm, drag her upstairs and remind her that he was not to be looked at like that again!

If only things were so easy as that.

Duncan loved dominating his sexual partners in such a way. And he loved it when they fought against him, stoked his anger, letting him then bear it upon them. But he only enjoyed it if they wanted it to. If they took the same pleasure in being controlled as he took in controlling them.

He did not want to force himself on his wife. He did not want her to be scared of him. And for that reason, he thought it best to avoid her until he could figure out what he was going to do about his insatiable appetite.

Perhaps I will get lucky, and she will not do anything too rambunctious that she knows will bring me to anger. Although that seems unlikely...

"Let me ask you a question," Duncan began as his mind worked toward a way to solve this problem. "You and your wife, was it always so easy?"

Richard frowned. "How do you mean?"

"I have seen the two of you together, Richard, and I cannot think of a single time where you have so much as raised your voice at her. Or where she might have warranted such a thing."

He chuckled. "Such is the way of my marriage. I confess, that woman has me wrapped around her finger."

"And what if she was to..." He clicked his tongue. "How do you manage to keep her so sedated? So calm and content? Surely, there are times that the two of you fight."

Richard's brow furrowed. "There have been times where she has been annoyed by me, if that is your meaning. But that is only natural! All part of marriage."

"Yes, but how do you diffuse the tension?" He dared another glance at his wife, still

glaring at him. “How do you bring her to calm if she is being particularly bothersome?”

“Oh, that is easy,” Richard shrugged. “Women are not so complex, you know? Even if we pretend otherwise. The best method I find for calming a woman’s anger is a simple compliment.”

“A compliment...” Duncan repeated the word as if hearing it for the first time.”

“Tell her how gorgeous she is. How entrancing. In fact, as strange as it might sound, many women prefer compliments not to do with just their physical appearance. Something as obvious as admitting that she is right or telling her that she is funny will go a long way.”



Duncan nodded his understanding. “Anything else?”

“A gift,” Richard shrugged. “When in doubt, buy her a gift. You would be surprised how a woman might melt at the thought.” He slapped a hand on Duncan’s shoulder and grinned. “If you are smart, you will buy several in advance to pull out when the time is right!”

Duncan stored the advice for safe keeping. Something told him that he would be needing it soon.

Tonight, he and Isabella would be alone for the first time since two nights ago. Only this time, if things turned heated, he wouldn’t be able to kick her out or avoid her. They would be living together. The rules had changed, and Duncan could not help but sweat at the implications.

### Chapter Twelve

Isabella waited patiently in her bedroom. She sat on the edge of her bed, watching the closed door, feeling her nerves grow by the second.

Her heart was racing so fast that it hurt her. Her legs shook and she fidgeted with her hands in a vain attempt to dispel the energy coursing through her body. She almost stood and began to pace, but remained where she was because she did not want to create any noise that might draw attention to herself.

Ha! As if he does not know where I am. And as if he is not expecting me to be here, waiting for him like a good, obedient wife.

The wedding breakfast had finally come to a close. It had gone on for longer than Isabella had thought, dragging into the early hours of the evening so that the sun had already set. As was always the way with these things, there were a few who refused to leave when the time was appropriate, managing to convince her husband to share in a final drink or two... or three.

It was men's business and Isabella was happy to leave them to it.

That was an hour ago now, time spent fretting as her mind fixated on what was to come. Downstairs she could hear the Duke saying goodbye to the final guests, which meant that soon he would be coming upstairs, into her room to claim what was his by right.

Over my dead body.

It was a bold statement but one that had less bite to it than Isabella liked to admit. She had seen what the Duke became when she denied and fought him, and she wondered how he might act if she was to try and escape her wifely duties. Not that I have to wonder too hard.

It sent a shudder through her. As she pictured that look in his eyes. As she remembered his warm breath on her skin. As she felt his wet lips on her and his hand around her throat...

Another shudder and this time she jumped to her feet as if to dispel it. As if to fight it.

She did not want to lie with the Duke! She did not want to put herself through that! The way her body reacted to thoughts of him were brought about by intimidation, hatred, disgust! Certainly not... not anything else, to which she did not speak because she did not understand it.

The sound of footsteps walking down the hallway snapped Isabella back into the room.

She gasped and froze where she stood, staring at the door, listening to those footsteps growing closer and closer and closer.

I will just tell him that I am tired. That is all. Surely, that will be enough to convince him to wait at least one more night...

The footsteps grew closer. They reached the door. And then... they continued, past the door and down the hallway. The sound of another door opening echoed from beyond and then shut closed as the Duke walked inside.

“Huh...”

Isabella’s shoulders sagged and her quickly beating heart slowed. She stared at the closed door in confusion, refusing to recognize the way her stomach had dropped as if from disappointment.

“Well then...” She looked about the empty room awkwardly. “I guess that settles that.” A firm nod and she turned her back on the door.

Her husband did not want to be with her tonight. As was the case with much of today, he seemed set on ignoring her. Perhaps for good. He had heard her complaints about this marriage, and he had taken to them, understanding that the two could not possibly work together. Hopefully, he would continue to behave in this manner from now until... well, forever.

Isabella forced herself to smile, still ignoring the strange way that her stomach turned, because she needed to believe that this was a good thing. She could not escape marriage but if she could escape her husband then that was the next best thing.

Although....

She looked to the closed door again. Through it. Toward her husband's chambers. What now? Are we going to live in this house as strangers? Until one of us dies? Surely that is not his plan?

Isabella was many things but at the top of that list was stubborn. Good sense told her to leave tonight and wait for tomorrow. Then, once the dust from today had settled, she could approach her husband and ask what he had planned for this marriage. If he did plan on avoiding her, she would like to know about it.

Yes... that was what this was. The reason she felt so strange. She simply wished for closure and nothing more.

It was this sense of closure that she chose to focus on. A need to confirm with the Duke that she was safe to sleep tonight and that he would not try anything. That she would wake tomorrow knowing what to expect. That was all she wanted.

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Without even realizing that she was doing it, Isabella had already started walking toward the door. And then the door was open. A spike of fear struck at her as she looked down the empty hallway, but at the same time... a pinprick of excitement that she did not understand.

The wolf's den sat at the end of the hall and foolishly, she was about to walk right into it.

The room was filled with steam. It hovered thickly before Isabella's eyes and the heat had her sweating through her dress before she had even taken one step into the room.

"He -- hello?" Isabella spoke softly, confused because she had been certain this was her husband's bedroom. "Your Grace?"

"Isabella?" his voice drifted through the steam and the darkness. "What are you doing?!" he barked.

"I..." She thought to close the door quickly and hurry back to her room. But it was too late for that now, as he would just come and see her himself. No, she was here and had no choice but to commit. "I was hoping we might talk for a moment?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now." She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

It took a few seconds for Isabella's eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. And when it did, she realized where she was and the utter tragedy that she had stepped into.

Willingly, at that.

This wasn't the Duke's bedroom. It was the washroom! And there at its center, in a bath made from porcelain, sat the Duke. Up to his waist in water, the tub was too small for his hulking frame, making him appear even bigger than usual. But that was the least of Isabella's worries.

Her eyes went wide as she registered his naked body. She could only see his chest and arms and abdomen, but it was enough to have her gaping. A hair-covered chest, thick and muscular arms, pink skin dripping with water in a way that wasn't at all unpleasant to look at...

"What is this?" the Duke demanded.

"I --" She hesitated, only just now noticing the housekeeper standing beside the tub. He had a washcloth in hand and could not have looked more nervous.

"You may go," the Duke said to the housekeeper. "Now."

The housekeeper let out a frightened gasp and hurried around the tub. On the way, he dared a glance at Isabella and she could have sworn she saw fear in his eyes.

"Is something the matter?" the Duke asked her the moment the door closed.

"I..." She was staring at him with her mouth hanging wide open. A shake of the head and she tore her eyes free, clearing her throat and then looking past him. "I think we need to talk."

"And now is the best time for that, is it?"

"It is the only time," she said as she willed some sense of confidence into her being.

“Despite my objections, you and I are now married and --”

“I am glad that you noticed,” he said with a light chuckle.

She ignored it. “And I would like to know what happens next. What is...” Her eyes flicked to his body again, her pulse quickened, and she looked away. “What is to be expected of me?”

“Expected of you?” He frowned. “I am afraid that I do not quite understand your meaning.”

“As husband and wife,” she continued, speaking into the room rather than at him. “What is ah... expected.”

“You said that already.”

She breathed out her nose. “My meaning is, some couples are expected to break their fast in the morning together, and to share supper of an evening. Balls and promenades and such, also, we will be expected to attend as one. But outside of that...” She could feel herself begin to sweat as she came to her point. “I was hoping you might be able to confirm that you and I will... that there will be no... that I am not expected to...”

Say it, Isabella! What is wrong with you?

He chuckled to himself, seeming more than a little pleased at how put out she was. “You and I are far from what most would consider normal, would you not agree?”

“I would.”

“Then I would not expect normalities to concern us. As you may have noticed, I did my best to give you space today for I was certain you did not want to spend more

time with me than was necessary.”

“And I thank you for that.”



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“And the same will be said of our marriage. If I require that we dine together or attend any social events, I expect you to acquiesce without causing a situation.” He looked pointedly at her.

“That is fair.”

“But outside of that...” He shrugged. “I do not expect you and I to spend hours gazing into one another's eyes like lovesick puppies. Nor shall we be joined at the hip. The one thing you need to know about me is that I do not appreciate drama. We had our differences recently. My hope now is that we can move past them. Without incident.”

“That sounds perfectly agreeable.”

“Good.” He actually looked relieved. “Now, if you do not mind...” He indicated the bathtub.

Isabella very nearly breathed a sigh of relief and left. He had, after all, confirmed what she needed to know and assuming that he was being truthful, it sounded like a better set of circumstances than she could have hoped. Only, as she went to leave, she realized something.

He hadn't answered the one question that she needed an answer to most of all! She cursed inwardly and did not leave.

“Was there something else?”

“Yes...” She swallowed awkwardly, her face turning bright red. “It is... as a husband and wife, there are expectations. Ones that I had... that I assumed... that I was assuming you would... that tonight especially, it is said that...” Her mouth began to turn dry, and embarrassment flooded her.

Worse, the Duke’s eyes flashed recognition. “Ah, I see why you are here.”

“It is not like that!”

He chuckled. “Are you sure? Duchess Fangsdale, for all your complaints about married life, one might assess this situation and be right to think that you are trying to take advantage of --”

“I am not!”

“-- your husband, naked in the bath on your wedding night.” He continued to chuckle to himself. “Is that why you’re here? Upset that I did not come to your room instead?”

She widened her eyes at him. “Relieved is the word you are looking for.”

“Is that right?” he said disbelievingly.

“I came here to make certain that you and I would never – that you had no intention of trying anything of that sort.”

“Of what sort, exactly?” he tilted his head.

“You know well what!”

“You know...” He shrugged and leaned back in the tub, putting his arms up on the

sides, sticking his chest out and exposing the waters beneath which lurked his member. “As your husband, it is my right.”

“I am aware,” she said, making sure that the disgust was present.

“And it is expected that we produce an heir. Sooner, rather than later.”

“Hopefully later, if not at all.”

He looked at her from the bathtub. Amusement gone. A sense that he was trying to see through her; whether to believe her words or searching for the exaggeration in them.

“You really do hate me, don’t you?” he asked finally.

“What was the giveaway?” she responded before she could stop to think of a more tactful response.

“And there is that tongue again. I thought I warned you about that.”

Her heart began to race at the implication. Good sense told her to apologize, but that feeling inside of her that roared at the sight of his naked body would not allow it. “I have always been a slow learner.”

“Yes, you are, aren’t you.” The humor in him was gone and the look he gave her sent a shudder up her spine. “I thought I warned you about that.”

“I--” She swallowed. “I just want to know what is expected of me. You wish for me to be obedient? Then...” Her body was shaking, and her tongue felt swollen in her mouth. “Then tell me what to do.”

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The Duke shut his eyes and groaned in a way that had her skin breaking out into goosebumps. Then he ran a hand through his hair and spoke without looking at her.

“I want the truth from you. Do you want me to take you to bed.”

“Wh -- what?”

“Answer me truthfully,” he growled angrily. “It is not a question I am used to asking and I won’t do so again.”

“I--” Her eyes flicked over his naked body. Her mind flashed to his hulking frame pinning her down, his lips latching onto her neck, her heart racing at his touch. “I... I... I do not want that,” she stammered.

“So be it.”

Suddenly, he rose from the bathtub.

Isabella gasped at the sight. Her first inclination was to turn around and look away, but she froze to the spot, unable to control her legs... not to mention her eyes!

They swept over the Duke’s naked body. Down his bulging chest, past his muscular torso, and to his thick member which swung freely between his legs without a care. She stared at it in rapture, felt her tongue lick her lips, became aware of how she gaped at it as if she was a starving pauper being offered a meal for the first time in days.

Is it too late to take back what I said?

“We have a problem,” the Duke began as he climbed from the bathtub. “One that I am having difficulty seeing a way around.”

She could not speak. Her tongue felt swollen. Her heart blocked her throat as it tried to escape. Desperate to pull her eyes from him, they refused to budge, staring freely as he crossed the room.

“As husband and wife, we are expected to lay together,” he continued, speaking casually as if he wasn’t completely nude. “But you have made it clear that you do not wish such a thing. Do I have that right?”

“Ye -- yes,” she said for reasons she could not comprehend. “That is right.”

“Despite what you might think about me, I am not one to take a woman who does not wish to be taken.” He reached her, stopping a foot away. His eyes then searched her, working over her body slowly, and she could very well sense what was on his mind. “But I do have my limits.”

“I... I do not know what you... I --”

“Know this,” he cut her off. “So long as you do not wish it, I will not take you to my bed. I promise.” It was as if saying the words caused him pain. “In fact, until you tell me otherwise, I promise not to lay a hand on you.”

That had her snapping back into the moment. “Re -- really?”

“But for this to work, I require that you...” He sucked through his teeth, eyes straying down her body. His hand moved by his side as if he meant to grab a hold of her, but he kept it stilled. “That you do what you can not to antagonize me. You have seen

what happens when you make me angry, and something tells me that you will not like what might happen if the next time I am unable to..." He took a deep breath. "Control myself."

"I thought that you said it was my choice," she shot back.

"It is," he assured her. "I would never force myself on you, and I hope you know that." He raised an eyebrow at her. "But if you do anger me, and then you do allow me to... to..." He grimaced. "It is best that we do not let such things happen. For both of our sakes."

She knew only too well to what he was referring. Her husband was a monster of unrestrained anger and if he was given his way he would do unspeakable things to her. She had seen it in his eyes!

Yet, the Duke stood naked before her. His muscular body dripping wet. His member throbbing between his legs, growing before her eyes in ways that she had heard about. It made her own inhibitions seem incredibly frail. And it made her convictions that all she felt for the Duke was fear finally be seen for what they were. False.

A shudder ran through her body again, and she very nearly said something that she knew she would regret.

Although something tells me that I would not regret it as much as I think...

"Is that understood?" the Duke asked.

"It is," she said with as much resolve as was possible, tearing her eyes from his body and looking over his shoulder. "Now, if there is nothing else...?"

The Duke almost looked upset. Taken aback as if he expected her to retort or argue...

as if he wanted her to. And Isabella, with thoughts of the Duke's warning ringing in her ears, her blood growing warmer by the second with thoughts of what he just might do, could not stop herself from acting.

“In fact, I do not care if there is. I am leaving.” She turned to walk away.

“Wait --” His hand snatched her arm and her body went stiff.

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“Wh -- what is it?” She eyed the hand excitedly, wondering if she should fight it or let it take her. What would he want her to do?

“I...” His grip on her arm tightened. His bicep flexed as he held her. His eyes worked their way over her, and she could literally see him fighting with himself.

Again, that desire to give him what he wanted. Isabella turned so that she was facing him. She licked her lips, eyes flicking down at his member which was now stiff and erect; literally throbbing as if it might explode.

All it would take was a comment, perhaps a dismissal of him. But did she want that...

“I did not dismiss you,” he growled.

“Is that a problem?”

He grimaced and his grip tightened. His eyes flashed. She could feel the arousal taking him, the desire building, that uncontrollable force that he had spoken of threatening to take over.

It was then that Isabella decided she wanted it. All this wondering. All this denying. All this building up so that she was now shaking with anticipation! Dammit, she wanted it all.

She wanted the beast.

“I...” He stepped in closer. His naked body almost touched her. She could feel the



heat coming from him and she focused on his lips which came closer and closer. “You promised that you would behave.”

“And you promised that you would control yourself,” she shot back with venom.

He groaned as his hand moved up behind her head as if he meant to snatch a handful. But he resisted doing so... barely. He licked his lips, his eyes flashed, and his eyes trained themselves on her neck like a ravage beast rearing for its first bite.

“No.” He released her suddenly and stumbled back. “You are right.”

“Wh -- what?” she gaped.

“I am the one who needs to learn control. I am...” He looked away. “I am sorry.”

She stared at him stupidly. Wanting to cry out and tell him that he was wrong. That she was wrong! Only the words would not come because she had no idea what to say.

The Duke turned around and went back to his bath, keeping his back purposefully on her. And when he climbed back in the tub, his eyes were closed, and he leaned his head back as if he was falling asleep.

“Send Jared back in when you leave, thank you,” he said as if he was speaking to the room. “That will be all.”

Isabella stumbled back, her mind unclouding with the fog of arousal, her good senses coming back to her like a wave slapping her in the face. Realizing what had just nearly happened, feeling as embarrassed as she did ashamed, she spun about, lurched for the door, and threw herself through it.

She ran for her room, all the while trying to strike what had happened in that room

from her mind as if it had never occurred. She had won a great victory. The Duke would not try and seduce her. After what he had just done, he might very well try and avoid her. What could be better?

It was only once she was in her room, on her bed, heart rate slowing and breathing returning to normal, that the more obvious thought popped up and then refused to leave: in what possible way could that have been considered a victory?

## Chapter Thirteen

Duncan did not sleep very well that night.

He tossed and he turned as his thoughts drifted to and stayed on his wife, Isabella. They'd been alone in the washroom. A tension had built between them. And Duncan had very nearly broken and taken his wife then and there.

Lying in bed, unable to sleep, even hours later he still could not decide if he had done the right thing or not.

What was more, it had seemed like, for a moment there, that Isabella had wanted him to take her. As if she had known what she was doing and what the result would be if she didn't stop him.

He had hoped earlier today that she might have been eager for what he wanted to do to her. Now, he was veering toward certain. The idea of that frightened him almost as much.

But she had told him that she did not want him. She had been emphatic about it. For the best, Duncan decided. And to better ensure that this demand was kept, he would do everything he could to avoid upsetting his wife.

It was late into the night when Duncan finally began to drift off to sleep. Needless to say, he got few hours in, made to be even less when he was awoken early the following morning by the sounds of women screaming.

“Wh --” Duncan sat up with a start. He looked about the room in confusion, taking a moment to understand what was going on.

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It was the screaming. Women, of course. Coming from outside somewhere. Duncan was still half-asleep as he tried to listen, unable to detect if the screams were brought from pain or joy.

“What in the world...” he mumbled as he stumbled from bed and then the room.

Through the house he went, waking himself up as he went, listening as the screams quietened considerably. They were replaced instead by laughter and cackles, loud conversation, the sense that there were dozens of people suddenly congregating outside of his home.

There were not dozens of people gathered outside his manor. Only three. Although the noise that they made might have challenged that fact.

“I still cannot believe you are here!” Isabella cried merrily, embracing her sisters in a two-arm hug.

“You told us to come!” Louisa said.

“Yes, yes, but I did not think you would.”

“I hate to interrupt but is there a washroom I might use,” Isabella’s older sister, Duchess Northwick asked as she cradled her swollen belly.

“When I told you to visit, I meant in due time. Not the next day!” Isabella continued, ignoring her pregnant sister.

“Oh, well, we can leave if you like.”

“No, no.”

“Please, a washroom...” the Duchess begged and grabbed a hold of Isabella's arm.

“Besides, you are so close!” Isabella’s twin decreed happily. “It really was no bother.”

“Oh, I am just so glad you came!”

“Less than a day and she is already bored!”

“I did not say that.”

“Unhappy.”

“I did not say that either.”

“Miserable beyond anything that you --”

“Washroom! Now!”

There were just the three of them. Standing down the driveway by the carriage, Isabella embracing her sisters lovingly as she began to lead them back toward the manor. Certainly not a calamitous gathering of what had sounded like dozens of people to Duncan’s still-tired ears. Even still...

The hysteria. The noise. The impending sense of doom that built inside of Duncan as he watched the three women march toward him, wrapped in one another’s arms, speaking faster than racehorses in full gallop; words tripping, voices rising, laughter

crying out.

Duncan felt himself getting annoyed. What were they doing here? And why had he not been told! To be woken up like this, it was beyond infuriating.

As the women came toward him, Duncan watched them, no sense of joy about him, as cold as a winter's morning.

“Your Grace!” Louisa cried when she spotted Duncan standing in the front door watching them. She hesitated at the sight of him, but then hurried forward and up the stairs and offered a curtsy. “It is a pleasure to see you again. And thank you in advance for your generous hospitality.”

He did not respond.

“Your Grace.” Lady Northwick did the same, albeit with more difficulty as she was forced to hold her belly. “A pleasure and thank you for allowing us in your home today. Might I enquire on where the wash --”

“I do hope it is agreeable that my sisters have come to visit,” Isabella explained as she began up the stairs and after her two sisters. “I extended them an invitation yesterday and they took hold of it with both their hands.”

“You told us to come and visit you as soon as we liked,” Louisa pointed out.

“I did not think it would be the next day.”

“And as I said, we can leave.”

“Oh, now you are just being silly.”

“Coming from you! Ha!”

Isabella shook her head at her Louisa as she stepped in front of her to greet Duncan. There was no kiss on the cheek to greet him. And she stayed back slightly, careful not to get too close, fidgeting nervously with her hands as she looked him over quickly, and then away as if embarrassed.

Duncan eyed her a moment, taking just a little pleasure at seeing the flush in her cheeks as she purposefully refused to meet his eyes. It had her looking away, exposing the side of her neck...

Which, of course, had Duncan's mind racing to the previous night. His urge to bite into that neck and lick up her skin was infuriatingly tempting.

And with how she is behaving this morning, she would deserve everything that I gave her.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Isabelle began with a hint of nervousness. “How did you sleep?”

“I was sleeping very well,” Duncan said, giving his head a shake and snapping himself into the moment. “That was before I was woken up by what I thought was a battle happening just outside my doorsteps. And invasion, it sounded like.”

If it had been anyone else, an apology would have been offered. If not for the noise made, then for the invitation extended without first asking Duncan for permission. That was expected and proper and certainly not too much to ask!

Isabella was not anyone else.

“You were still asleep?” she frowned. “At this hour?”

“I had trouble falling asleep last night and was hoping for an extra hour in the morning to catch up. The fool I am, think I might be afforded such a thing in my own home.”

“Well, that explains the morning wear...” She flicked her eyes over him and grinned to herself. “Although I do ask that the next time my sisters visit, if you might dress more appropriately.”

Duncan hadn’t even considered what he was wearing. Dressed in an old pair of thin cotton breeches and a nightshirt, the outfit was highly inappropriate. And that wasn’t to mention the smell his body surely permitted and how messy his hair was. He must have looked a fright.

His eyes went wide, and he half stepped back as if he meant to flee. One hand shooting down to cover himself. “And I would ask that I am told in advance the next time you plan on having company.”

“In my own home?” she responded coolly. “I had no idea I needed to make such a request. Would the same be said of everything else I do? My sister needs to use the washroom, is that agreeable with you?”

“May I?” the Duchess stepped in. “I really need to --”



“A warning is all that I require,” Duncan cut her off, feeling himself growing irate – again, it was as if she wanted him to! “It is common curtesy. I am sure that even you can respect that.”

“And as my sister has explained, I was as caught by surprise by their visit as you. Perhaps if you did not sleep in so late, this might not have been a problem.”

“My sleeping patterns are not your concern.” A knowing smile came to his lips, which he made sure that she saw. “You made that clear last night, after all.”

Her cheeks flushed further, and she looked away. “A decision that I can see now is the right one.”

It was becoming tense again.

He and Isabella bickering. The two sisters standing there awkwardly, looks on their faces like they wanted to be anywhere else. And Duncan’s express desire to save face by doubling down and reminding Isabella of her place.

Why does this always happen? Can the two of us not speak without fighting!

The danger inherent in the situation was clear and were it just himself and Isabella, this time Duncan might have very well given in. He was certain now that she was doing it on purpose. That was the only explanation that made sense.

At least it was the only one that he wanted to listen to.

But Isabella’s sisters were standing right there. They were watching, eyes wide, likely shocked by this already hostile interaction. They have no idea...

Duncan had gone through with this marriage for the simple reason of saving his

reputation. But if word was to get out about how he spoke with his wife, it would completely undercut the entire point. And that simply would not do.

He needed to diffuse.

He needed to soften the hostility.

He needed... he needed... he needed to heed the advice that his good friend, Richard, had given him yesterday. What to do if he found himself on the backfoot. And how to turn a fight into an apology.

A deep breath and Duncan forced a smile. "Might I also add, you are looking rather splendid this morning, Isabella. That dress..." He swept his hand over her dress; it was simple daywear, nothing too extravagant but nothing too scandalous either. "Stunning."

Isabella blinked. "Oh." She blinked again. "That is... thank you?"

"Of course." Duncan noticed the immediate change in her; the hostility in her eyes fading, that coy smile receding. Sensing the moment, he decided to push a little bit further. "It has occurred to me, in fact, that I didn't tell you yesterday how wonderful you looked. That is an error of the highest order on my part – no wife should have to wonder if their husband finds them beautiful. From this day on I will do better."

"That is..." She could not have looked more confused. And from the way that she struggled to keep her smile at bay, just a little bit smitten. "That is very kind."

"Think nothing of it."

"And..." She licked her lips and focused on him again and Duncan was certain she was going to go back to their fight. But he saw a shadow pass behind her eyes, a sense that she didn't quite have it in her anymore. "And me too."

“You too?” Duncan frowned.

She gave her head a little shake, as if in surprise. “I apologize for my sisters, I should have... I should have told you that they were coming.”

“Think nothing of it,” Duncan assured her.

Well, that was interesting...

“Isabella! I do hate to interrupt, but may I please use the washroom!” Duchess Northwick cried. “Please!”

“What -- oh! Yes!” Isabella spun about awkwardly, her mind clearly anywhere but on her sister’s impending burst bladder. “Ah... Your Grace --”

“Duncan, Isabella,” he chuckled, offering her a friendly smile. “I think we can dispense with the titles, don’t you?”

She blushed. “Duncan... might it be alright if my sister...”

“You do not have to ask. But I appreciate that you did.” He stepped aside and waved Isabella and her two sisters inside. And as she passed, because Duncan could not help himself, he whispered in her ear “Very wellbehaved.”

He saw her shiver at the comment, cheeks flushing even more red. Smiling to himself, he watched as they hurried through the manor in search of a washroom, feeling a tinge of pride because he was rather pleased with what had just occurred, and what it might mean for the future.

That was the key. He needed a way to keep Isabella and himself from fighting. He needed a means by which to control himself so that he wouldn’t do something that he

might regret. And it seemed now that he had found one.

Compliments and false niceties. Perhaps even a gift, if he thought it might help. Anything that would diffuse Isabella's hostility such that she wouldn't risk accidentally igniting his more amorous desires. Well... at least not until she asked him to.

## Chapter Fourteen

Isabella was becoming more confused by the day.

This marriage was supposed to be suffocating. It was supposed to be hostile and incompatible. It was supposed to be a constant assault on her ideals and freedoms as she sought for a way to escape the horror that was married life. Married life to Duke Fangsdale, no less.

So far, it had been nothing of the sort. Hence the confusion.

If anything, as the first week of marriage proved, it was the complete opposite. Heck, it was so far removed from what she had been anticipating that it was almost boring.

"What are those?" Isabella asked as she wandered into the dining room to break her fast on the second morning of her marriage. She had not chosen that time because Duncan also happened to be eating – it was not as if she wanted to spend anymore time with him than she already had. I don't! It was just a coincidence...

As for what she was pointing at in confusion, that was the bouquet of purple and yellow colored flowers arranged by her seat.

"They're called flowers," Duncan responded as if it was obvious.

“Wh -- Where did they come from?” She paused by her chair, confused by the gesture. Sensing a trap.

“They are for you,” Duncan said with what looked to be a genuine smile. He watched her closely, taking note of her reaction. “As to their origin? The garden. I do not know if you’ve had time to explore but my gardeners have done a rather impressive job with the horticulture.”

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“Oh, have they? That is... that is very nice. Of you, I mean.” She blushed furiously, hating the fact that she did. “That is very nice of you.”

“I thought it might brighten your morning,” he continued pleasantly. “As much as you have done for mine. That dress...” He exhaled and his smile grew. “Ravishing, Isabella.”

“Th -- thank you.” She sat down quickly, and awkwardly. She wasn’t used to getting these sorts of compliments from men and had no idea how to react to such a thing. “Really, you do not have to say...”

“I am just paying my wife a compliment,” he continued with an air of charm that almost felt genuine. “Surely, you won’t deny me that?”

Isabella could not have been more confused. Was this genuine? Did he mean the things that he said? Or was this just an angle he was using, to what end she could not imagine.

Again, she had no idea how to react. Her natural inclination was to say something sharp and scathing – at him. But if this was real, and he was trying to be kind for a damn change, the least that she could do was be grateful.

Why, it might have even been the first kind thing he had done for her.

“I do appreciate it,” she said with a smile to match Duncan’s. “And you also, look very...” She swallowed. “Very handsome this morning.”

“Just doing my best not to drag you down,” he said automatically. A little too quickly. “Again, that dress. Breathtaking.”

She eyed him curiously. And again, she very nearly said something biting or dismissive, to tell him that she wasn’t to be fooled by whatever the heck it was that he was doing. But she held her tongue. Barely.

“Again, thank you,” she said. “I... it brings me joy to hear you say such kind words.”

Isabella was still trying to decide what she was going to do about this marriage. How she was going to approach it. The marriage had gone through. It had happened. She and the Duke were together, and there was nothing Isabella could do to change that.

The question now became, how was she going to approach this marriage.

She was no longer intimidated by her husband. At least not in the way that she had before. After what had happened the previous night, she was beginning to better understand the threats that Duncan had made toward her. Threats that she now thought she might enjoy.

In fact, following a long night of tossing and turning and sweating and shaking, she was damn certain that she would enjoy them.

It should have been easy from there. Isabella knew how to push her husband’s buttons better than she ought to have. It was as easy as breathing, as natural as walking. And once she started... her body literally quivered at the thought.

But enter this morning. Enter the flowers and the niceness and the genuine effort to avoid hostilities and Isabella was at a loss as to how she should react.

He was being nice. Purposefully nice. It was clear that he was doing his best to show



her another side of him. As if he was apologizing silently in his own way, letting her know that things were going to change.

But... but... but what if I don't want them to change? Not yet.

"Duncan, I was just thinking," Isabella began pleasantly as she settled into her chair. "My sisters yesterday were telling me of an upcoming ball that they will both be attending at the Manfield Manor."

"I have heard of it."

"Oh good, because I plan on going." She cocked an eyebrow at him, licking her lips with anticipation. "In fact, I am going to attend. In the interest of letting you know my plans, I thought I should tell you of them in advance."

"Is that right..." She could see his mind at work, that desire to chastise her for telling him, rather than asking, what she wished to do. He hated that.

"It is," she said with an arrogant smile that she knew would drive him wild. "If you do not wish to attend, that is fine by me, of course. And if you have already made other plans, I understand perfectly well. But I am going, and that is final."

"The ball is on the Friday night, yes?"

"I believe it is."

Duncan grimaced. His jaw clenched as he worked about as hard as a man ever has to keep his temper. "I had made plans that evening to see some friends in London."

"Oh." She blinked as if it hadn't occurred to her. Beneath the table, her legs shook with a sense of excitement as she imagined the Duke's temper rising so that he had no

choice but to grab her and... “Well, that is a shame,” she finished.

“You do realize how strange it would look if you were to attend such an event without me?”

“Perhaps,” she agreed, eyeing him closely, looking for the chink in his armor at which she could strike. “But I am going, Duncan. I promised my sisters already and I would hate to break it. How might that makemelook.”

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Isabella could see it happening in real time. The side of his mouth twitching. The anger boiling. The desire he must have felt to reprimand her for being so rude and abrasive. For not behaving as she had promised.

“I suppose that means you will be needing a new dress,” Duncan said suddenly. “Which is perfect timing, because I was looking for an excuse to buy you one.”

Her face dropped. “Excuse me?”

“I can always change my plans,” he shrugged as he seemed to relax. “They were not written in stone. The Mayfield Ball, is it? Should be a wonderful time.”

Isabella’s stomach dropped and disappointment swept over her. Not to mention surprise! She studied her husband closely, desperate to see what the heck was going on with him. And what she could do about it. But he smiled with what appeared genuine affection and despite her burning desire to start an argument, Isabella’s resolve wavered.

If he wanted to be nice to her for a damn change, then so be it. Isabella wouldn’t be the one to break this attempted rebranding. She knew Duncan well enough to know that it could not last and most likely, before the day was even out, they would devolve back to their usual state of play.

Isabella still had no idea what that would mean exactly. But the image of her naked husband and the look he had held in his eyes as he resisted the urge to punish her was enough to make her want to find out.

I just need to be patient. A day at most, surely...

The week that followed was as long as it was confusing as it was disappointing.

Duncan was as determined to be as congenial and companionable as he could be, showering Isabella with compliments every time he saw her, buying her gifts such as flowers and chocolates daily for no other reason that he wanted to please her. Being affectionate with his words and actions in a way that should have been enchanting but came across as false.

And Isabella, not wanting to insult a man who had literally just swept into the room with a box of chocolates for her – specially bought in London – had no choice but to go along with it.

“How is the food?” he asked one evening as they ate together.

The dish was a seafood bouillabaisse, a surprise to Isabella when it had been served in front of her, as she recognized the meal immediately. And could not believe that Duncan had requested it.

“It is lovely, thank you,” she said plainly, her mind working to find a way to insult it. But she could not! And for a very specific reason.

“I suspected you might like it,” he said with a charming smile. “I asked your mother what your favorite dish was, and had my chefs prepare it especially for you. Is it up to your liking?”

“It is, thank you.”

“Wonderful.”

“Although...” Isabella was desperate. “It is not quite the same as the one served at home.”

“Oh...?” His head tilted, his lips tightened.

“The fish...” She grimaced. “Do you know what type it is?”

“Ah... no, I did not --”

“It is almost certainly the wrong type of fish. And it sweeter than I remember. Certainly not the same.”

She could see it happening. His temper fraying. His anger piquing. That desire to tell her to stop behaving like a child and be damn grateful, rearing its ugly head...

Isabella braced for it. Excitement building. Legs shaking and pulse rising and mind going back to that night in the washroom, her naked husband grabbing her and lifting her and --

“I will speak to the chef” Duncan said with a shrug and a deep sigh. “And your mother’s chef while I am at it. See if we can’t do better the next time.”

She pushed her lips together, annoyed. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Nothing was working! Nothing she said or did seemed to bring him to anger!

The only reason that Isabella could come up with for why he was behaving this way, was because he did not want to take her to bed. Was it possible that he had given her the choice, knowing that she would deny him?

Only then she remembered his effort at self-control. How obvious it was that he

wanted her and that he was for some reason doing everything in his power to stop himself.

It was all very confusing. Isabella the unsure. Duncan the controlled. She still did not know what she wanted from the marriage. But what she did know was that if she was to be stuck like this, the last thing she wanted was boredom.

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Something needed to give. Desperate to find out once and for all what Duncan might do if he was pushed to the edge, Isabella decided that she needed to stop waiting for the moment to appear and to just create it herself. And with the Mayfield Ball right around the corner... the timing couldn't be better.

### Chapter Fifteen

Isabella was left speechless.

She stood in the doorway to her bedroom, staring at her bed, unable to comprehend what she was looking at or how she should react. What she should feel.

"Do you like it?" Duncan asked from behind her.

"I... you did not have to --"

"I told you that I would."

"Still..." She stepped into the room, nervously, as if she was worried to make any sudden movements. "There was no need."

"I wanted to," he said as he followed her in.

She shook her head and turned back to face him. Unsurprisingly, he looked rather pleased with himself, aware that he had done a good thing and that it was very appreciated. It was but one of many 'right things' that he had done this week, even if this felt more significant than the others.

Isabella had been certain that all the gift giving and compliment paying was false. That Duncan was only doing it to force her into compliance so that she wouldn't annoy and anger him. The appearance of a happy marriage without any of the excitement.

This time, it felt different.

His delight appeared real. And for the first time this week, Isabella was forced to question if there was more to what was going on here than she had thought.

"It's for tonight," he said. "The Mayfield Ball. Our first night out together and I thought it best if you looked your best. A high ceiling to reach, I know," he added with a chuckle. "But I don't think it will be a problem."

"Either do I," She returned the smile, and this time it felt genuine.

Duncan had bought her a dress for the ball. An elegant gown of emerald and forest green, darker over the body, with a lighter chemise that flowed into a gorgeous skirt. The hemming and stitching were golden, the intricate lace pattern was flowery, and the design was modest with its higher neckline and sleeves, but still tight fitting to show off her curves.

And it wasn't just the dress that had Isabella gasping. There was jewelry to match. A pair of ruby-encrusted earrings. A silver tiara that looked to have been inlaid with gold. And a necklace that Isabella looked at but did not want to touch because it was such a delicate piece of craftsmanship that she worried she might break it.

"Duncan..." She was back to looking at the ensemble, unable to put into words how she was feeling.

"You like it, then?"



“I love it.”

Tonight was going to be the night that Isabella turned Duncan back against her. With an audience to watch, Isabella had planned on doing just enough to force a confrontation that was sure to set Duncan on fire. And myself, for that matter.

Easier to do when she had convinced herself that she was doing them a favor. That Duncan wanted her to. That he was being purposefully false because he didn't really mean anything that he said.

The appearance of this dress, and Duncan's delight at seeing her reaction, brought into question all these so-called truths that Isabella had known as fact until thirty seconds ago. Now, she wasn't sure what she thought, what she knew, or what she was going to do!

Was it possible that Duncan's affection was genuine? And that he didn't want her to force him into the monster whom she was so desperate to finally meet? That he wanted her to behave.

And if that was the case, did that mean he was trying to make something of this marriage? Where all Isabella could think to do was destroy it?

Needless to say, Isabella was more than a little confused. And as she slipped into the dress and put on the jewelry, gasping at how utterly stunning she looked, while blushing to imagine the Duke's expression when he saw her for the first time in it, she questioned if she should go ahead with her plan tonight. Or if she even still wanted to.

“Have I told you yet how beautiful you look?” Duncan spoke out the side of his mouth as the two walked through the foyer. Beyond, Duncan could hear the ever growing sounds of the Mayfield Ball, so he figured it was best to slip in one final

compliment before they became swept up in the festivities.

“You have,” Isabella said, pressing her lips together to keep herself from smiling.

“But I suppose once more will not hurt.”

“That is the last time, I swear it,” he said. “I fear that any more and it might go to your head.”

“Oh, Duncan, who is to say that it hasn’t already.”

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“Well deserved though, I think. If anyone here should feel that way, it is you.”

To this, Duncan caught Isabella rolling her eyes at the saccharine nature of his comments. But he also saw her working to suppress her smile, which told him that his excessive compliments had hit the mark perfectly.

It really is that easy. Tell a woman how beautiful she is and watch her melt in your palm like butter on a warm day.

Duncan beamed as he and Isabella made their way into the Mayfield Ball, arm in arm, the very picture of what a perfect marriage should be. No fighting. No bickering. No sense that they were anything but content.

Duncan’s plan had worked perfectly.

Needing a way to diffuse the tension between himself and Isabella, he had taken to being excessively complimentary and damn charming to great effect. The moment he sensed that Isabella was trying to upset him, he pushed down the anger that threatened to consume him and forced himself to say something nice to her instead.

And Isabella fell for it. Every single time.

They seemed to confuse her, setting her off guard, and then leaving her in a state of unsureness such that her efforts to annoy him fizzled and faded as if they had never been. And then, almost always, she would thank him!

What is more, my urge to bed her is nowhere near as aggressive as it had been.

Whether or not that is a good thing, however...

“Duncan!” Duncan heard his name called and turned just in time to see his mother coming for him. “There you are!”

“Mother.” Duncan smiled as he pulled his arm free from Isabella and swept toward his mother, planting a kiss on her cheek. “Lovely to see you.”

“When you told me that you were coming, I confess, I thought that you were lying to your poor mother.”

He chuckled. “Isabella convinced me.” He made sure to bring Isabella in to greet his mother. “Does she not look wonderful in this dress.”

“Good evening,” Isabella said politely. “It is a pleasure to see you again, Your Grace.”

“As it is you,” Duncan’s mother greeted her, sounding a little suspicious at the greeting. “And looking so...” She pressed her lips together and studied Isabella for a moment. “Buoyant. Compared to how you looked on your wedding day, the change is remarkable.”

“A week makes all the difference,” Duncan said quickly. “And what a week it has been. Is that not right, Isabella?”

Isabella frowned and for a moment, Duncan was certain she was going to say something rude. For no other reason than his mother was the very reason that they were in this mess in the first place, so why not let the woman know it?

His heart beat quickly, almost wanting it.

“I was simply tired,” Isabella said politely. “But your son is right. It has been a... a lovely week to begin our marriage. Better than I might have hoped.”

“Only to improve from here on out,” Duncan was sure to say, even as his stomach sunk “And with a wife that looks as good as this...” He made sure to indicate her dress. “This marriage is turning out to be a blessing. Who would have thought?”

Isabella eyed him suspiciously. “Yes, who would have thought.”

There was one problem inherent in Duncan’s plan. One that, when first marrying Isabella, he wouldn’t have dreamed to be possible. This marriage, for how easy it has seemingly been this past week, was missing something.

Not that Duncan needed to guess what that something was. Oh, he was only too aware of that. But that was also dangerous and the exact opposite of what he had told himself he needed in this marriage.

But what was the point of a marriage if it was missing that fire? He had thought that this was what he desired, as the alternative was not only dangerous in how out of control it might risk becoming, but would also reignite memories that Duncan had worked well to suppress – the very reason he had promised never to become that man again.

He told himself he wanted simple and manageable. But the way that he hungered for Isabella to ignore his compliments and snap at him just once, just enough to set him off... it suggested the complete opposite.

“Isabella!” a voice called through the crowd. It was Louisa, waving excitedly for her sister. “Over here!”

Isabella smiled and waved at her sister. Then, she started to go to her, only to stop

and turned back to Duncan. “May I be excused?” she asked.

Duncan didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry out in frustration. A week ago, the very thought that she would ask permission, rather than just doing what she wished, was anathema to everything he thought he knew about the woman. Now, she was as meek as a house cat.

“Of course,” Duncan said. “And thank you for asking.”

She smiled and bowed her head and then turned and hurried to greet her sister.

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“My oh my, she is so well behaved and what manners,” his mother commented.

You have no idea, he thought bitterly.

“The two of you look rather happy,” Louisa noted of Isabella and Duncan. “Do I detect a budding romance?”

Isabella rolled her eyes. “Hardly. The fact that we are not fighting, while agreeable, is not cause to get too excited.”

“But still...” Louisa looked smug. “I was watching the two of you when you arrived, and you seemed...” She shrugged. “Rather good together. Better than good, in fact.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

“How so?”

“We are behaving, Louisa, but only because the man has given me no other choice! It is hard not to be cantankerous when all the man does is compliment me and give me gifts.”

“The nerve of him! What’s next? He’s going to take you away somewhere nice for a holiday? Paris or what-have-you? Shame on that man. Shame on him!”

Something had to give, and tonight was proving to be the final straw.

The ball was typically gallant and grandiose in all the ways that these events often

were. Brightly and ostentatiously dressed women. Smartly dressed men. Dancing and drinking and plenty of chatter as the throngs of excited guests moved to and fro across the open ballroom.

It was a social event, a chance to relax and have a little bit of fun. But Isabella was so tense with nerves that fun was the very last thing on her mind.

Duncan was just working so hard to keep her from doing or saying anything that might cause alarm. He was desperate for her to behave. And where to the casual observer it looked like a happy little marriage the two had carved out for one another, it was anything but.

Only... Isabella didn't know what she was going to do. Or how she was going to do it. She had been set on upsetting the apple cart tonight, finally doing something! But with how congenial and pleasant Duncan was being – how genuine he seemed. It was hard to find the enthusiasm.

The irony that her husband being nice to her might threaten to destroy their marriage before it even had a chance to begin, was not lost on Isabella.

“Who is that?” Louisa said suddenly.

“Hmm? Who?”

“That?” Louisa grabbed Isabella by the arm and directed her attention across the ball room. “Who His Grace is speaking with.”

Isabella found her husband and saw immediately to whom her sister was referring. She was a tall and elegant looking woman, a tad older than Duncan, with dark features and shining white skin that stood out against the darker gown she was wearing. Very pretty, Isabella thought. And clearly very interested in her husband.



The woman was flirting with Duncan. Slapping at his chest. Laughing at everything that he said. And even though Duncan appeared to not be encouraging her, she persisted nonetheless!

As to how Isabella felt about it? She wasn't entirely sure.

Logically she should not have cared. After all, she had long since convinced herself that she did not like her husband and that this marriage was never going to be a love match. So what did she care who he flirted with?

Yet as she watched the two speak, she could not ignore the knots twisting in her stomach. Knots of jealousy which didn't make any sense! Even if they should have.

"That looks entirely too friendly," Louisa said in a huff. "Don't you think?"

"I am sure it is fine..."

"Fine?" Louisa scoffed. "It is not fine. If that was my husband, I would let him know it too. Honestly, the nerve of the man."

"Louisa..." Isabella's brow tightened as Duncan nudged the older woman with his elbow and whispered something that had the woman laughing. "They are just speaking."

"Even if they are, it is highly inappropriate. To behave that way at an event like this one – with friends and family about? His Grace should know better."

Isabella opened her mouth to again tell her sister that it was perfectly fine. But then an idea struck her, like lightning, such was the power of this idea and the reaction that it sent through her.

Louisa made a good point. Even if her husband was doing nothing wrong technically, he should still have known better than to allow that woman to behave that way toward him. And with his wife in the same room! Even the most docile of wives would have every right to speak to their husband about doing such a thing.

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A smile spread over Isabella's face and her eyes flashed excitement.

This was it. This was exactly what she had been looking for. A reason to antagonize her husband in a way that he could not wiggle out of or compliment his way through. A reasonable means by which she could anger him.

She felt a tingle ripple up the inside of her thighs. She felt her heart begin to beat just that little bit faster. Her husband angry. The two of them alone. Her wicked tongue refusing to behave itself because in this instance her husband deserved it.

Isabella continued to watch Duncan and the strange woman across the room, flirting outrageously in ways that delighted her. Was she jealous? She told herself that she was not, and that had nothing to do with why she was now so eager to act. But that didn't mean she wouldn't take some pleasure in knowing that the woman, whoever she was, would be going home alone tonight while her husband would be going home with her.

And if I have my way, that is not all he will be doing...

### Chapter Sixteen

She waited until they arrived home. But that was done purposefully.

Little was said on the trip back, a normal state of affairs, still companionable and without incident, but that was the problem. Again, Duncan complimented her and thanked her for a pleasant evening without drama.

“It was my pleasure,” she said simply, sure to keep her cool and let Duncan think that the night would be progressing, and then ending, smoothly. “I am just glad that you enjoyed yourself.”

“I did,” Duncan agreed, seemingly pleased with her content state.

When they walked inside the manor, it was expected that they would go their separate ways as was always the case after supper, when the evening came to an end. Duncan would go to his room to get ready for bed, and she would go to her own.

This time, Isabella changed course.

She walked after Duncan and followed him down the hallway. He didn’t notice her, reaching his room and opening the door, stepping inside and then closing it behind him without so much as a glance.

Isabella approached that closed door and raised her fist above her head to knock. She hesitated for a fraction of a moment, considering whether this was the best course of action. Once she knocked on that door, there would be no going back and she still could not say exactly what she expected, or even wanted to happen.

But then she remembered this past week. How pedestrian it had been. How simple and plain. Oh sure, it was pleasant enough and it was nice not to outwardly despise the man whom she was married to. But it wasn’t enough!

She remembered their first night, in the washroom, the Duke’s naked body glistening with soapy water as his eyes burned a furious warning that she was yet to meet.

A warmth spread through her body at the thought and she knocked once and then, without waiting for an answer, she opened the door and stepped inside.

“Isabella?” Duncan was in the middle of taking off his jacket, pausing with it halfway down his arms when she saw her close the door behind her. “What is this – is something the matter?”

“You tell me,” she said as she crossed the room to meet him.

He frowned, eyes flicking over her and trying to assess what this was about. He must have seen the determined look on her face, and surely he sensed that this wasn’t going to be a congenial conversation.

Still, he tried for a disarming smile. “Whatever it is, might it wait for tomorrow? It has been a big night, and I think we could both use some sleep.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

His face dropped and the side of his mouth twitched. “Are you sure about that? We have both had a few drinks tonight, perhaps some time to discuss...” His eyes flicked over her again. “Whatever this is, will do us well. By the way...” He forced the smile again. “That dress on you is --”

“Stop it,” she snapped, not daring to give him the chance to compliment or try and be nice. This ended tonight! “Enough with the feigned compliments and the forced niceties. Enough!”

He turned stiff. “Excuse me?”

“You heard what I said, and I am sick of it, Duncan.”

“I...” He clicked his tongue and took a calming breath. “I am not entirely certain what you mean, Isabella. All I have done is be kind to you, which I thought you might have appreciated.”

“And I might have, if it was real.”

“You think I am lying?”

She scoffed. “I think that a man who means what he says would not spend half the night flirting with a strange woman in the middle of a crowded party where everyone could see.” She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at him.

He scoffed. “I do not know what you think you saw, but I can assure you that I was not flirting.”

“So you say.”

“So I do,” he said sternly. “Whatever it is that you think of me, I would never do such a thing as that. We are married, Isabella. And that means something.”

“Then she was flirting with you!” Isabella attempted, desperate to put herself back in control of this argument. “I know a woman trying to seduce a man when I see one.”

“That was not what was happening.”

“And I know a man accepting those advances when I see it,” she continued to fire. “I am sorry that I was there tonight. If I had not been, I am certain you would have had more fun.”

Jaw clenched, she saw his eyes flash fire and brimstone. His body began to tremble. The anger that he had worked so hard to suppress all week slowly boiling to the surface.

That’s right. Just like that...

“That is not what happened.” He spoke through his teeth. “And I will thank you not to speak of that which you do not know – to not accuse me of such slander.”

“Who was she then?” Isabella demanded, her excitement building, while she

maintained her angered temperament. “Hhmm?”

“Nobody.”

“That was not how it --”

“I do not care how it looked!” Duncan roared suddenly. “She is an old friend and that is all – which is more than you deserve to be told! I will not stand here and defend myself because you have suddenly decided to pretend to care.”

His words washed over her like flames. Hot and heated and fiery, she took a step back as if he had slapped her. Heart rate spiking, a tremor of fear crept up inside of her because the demented look of rage on his face was beyond what she had imagined.

But still, Isabella stayed strong. Stubborn. Determined. And, most of all, excited beyond anything that she had felt all week. In my entire life, for that matter.

“I am not pretending to care,” she shot back. “I do care. As is my right.”

As she spoke the words, she expected them to come out as a lie. Only there was a truth behind them, one which she realized as soon as they were spoken that Duncan could see.

“Really?” he frowned, sounding cautious now. “You expect me to believe that.”

“It’s the truth!”

“And I am supposed to believe that? That suddenly you care about this marriage when all week, I have watched you itch and fidget at the mere idea of being congenial. Most women would count themselves lucky if they had a week as ours just



was. You..." He scoffed again. "You treat it like torture."

"That is not true!" Isabella cried. "And I have every right to be upset."

"Upset, yes," he agreed. "But not hysterical."

Her eyes flashed anger. If she was being entirely truthful, those words alone might have cut her so deep that she would have bled out all over the carpet. But he assumed that she was lying, which she realized she could use.

"Fine then," she said with a shrug. "If that is the case, perhaps I will take a leaf out of your book."

"What do you mean?"

"You wish to sleep with other women?"

"I do not wish to sleep –"

"Then what would you say to letting me sleep with other men?" she spoke over him; his eyes widened and she could see how angry that suggestion made him. "An open marriage, I believe is the term. Surely, you will not be so against that?"

"Isabella..." He groaned and massaged his temples as if to calm down. "I will pretend I did not hear that."

"Why? What is the point? As this week has proven, you and I..." She shook her head.

"We cannot work."

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“Is that what you think? All I have done this week is be kind to you! To treat you with respect! Which I had thought you might appreciate.”

“What I would appreciate is a husband who is honest with me!”

“We tried that!” he snapped.

“No, we did not,” she responded, half with venom, half with a sense of earnestness that came out naturally. “You want to avoid me and hate me and pretend that I do not exist? Fine! But do not dare to treat me like a fool or an idiot. All I ask is that you be real with me. At least then I will know where I stand.”

She was standing less than five feet away from him. Facing him. Hands curled into fists by her side as she berated the man as if her life depended on it – a full week’s worth of insults, laid bare in ways that she could see were cutting him.

And Duncan did all he could to control himself. Body shaking. Refusing to look at her. Face and neck turning red as his breathing rose so quickly that she thought he might start breathing steam soon.

“You do not know what you are asking.”

“I know exactly what I am asking.”

“No...” He shook his head. “What you think you want, trust me when I tell you that you are not ready for it. You would not enjoy it.”

“That is for me to decide.”

“I am doing this for you.”

“And I am telling you no.”

He winced. “Isabella... please.”

Isabella had never felt so excited before. It was hard to fathom what was happening to her body; the way it quivered, the warmth that spread, the fire that grew inside of her that was like a hunger desperately searching for something to consume. And Duncan... he was so close, she knew it.

“I was right then,” she scoffed as if in disgust. “I married a coward. What a shame.”

And that was the final straw.

Duncan’s head snapped up and he growled at her; the beast released from the cage. She could see it in his eyes, she could feel it radiating from his body. The entire room seemed to shake as he bore down on her, his presence growing where he stood to seem as if he was eight or even nine feet tall.

“You want the beast?” he snarled. “You want the monster?”

“I need it,” she said.

“Fine. But remember, you asked for this.”

And with that, Duncan let the beast out of the cage, strode across the room, and took her for the first time.

## Chapter Seventeen

Duncan's kiss was wild and attacking. It caught Isabella by surprise, as if she worried he might tear at her lips with his teeth. But he did no such thing. Lips found lips and tongues worked their way into mouths and soon the two were engaged in a kiss filled with passion and lust that had spent the last two weeks building.

Isabella melted and allowed herself to give in to the kiss. She was through pretending that she did not want it, or that the thought of kissing her husband disgusted her. As his tongue explored the inside of her mouth, and as his hands gripped her waist tightly, she relaxed in a way she wouldn't have thought possible.

This isn't so scary. The opposite! Truly, I do not know what Duncan was so worried about --

Suddenly, Duncan's hand snatched the back of Isabella's head, taking a handful of hair and prying her lips away from his face.

She tried desperately to follow his escaping mouth. "Wh --"

"You have spent the last week antagonizing me," Duncan growled, refusing to let her go. One hand holding her hair, the other now around her waist. "Admit it."

Her first inclination was to agree. To surrender and admit fault because she knew that Duncan hated being argued with. But a voice inside of her whispered a soft reminder, a suggestion that she did not understand but knew to be the right course.

Heart beating. That sense of fear mounting. Her body trembled as she licked her lips and spoke. "I admit nothing. You have been the one antagonizing me."

Duncan groaned and she could see his jaw clench. “You enjoy frustrating me.”

“You make it so easy to do.”

He closed his eyes and groaned again, that hand around her waist moving up her body and then slowly wrapping itself around her throat. She gasped and he squeezed, not roughly, just tight enough to let her know that he had her in his grip and could end her if he so pleased.

“What am I going to do with you...” He licked his lips as his eyes flicked hungrily over her body.

“Nothing,” she shot back excitedly, feeling it grow inside of her as she pushed him. “And I will ask you to let me go or... or... or I promise that you will regret it.”

He groaned again, his grip around her throat tightening. “I have asked you time and time again to behave. And still you refuse.”

“I am not yours to command.”

“That is exactly what you are.” He leaned in and she held her breath as she braced for another kiss. Only he moved past her lips and his tongue licked her ear before his teeth caught her lobe and bit down. “You are mine and it is time that you learned how to behave.”

“I am a slow learner,” she breathed in a whisper.

“Yes...” He smiled and his eyes flashed. “Yes, you are.”

She had no idea what was going to happen. What she was even saying! But Isabella could sense it was the right thing. The way that her husband’s breathing was rising steadily. The flush on his neck. How moist his lips became as his eyes devoured her and his mind went to places she could not even imagine.

“Pr -- prove it,” she said as she tried to pull herself free.

Suddenly, Duncan stepped into her, wrapped an arm around her waist and threw her up onto his shoulder as if she weighed nothing.

“Ow!” she cried out in shock as he carried her across the room where he tossed her onto the bed. She gasped and attempted to push herself up but her husband was on her before she could do much of anything.

His hulking frame pinned her down and again she felt trapped, completely at this man’s mercy. He looked at her savagely, like a wild animal escaped from captivity. And the way he breathed, it almost sounded painful as if his lungs could not handle the pressure that was building inside of him.

“What are you --”

“Do not speak,” he growled. “Not unless I allow it.”

“What does --”

His hand shot out and covered her mouth. He pressed himself in close, his lips touching the back of his hand, their eyes meeting. “I said, do not speak.”

She widened her eyes at him, as if in rebuke. And all the while her body ran so hot

that she began to sweat. Shaking too. Trembling! Caught between the fear of not knowing and the excitement of wanting to find out, Isabella was too far in to stop now. What was more, she did not want to.

“This is how it will be,” Duncan said in a commanding tone. “The way you have been behaving requires punishment. But I am not a complete monster, nor do I enjoy serving it to you...” His eyes flashed their hunger. “Even if it might seem that I do. So, I will say this one time and one time only. If I go too far, or at any time you wish to end this – what you have forced me to do,” he growled. “You will say King George. Is that understood.”

A safe word. Isabella’s mind raced with the implications, her heart still beating quickly but not quite so panicked. This changed everything. What was more, it gave her a small amount of power that she didn’t realize she needed.

She opened her mouth to speak but Duncan’s hand kept it closed.

“Do not speak...” He whispered as he held her mouth. “Nod your head. Do you understand what I am saying?”

She nodded her head.

“Now, are you going to do as you are told?”

She very nearly nodded her head again but caught herself just in time. From the look in his eyes, she knew what he wanted, and she was happy to play along. She shook her head, trying her best to match his furious stare with her own cantankerous one.

“I did not think so,” he chuckled, almost looking amused. “So be it.”

His arms lifted her from underneath and then flipped her onto her stomach. Duncan

then fell in next to her and pushed her face into the soft bedding. She tried to push him off, but he was too big, too strong, too powerful.

And as he held her, his other hand moved to the skirt of her dress, taking a handful and then slowly sliding it up the back of her bare thighs. Continuing to pull it, he tore it over her buttocks and exposed them fully.



“Get off --” She tried to wiggle free, but he refused to allow it.

She gasped next. His fingers, they traced gently over her naked backside, soft and tender and careful. Goosebumps erupted across the bare skin, weaving their way down and between her thighs until her entire lower half was trembling at his touch.

“Are you going to behave for me?” he asked her, his voice as gentle as his fingers which still traced her.

“I --” She hesitated. Good sense told her to yield, to scream the safe word, but the excitement that raged within had her subconsciously arching her backside as if presenting more of it for Duncan to use. “No, I will not.”

The pain was sharp and unexpected. It erupted across her right butt cheek, burning hot for a second before simmering and then cooling just as quickly. She gasped; a moment taken to understand what had just happened. He has spanked her!

“Are you going to behave for me?” he asked again.

“Never,” she said excitedly, wanting more.

Another spank. This one harder, the full hand cupping her left cheek, sending those spikes of pain through her entire body.

“Urgh...” she moaned as the pain turned to pleasure rippled over her.

“Again,” Duncan growled. He yanked her head up and leaned down, whispering into

her ear. “Are you going to behave for me? Or do I need to take this further?”

Further? What else can he possibly do? And why am I so excited to find out?

“I am not yours to command,” she spat as she tried to free herself from his embrace. “I will never – urgh!” she moaned as he spanked her again.

“Further then.” His laughter was excited as if he relished the idea of what was to come. Likely, he did.

Duncan let go of her hair and pushed himself from the bed. Finally free, Isabella spun about with the intention of berating Duncan in the ways that she knew he liked. But her voice caught in her throat when she saw what he was doing.

He was removing the belt from his pants.

Her eyes went wide as he whipped off the leather in one quick motion. Standing over her as he was, body flushed red, eyes wild and hungry, Isabella could not help but wonder if maybe she had gone too far. She very nearly opened her mouth to say the safe word, to put a stop to this before it got out of hand. And yet... somehow still, she was eager for more. She did not know why. She did not know how to explain it. But there was just something about the way that Duncan was treating her that she could not get enough of.

Always the rebel. Always the smart mouthed. Always the antagonist. She had to admit, it was nice for once to be put in her place.

“Wh -- what are you doing?” she asked of the belt, her mouth turning dry.

“What I should have done on our wedding night.” He looked directly at her as he gripped the belt between both hands, squeezing it tight as if to test its strength. “What

you needed me to do, even if you would never admit it.”

“And wh – what is that?” she asked, even leaning back a little because the look in her husband’s eyes was beyond anything she had ever seen.

“Turn around.”

Her eyes went wide. “Why? What are you going to --”

“Turn around.”

“I...” Eyes flicking between the belt and her husband. “And if I do not?”

He sighed and shook his head, almost appearing disappointed. Then he strode toward her, two short steps, reaching her before she had a chance to move. His hand shot out, snatching just underneath her chin, forcing her to look up and hold his eyes.

She tried to pull free, but he was towering over her, giving her nowhere to go.

“I am going to show you what happens when you continue to disobey me,” he explained evenly. “But it serves you right, for being such a bad girl.”

“But what are you going to --”

“Turn around.” It wasn’t a question or an offer. It was a command. His voice, the rumble in his chest, washed over her like a wave and it was all Isabella could do not to jump to her feet and run.

Instead of that, however, she swallowed. Focused on the heat building inside of her with such force that she very well might have exploded. Her legs trembling. Her breath rising. Excitement growing. She wanted this.

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Duncan stepped back and Isabella turned around. He did not ask her to specifically, but she put herself on her hands and knees, facing away from him. She pulled her skirt above her waist, her bare backside presented for him.

She had never felt more vulnerable.

Duncan's footsteps approached her slowly. She shook as his hand again stroked over her naked skin. She gasped as his fingers moved between her thighs and ran up the inside of her lips. And she moaned when one of those fingers slipped inside of her.

"Urgh..." Her face collapsed to the bed as waves of pleasure shot through her. "Duncan..."

"Look at that," Duncan purred as his finger continued to slip inside of her. "How wet you already are. If I didn't know any better, I would say that you are enjoying yourself. You really are bad."

"I am not," she moaned as her body shook from his touch. "I hate... hate... I hate it."

"I bet you do," he chuckled. "Now..." Slowly, his finger slipped back outside, and he wiped it off on her skin. "Are you going to behave?"

"No," she said with force, and he spanked her. She gasped, and then caught her breath as he slipped his finger inside her again. Slowly and gently, he explored her... stroking with his fingers in a way that had her --

He pulled his fingers out and it felt as if the life was being sucked from her.

“Are you going to behave?” he asked again.

“Never,” she said with bite, bracing as his hand slapped across her naked backside again. His fingers moved to her lips and she closed her eyes and held her breath as the pleasure --

He pulled his fingers back, denying her.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me?”

“I would rather die.” A third spank, the hardest yet.

“You simply will not learn,” he growled. “You leave me no choice, Isabella. But remember, you asked for this. Bad girls deserve to be punished.”

“Did wha --” She started as the belt suddenly wrapped itself around her neck. “Duncan? What are you doing?”

“Teaching you how to behave.” The belt made a noose, with Duncan holding onto the other end as if she was a dog being led around the park. “Now...” He pulled on the end of the belt and it tightened around her neck. Not too tight, just enough that she could feel it. “Are you going to behave for me?”

“Are you going to make me?”

His laughter was deep. She could hear the excitement in it. She could feel what he was going to do. Isabella was no expert. This was, in fact, her first time ever with a man. Yet somehow she understood what was about to happen. As if it was instinct.

Slowly, she spread her legs open and arched her back further. She lowered her head, pressing her face against the bedding. She took a breath... and she held it as the

anticipation grew inside of her.

Duncan's pants dropped to the floor.

Again, his fingers traced up the inside of her thighs. She squirmed and writhed as they slipped inside of her. She gasped as he began to move them in and out, testing and teasing and opening her wide. Her entire body trembled. The overwhelming sense of desire that swept her was so intoxicating that she nearly screamed at him to just do it!

"Remember," he growled. "This is your fault." Then, without another word, he entered her.

Isabella's eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. Her body turned stiff. She very nearly bucked and tried to wiggle away. But he had one hand around her waist, while the other held the belt, pulling her in closer as his member plunged inside of her, inch by glorious inch.

"Duncan..." she breathed.

"Now..." He pulled on the belt, tightening it around her neck and forcing her head up. "Are you going to be a good girl for me?"

"No," she moaned. "Never."

"So be it."

Duncan began to thrust inside of her. Slow at first; long and deep and hard. Each time he pushed himself deeper, it sent a spike of pleasure through Isabella that had her screaming for more. Sensations of such carnal delight that if she had known how good this would feel...this would have happened a lot sooner than it had.

“Are you going to behave?” he commanded of her, spanking her with his spare hand as he thrust at and pounded her.

“No!”

He thrust harder. Faster. One hand on her waist now, the other pulled the belt. It cut off the air, giving her just enough to breathe. She tried to wiggle free, but he pulled her back. She tried to buck him, but his thrusts were too hard and fast and aggressive. She tried to fight him, but he was too powerful for her.

Besides, she wasn't trying that hard to stop him. God no.

“You've been a bad girl,” Duncan growled as he pummeled her; hard, fast, deep, all force. “Haven't you!”

“I am so bad!” she cried.

“This is your punishment for disobeying me!” Another spank, the hardest yet. “This is what bad girls get! Now --” Another spank. “Will you behave!”

“I don't want to --” He spanked her again. “I won't --” Another spank and then the hand holding the belt dropped it as he leaned forward and took a handful of hair. “I... I...I...”

He thrust inside of her, deeper this time as he fell forward so that his entire body was on her. “Tell me you will behave!” he growled. “Tell me that you're going to be my good little girl. Do it!”

“I'm sorry!” she found herself crying out, gasping through the waves of pleasure.



“Sorry for what?”

“For being bad.”

“A bad what?”

“I’m sorry for being a bad girl!” she screamed as he continued to pound her as his lips found her neck. “I won’t do it again.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“I promise!” she begged him, barely able to breathe, both ass cheeks stinging, legs shaking so hard that she could barely stay on them. “I promise. I’ll be good... I’ll be good...”

“A good what?”

“A good girl,” she gasped as he thrust again. “I’ll be good for you from now on. I promise!”

“You better be!” He pushed himself back and both hands found her waist. “You’re going to be obedient, aren’t you?”

“I am!”

“You’re going to do as you are told.”

“I will!”

“Because if you do not...” He began to move his hips even harder. Even faster. She could feel something happening, which she did not understand at first. His grip was

tight. His movements were short and sharp. His breathing became pained. "If you do not... I will have to punish you again!"

And as he shouted that final command, Duncan exploded inside of Isabella. Or maybe she was the one exploding? She did not fully understand what was happening. The heat building inside of her. Her body fighting it. An eruption that she tried to resist, only for her subconscious to will it to happen.

As Duncan gave his final thrust, Isabella seemed to explode. Fire consumed her. She went stiff and then her legs kicked out, her body spasmed, her entire being rebelled against her beyond anything she had ever felt. For a moment, she thought her heart might give out...

For it to suddenly stop. The heat was still there. The pleasure still tingled and swept over her body. But it was nowhere near as aggressive, leaving her to shake as her heart slowly softened and went back to normal.

What in the name of all things was that?

As for Duncan? He had stumbled back, falling into a chair, his breathing heavy and aggressive, his body coated in sweat; he was still wearing his white linen shirt, but it was so wet that she could see his flushed skin underneath.

Isabella was worried, at first, to look at him. Surely, after such a savage display, he must be embarrassed? She certainly was! She found his eyes... hesitant at first... surprised to see a smile behind them.

That surprise grew when Duncan pushed himself up and made his way back to her. For a moment, she thought he was going to try the same again, as if once was enough. She pulled back on instinct, but he was gentle as he fell in beside her and pulled her sweating body into his own.

“Wh – what are you doing?” she stammered while letting him hold her.

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“You were very good for me today,” he purred as he held her. One hand stroked the back of her head, the other was soft on the bruises he left on her behind. He massaged them gently, careful not to hurt her. “I’m very proud of you.”

“You are?”

“Of course. You have been so good for me.” He kissed the top of her head, pulling her in even closer.

Isabella had no idea how to feel. Perhaps embarrassed, at first, until Duncan began to hold her the way that he was. As aggressively and even violently as he had just treated her, this was another side to the man who was her husband. The mystery behind the monster. Strangely too, she felt safe in his arms like she never had, that sense that he actually did care about her.

It put into perspective what they had just done, almost cleansing it, while making the idea of doing it again even more inviting.

“So,” Duncan began. “Was that... was that what you had been expecting?”

“Not at all,” Isabella said truthfully, her smile growing and her heart racing again because she had a distinct feeling that this night was far from over. It better not be. “It was even better.”

### Chapter Eighteen

“Iforgot to ask,” Duncan began as he and his wife broke their fast together. “What are

your plans for today?”

“No plans,” Isabella responded simply as she nibbled on a piece of cake; warm, coated in butter and jam. “I thought I might read. Perhaps go for a walk.”

“Good,” Duncan agreed as he took a sip of freshly squeezed juice. “Because I shall be out for most of the day. But I shall be home in time for supper.”

“Out?” she looked at him. “Where are you going?”

“To see some friends,” he responded simply. “Nothing overly exciting, I assure you.”

“And when were you planning on telling me this?”

Duncan stiffened, as he could sense where this was going... exactly where he hoped it would. “Right now. Is that a problem?”

She put down the piece of cake, folded her hands on the table, and looked right at him. “It would have been nice to have been told earlier.”

“And the difference it would have made?”

“None,” she said. “But that is simple luck. What if I had thought to spend the day with you? Only now I would be unable, as you have made plans without bothering to inform me of them.” She cocked a warning eyebrow at him.

“And that is not my concern,” he responded with a low growl to his voice; his leg was already shaking. “I am not here to serve at your beck and call. Nor am I required to seek your permission before making plans.”

“And I suppose I am to sit at home and wait upon your return? What if I wish to go

out myself?”

“Alone? That would not be proper.”

She scoffed and then licked her lips; Duncan felt himself begin to sweat as he focused on them, pink and plump and soft. “And I care what is proper? You know what, now that I think of it, perhaps I will go into London for the day. Why not?”

Duncan’s eyes drifted to Isabella’s chest. The neckline was low, the cut tightly cinched underneath her bust, propping it out and pushing it up. Her curves were almost too much for even Duncan to handle, and he salivated at the thought of getting his hands around them.

“You will not be going into London.” He forced himself to look at her. “Certainly not on your own.”

“Are you going to stop me?”

“Do I need to?”

She smirked. “You will not be here – you just said so. So, what are you going to do to stop me?” Her eyes flashed their excitement, and she licked her lips again.

Duncan moaned inwardly, careful not to let his own excitement take hold of him. Yet. Stone faced, commanding, he met his wife’s rebellious stare; his own one a no-nonsense glare designed to put her back in her place. “Do not test me.”

She laughed. “Do not make threats you cannot keep.”

“Do I need to remind you of what will happen if you continue to disobey me?”

“You think that I care what you will do?”

Not only do I think that you care. I know that you do. What’s more, I now know how much you love it.

“I think --”

“I am done talking.” She pushed her chair back as if she meant to rise. “And I will see you at supper.” She stood quickly and went to leave --

“Do not even think of leaving!” Duncan barked at her. “And do not speak over me.” He glared daggers at her and the look of fear that was hidden behind her eyes had him groaning again. This time, loud enough so that she could hear it.

It had only been half a day. Still, Duncan’s hand was raw from having spanked Isabella beyond what he had thought she could take. Still, his member was bruised from the treatment she had given it last night. Still, his body was drained of fluids, and he’d had maybe an hour of sleep – if that! Still all those things, yet nothing could stop what was about to happen.

How to even describe the previous night? Impossible.

It was a dream turned reality. It was a fantasy come to life. It was everything that Duncan wanted, made even more glorious because Isabella, his wife, had wanted it too.

Their two-weeks of bickering and arguing and fighting had exploded into a glorious

orgy of spanking and slapping and choking and biting and dominance the likes of which Duncan thought he might never experience again. Made possible because Isabella's naturally argumentative personality seemed expressly designed for Duncan's own brand of amorous discipline.

Isabella had finally overcome what were trepidatiously aggressive waters and her own brand of stubbornness, both of which had threatened to drown this marriage. Now, with calmer seas ahead, Duncan could not help but wonder what might happen next.

Although he didn't have to wonder too hard. Not with the way that she was looking at him; like a disobedient pup that knew it was about to be disciplined. That it deserved it.

"Come here." He pointed at the floor beside his chair. "Now!"

Isabella obeyed immediately. She made sure to glare at him as she walked around the table, as if she truly hated him.

Duncan pushed his chair back and turned it, spreading his legs so that she stood between them. He was hard already, his member begging to be released from his pants.

"Now, are you going to apologize for the way you have just behaved."

She scoffed. "I said nothing wrong. And I would appreciate it if in the future you did not treat me like an afterthought."

Duncan's heart began to race. His breathing grew. His anger... it throbbed inside of him. Memories of last night swirled and it was all he could do not to jump to his feet, throw her on the table, and ravish her.



“What am I going to do with you...” He muttered the words to himself as his eyes drifted down and focused on Isabella’s heaving breasts. Her nipples were hard through the dress, so he took one between thumb and forefinger and squeezed it... harder... harder... harder...

Isabella's entire body trembled as he pinched her nipple. Short spikes of pain which radiated down her body and to her loins.

“There is nothing you can do,” she said.

His expression dropped. As did his hand. Still seated, he looked up and met her eyes in a warning stare. “On your knees,” he growled. “Do not make me say it again.”

It looked like she might deny him but the gaze he fixed her in told her that might not be such a smart idea. So, she sighed and huffed but dropped to her knees.

Duncan reached out and took her under the chin, forcing her to look right at him; one thumb stroking that chin. “You enjoy angering me, don’t you?”

She tried to bite his thumb. “If I said anything that upset you, perhaps you are the one is at fault.”

Gently, he slapped the side of her face. She gasped and he grabbed her by the chin, again, forcing her eyes to meet his. “Are you going to apologize?”

“Never...” Her eyes flashed and she licked her lips.

He closed his eyes and groaned as if fury was enveloping him, when really it was lust. His member was throbbing painfully, so Duncan smirked as he reached down to his pants, fiddled with their front, and then released it right before her face.

Quickly then, he snatched the back of her head. He pulled it back and leaned in close as she tried to wiggle free... “Say you are sorry, and you can go about your day. I am feeling forgiving but do not test me.”

“I have never been less sorry,” she hissed.

“So be it.” Still holding her by the back of the head, Duncan leaned back and then forced her mouth around his rock-hard member.

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As for Isabella? She did not hesitate in accepting it.

“Are you going to behave for me today?” Duncan held Isabella by the top of the head, refusing to allow her to pull back and respond as he felt it slide further and further down her throat. “Well?”

She nodded her head as his member reached the back of her throat.

“Good girl,” Duncan purred and stroked her head. “You see, isn’t it so much easier when you just behave?”

Isabella wrenched her mouth free. Saliva poured from her lips and coated him. She wrapped her hand around his girth and stroked slowly, meeting his eyes and smiling. “I’m sorry, Duncan. I promise I’ll behave from now on.”

“You better,” he said only to take her by the back of the head and force her mouth over his length once more.

She had no intention of behaving for him. He could see it in her eyes. That troublesome glint that spoke of rebellion and an express desire to frustrate him with every breath that she took.

But it was all part of the game. When they had first met, Duncan and Isabella had seemed to hate one another. Duncan hated the situation he had been forced into and Isabella hated that he was refusing to let her off the hook. This hate had bubbled under the surface of the relationship, desperate to explode but held back because Duncan had feared what might happen if it did.

Now his only regret was that he had waited for so long.

And so it was that Duncan and Isabella enjoyed together their second full week of married life. Enjoyed being the key word.

Each night when Duncan returned home, he would find Isabella at the door waiting for him. She would complain about his being away all day and he would duly make her apologize for her wicked tongue.

Supper was rarely finished because they would inevitably descend into bickering which would more often than not end with Isabella bent over the table, her backside being spanked because she was, as always, a bad girl who deserved nothing less.

The nights were long, stretching into the early hours because Duncan could not get enough of Isabella, and she could not get enough of him. And the following mornings were much the same, seeing the two remain in bed long after they woke because plans made that day could always wait.

And with each minute and then hour spent together, Duncan found himself pushing the boundaries of his desires a little bit further.

Spanking came first. Putting Isabella over his knee like a petulant child as she fought against him. That was their favorite.

Choking her was a close second. Whether it be with a belt or a piece of clothing or just his hand. Duncan enjoyed it most when he was deep inside of her, bringing her to climax... only to stop at the last minute and release her and then walk away. This would see her chase him, shout at him, at which point he would snap and finish himself inside of her.

Denying her became a huge part of their routine. Often, Duncan would end the

morning by devouring Isabella's sex, licking and sucking on that bundle of nerves between her thighs, bringing her as close as he could, only to stop suddenly and announce that he had to leave. She would scream at him not to walk away, and he would leave for the day, taking untold amounts of pleasure in knowing how frustrated she was.

And then, when he eventually returned to finish her off.... it was a wonder that she didn't ambush him on the driveway.

He bound her hands behind her back whenever he wished.

He tied her to the bed, ravished her, and then left her there. Often blindfolded, so she would not know when he was returning.

He tested the limits of her pain through biting and pinching her swollen nipples. He taught her the responses he preferred when he was disciplining her, and she told him what she liked also.

The week wore on and as it did it wore the newlyweds out in a way that might have suggested to anyone who saw them that all they did was fight. No sleep. No food. Just two people who despised one another at it day and night until one eventually dropped dead.

That is a far closer description to this past week than I care to admit...

There was also the other side of their relationship that was rarely spoken about but had become vital in maintaining the animosity that was required of such sexually volatile behaviour. The aftercare. Once the two were finished with their pleasure, Duncan was always careful to take a few minutes in treating Isabella gently, reminding her of why it is that he had to treat her the way he did, while making certain that he hadn't gone too far.

Little was said during this more intimate moments. Mostly, it was just Duncan holding her as their breathing returned to normal and the anger that they lived in died down. Strange that Duncan actually looked forward to it each time, even if he would never admit just how much.

It was a week that was as unexpected as it was truly wonderful in every sense. A marriage that Duncan did not want. A relationship he did not dream could work. A prison that he had found himself trapped in, only to wake each morning with a smile on his face.

He did not know what might happen next.

He did not look to the future because that felt irrelevant.

As that week wore on, Duncan gave himself over to the pleasure and the ecstasy of married life with a woman who was as depraved and insatiable and as submissive as he was dominant.

And what a week it turned out to be.

### Chapter Nineteen

“Ow!” Isabella yelped as she sat down.

“What? What’s wrong?” Louisa asked.

“Nothing...” Isabella chuckled nervously as she adjusted herself on the seat, careful not to hit one of the many bruises that covered her behind. She was still getting used to that. “I just pinched myself, is all.”

“Perhaps hoping you might wake up from a nightmare,” Louisa noted. “No doubt you have been pinching yourself every hour on the hour this week. Sorry to say, Isabella, but this is the reality.”

Replace the word pinching with spanking and you might not be as far off as you think.

Isabella could not stop herself from smirking. “And why do you say that?”

“Isabella...” Louisa sighed and shook her head. “You do not have to pretend with me -- I am surprised you are even bothering to. I thought you said that His Grace was out of the day?” Louisa turned about and looked throughout the back garden, as if expecting Duncan to pop up suddenly. “Worried one of the staff might tell on you?”

“Oh...” Isabella chuckled. “I see what you are you saying. And no, no, do not fear. His Grace does not have me in such a state that I am worried to speak out again him. Quite the opposite in fact,” she added with a coy smile as her mind flashed to earlier

this morning when --

No, no. Do not go there. Not while your sister sits across from you.

“Oh no.” Louisa clicked her tongue. “It is even worse than I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was wondering why I had not heard from you all week – since the Mayfield Ball. And if you remember well, when you and His Grace left, you had murder written all over your face.”

Isabella frowned as she tried to remember. “What are you...?”

“Lady St. Vincent,” Louisa explained. “And your husband’s rather, forgive me for saying, lack of respect, regarding how he behaved in front of you that evening.” A shake of the head and another dismissive sigh. “Let me guess. The moment the two of you arrived home, you went at it like a couple of alley cats trapped inside a rucksack together and based on how...” Louisa looked Isabella over, her lips tightening with worry. “... horrid you look, the two of you have not stopped. Tell me I am wrong. Please.”

Isabella almost laughed. “Is that what you think?”

“What else could I possibly think!” Louisa cried. “A week now you have been in hiding and when I do come to see you, not only is His Grace out but, and forgive me for saying, you look as if you have not slept in days, Isabella.” Worry took her expression, and she shuffled in closer, dropping her voice. “If something is the matter, you know that you can tell me anything. As insistent as mother was in seeing this marriage go through, even she would not stand by if she thought that His Grace was...” She swallowed.



“Was what?”

Another glance about the empty garden and her voice dropped even further. “Hitting you. Now, is he? Because if he is...” She trailed off nervously, her body shaking with worry.

And again, Isabella very nearly laughed.

Louisa’s visit this morning had surprised Isabella, for it was unannounced. In fact, Isabella had just finished saying goodbye to the Duke – in the ways that they had both become accustomed to -- barely having time to throw on a dress before rushing downstairs to greet her sister who had stood idly in the foyer, a look on her face that spoke to the fear she must have been feeling for Isabella’s safety.

One look at Isabella’s state and that fear exploded. Isabella’s hair was a mess. She had no make-up on. Her dress was crumpled, for it was the same she had worn the previous night. Her skin was washed out from dehydration. And that wasn’t to mention the bruises on her lower neck and wrists.

It was no wonder Louisa was terrified.

“Louisa...” Isabella reached out and took her sister by the hand. They were sitting on a picnic blanket, under an oak tree, shaded from the sun, but her sister’s skin was flushed warm from worry. “I can assure you that you could not be further from the truth.”

“Do not lie to me! Do not feel that you have to!”

“I am not lying,” Isabella said, squeezing her by the hand and meeting her eyes. “His Grace and I are...” She bit into her lip as she considered what to say. “Despite everything, and as shocking as it might sound, we are doing rather well together.

Better than that, in fact.”

“Really?” Louisa leaned back and blinked.

“It has been a strange week.” Isabella spoke carefully, and was certain not to let her mind wander because she did not need to allude too closely to what the cause for such a week had been. “But following the Mayfield Ball, His Grace and I spoke openly for the first time, and as unbelievable as it might sound...” She made sure to smile so that her sister would not think that she was lying. “We have come to an understanding that has, dare I say, threatened to save this marriage.”

“An understanding?” Louisa frowned. “What sort of understanding?”

“Oh...” Isabella shrugged and looked away as she felt her cheeks begin to flush. “I will not bore you with the details. Just husband and wife stuff.”

“Such as?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Isabella winked.

Even I do not fully understand. And I am the one doing it!

It was hard to put into words exactly what was happening between the Duke and Isabella. Where it had come from. What it meant. And what it may or may not lead to in the future – if it led to anything beyond what it was already.

All Isabella knew was that she was enjoying it. An understatement of the highest order, as Isabella more than simply enjoyed the passion-injected debauchery that she and Duncan engaged in. She loved it. She worshipped it. It was like oxygen to her, needed to maintain life itself for without it she was certain to wither and die.

Now, was that a tad hyperbolic? It most certainly was. But that just spoke to how amazing this week had been.

It was just so unlike her. Still, a week later, and she struggled to believe it was happening. Growing up, Isabella had hated being told what to do. She had despised being treated like a little girl. And she loathed being made to feel less than or worthless in another’s eyes. But when Duncan did it to her...

She did not understand it. She did not know what it meant. All she knew was that with everything going as well as it was, there was no need to stop.

What was more, she was certain Duncan was of the same mind as she.

“So, the two of you are happy then?” Louisa scoffed as if she did not believe it, suddenly sounding almost upset by the notion. “Congratulations, I suppose.”

“Do not sound so happy,” Isabella laughed.

“I am,” Louisa assured her, not sounding like she meant it. And indeed, Isabella gave her a dismissive look which had Louisa hurrying to justify herself. “I am sorry if I sound a little upset – I am not. I am just surprised, that is all. The woman sitting before me, my own twin as I once knew her, would have rather peeled the skin from her own body then submit to married life as you have. With a man who just seven days ago you seemed to despise! It is just strange, is all.”

Isabella shrugged. “Believe me, I am equally as surprised as you are.”

She scoffed again. “And smitten, by that look in your eyes.”

“Oh, I am not,” she shot back quickly... a little too quickly. “I am just... content.”

To this, Louisa flashed her eyes wickedly. “Ah, now I see what this is. Why you are being so coy. When did it happen, Isabella? More importantly, how did it happen?”

“How did what happen?”

She widened her eyes. “You and His Grace. You have fallen in love!”

“We have not!”

“No, no, do not deny it,” she giggled. “And do not act as if it is such a bad thing either. Honestly, one cannot win with you. You act proud and haughty when describing how much you loathe the man with whom you share a bed...” She looked pointedly at Isabella, as if expecting her to denounce such a comment. When she did

not, Louisa's grin grew. "Yet you act like a child when it comes to admitting what any happily married couple, as you so claim, should be championing."

"We are not in love," Isabella said truthfully. "Far from it."

"Just happy?" Louisa giggled again.

"Is something wrong with that?"

"Not at all..." Louisa could not have looked more pleased. "I for one am glad to hear it. I could not be happier for you."

Isabella eyed her warningly but did not push the subject. Mostly because she did not want to keep discussing it, as that would force her to consider the one topic that she had refused to so much as contemplate all week for fear that it might suck the joy from the moment and utterly destroy the state of being that she and the Duke had found themselves in.

As well as everything had been going for this past week, Isabella could not help but notice how surface level it was. Oh sure, she and Duncan were closer and more comfortable with one another than they had ever been before, but it never went beyond the amorous.

They did not speak to one another unless fighting.

They did not discuss personal matters, save for using them to throw barbs and humiliate to cause anger.

They did not hint at a future beyond what was the current, both happy to exist in this state because it was easy and fun and pleasure filled beyond what should have been possible.

Yet as good as that was, as wonderful as it was, surely it could not go on forever? And when it did come to an end, what would happen next? Would they go back to hating the other? Or was there a chance at something more real?

And do I even want such a thing?

Sometimes, she would find herself thinking about the after care, those moments of softness and tenderness that she and Duncan shared once the sex was finished with. When he held her. When he made sure that he had not gone too far. When he checked on her well-being. Little was said in these moments how comfortable she felt during them spoke to a deeper connection that she was not quite willing to admit to.

It was a strange thing. A week ago, Isabella was happy to imagine that through sheer force of will, she might still have been able to end this marriage somehow. But now, if given the chance to, she wasn't so sure that she would take it.

"It is a shame that you are both so happy, truth be told," Louisa sighed and looked away.

Isabella frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Only that if you were not, I might have had something interesting to tell you." She shrugged in a nonchalant manner. "But now, you will not care. Why would you?"

"Tell me what?" Isabella demanded hotly. "Louisa..."

Louisa spun about quickly, widened her eyes excitedly, and then shuffled in closer. "Oh, only because you insisted. But I heard a little rumor recently that the old Isabella would have jumped out of her skin to have learned."

"Which is?"

“Only that the Duke of Hermon is returning to London next week and that he will likely be attending the Clementine Ball --”

“Get out!”

“I most certainly will not.”

“He will be here?” Isabella asked with a rush of excitement. “He is coming. You are certain?”

“I am. But again...” She shrugged and shook her head. “It should not matter to you. Not now that you are so happy.” She eyed Isabella closely, looking for the response she must have known to expect.

And Isabella gave it to her.

A smile crossed her lips. Excitement shone in her eyes. A chance presented, one that she had been waiting for, finally here for the taking.

And Isabella wasn't going to miss it. That had just never been her way.

The Duke of Hermon was a renowned scholar who, from what she had heard, was agreeable when it came to the tabooed subject of a woman's role in the sciences and further education in general. Most men of his stature thought education to be a man's business, and a woman would do better not to worry about such things as that.

The Duke was not of the same mind.

If rumor was for once true, he was even known to take young women under his wing and educate them personally where universities refused. Private tutoring lessons, learning expeditions, even books lent for reading and study!



All her life, Isabella had wanted more than what society gave her. Not marriage. Not love. Education. She wanted to learn, to prove that she was as smart as any man, and the Duke was one whom she had kept a close eye on for this reason. For years she had envisioned approaching him when the chance came and asking if he would take her on as one of his own students.

Or she had imagined it... still did... still wanted such a thing. Surely, married life should not make a difference? Why would it?

“Ah, so, now you’re wondering what your husband might say,” Louisa said quickly, noting the look in Isabella’s eyes.

“What?”

“I am sure that you can ask him,” she chuckled. “His Grace, I mean. As happy as you both are, why would he deny you the chance to further your education with the Duke of Hermon. Who is, I have heard, rather delicious to look at. Not that it matters.”

“I am sure he would not mind.” Isabella eyed her warningly.

“So, if you were to see the Duke of Hermon, you would approach and speak with him? Without worry what your husband might say.”

“Yes, I think I would.”

“And His Grace, he would not mind, I am sure.”

Isabella narrowed her eyes. “He would not mind as there would be nothing too mind. In fact, I hope that our paths do cross. It would be nice to speak of such things other than marriage. Which, it would seem, is all you care to discuss. Rather droll, if you ask me.”

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Louisa smirked to herself, apparently pleased that she was able to pry at her sister in ways that suggested everything was not quite as tranquil as it seemed.

Put simply, that's because it wasn't.

It was easy to pretend that she and Duncan were in a good place and there was no need to change it. But for how good it was, it was equally as confusing. There was no closeness there. No sense of companionship. Far removed from how a married couple should feel.

Even the after care, for how close it brought them when they were together and experiencing it, only came about because of the harshness of their sexual congress. Could she not have one without the other? Did Duncan even wish for such a thing?

Yet when she thought of the Duke of Hermon, there was an undeniable sense of guilt that attacked her when she considered going behind Duncan's back. But then why should she care what he thought, if their relationship was indeed just surface level?

Troubling questions. Confusing answers. The week that was had been fulfilled, unexpected, and downright filthy in all the ways that truly mattered. But as Isabella bickered with her twin sister she began to wonder for the first time where she and Duncan went from here.

A topic which both frightened and excited her in much the same ways that her husband so often did.

“Now, before we arrive,” Duncan began with a sternness to his voice that went beyond anything playful. It was a warning, one that this time Isabella knew she would be right to heed. “What are we going to be today?”

“On our best behavior,” Isabella said.

“And what are we not going to do?”

“Argue.”

“And...?”

“Fight. Bicker. Do or say anything that might tempt you into dragging me into one of the washrooms and reminding me what happens to bad girls when they don’t do as they are told.” She flashed her eyes suggestively and before she knew what she was doing, her hand wrapped her husband’s muscular thigh and gave it a squeeze.

“Isabella...” Duncan groaned but did not move her hand. “That is enough.”

“Oh, I am sorry.” She moved her hand further up his thigh, right to where she could see his member pressed against the thin fabric of his pants. Already stiff, she could practically see it throbbing. “Should I not...?”

“You know the answer to that.” He was leaning back, legs spread, making no move to stop her.

“Then why don’t you stop me?” Smirking, her hand moved up and cupped his package. Squeezed it. And then she leaned into him, nice and close, and whispered into his ear. “Punish me...”

Duncan’s eyes were closed, and she could literally see him fighting with his inner

demons. Deep, calming breaths as he twitched and searched for the courage he needed to stop her. But they were alone, in the back of the carriage, with nobody to see or interrupt them... at least until they arrived.

“No.” He exhaled and gave his head a shake. “I said no!” He snatched her hand and threw it away. Then he forced his eyes open and glared a warning at her. “This is exactly what I do not want from today.”

She laughed. “I was just testing you, Duncan. And wouldn’t you know it, you passed.”

“Testing me?”

She winked. “Seeing if you had the self-control that I know you are going to need.”

He groaned. “You’re the one I am worried about!”

“Which is silly.” She shuffled back and crossed her arms. “You are the uncaged animal here, posing as a member of the gentry. I am just an innocent woman, unlucky enough to stumble across your path. Honestly, even being alone now as we are...” She pretended to look about as if for an escape. “I do not feel safe.”

“Good,” he growled and reared up as if he meant to pounce on her. “And for testing me like that, you will pay.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh, I think you – no!” He clenched his jaw and pulled back. “Not now. This is --” He turns his hands into fists. “This is a lot harder than it ought to be.”

Isabella laughed, enjoying making her husband squirm. “It will be fine, Duncan. It

will only be a couple of hours at most. And how about this..." She raised an eyebrow at him. "If you manage to behave yourself, today --"

"Me!"

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“If you do,” she emphasized. “When we arrive home later, I promise to be extra bad for you. I cannot help but think you will have earned it.”

He swallowed and his face paled. “Extra bad...”

She winked. “Just you wait and see.”

This had him smiling and straightening up. More deep and calmed breathing. Adjusting himself and making sure that there would be no awkward conversations when they arrived. It was his command that the two behaved themselves today, so the least he could do was acquiesce.

Although, and to be perfectly fair, even if Duncan had not made sure that Isabella did not tempt him or do anything that might excite him today, she still would not have. Heaven’s no!

They were on their way to have supper with Duncan’s grandmother and somehow the thought of having ravenous sex with Duncan while the aged dowager marchioness sat in the other room waiting didn’t quite appeal to Isabella.

It’s nice to know, at least, that I still have my limitations. However few there are left.

It was strange to think but a small part of Isabella was looking forward to today, more than she might have guessed. For two weeks now, she and Duncan had been in the throes of exploring one another’s sexual proclivities without care or abandon, and still she felt no closer to him than she did the day they had met.

Oh sure, she knew things about the man which she was certain nobody else knew. But she didn't know him. Not really. Rarely did they speak openly or honestly. And never did they have a normal conversation that didn't lead to the obvious.

Isabella was still not certain what she wanted from this marriage. But she knew now that the way things were going could not last forever. And if she and Duncan were to have any future at all, whatever that might look like, they would have to get to know one another eventually. To have a conversation without turning it into a fight! To prove that there was more here than just sex.

Surely, that would not be too hard? Surely not...

Her mind strayed for a moment, to the after care. When Duncan would hold her and she would feel safer than she ever had. Was this not proof that they could be more? That there was a chance they might have a relationship outside of the volatile? Or did one only exist because of the other?

"We're here," Duncan said suddenly, with a hint of panic. "We're here. How do I look? Is everything...." He grimaced.

"It doesn't look as if you were just about to pin me down and eat my --"

"Isabella!"

"I am joking," she chuckled. "Just joking. You look..." She smiled. "You look good, Duncan. Very handsome."

He frowned at the compliment. But then he looked her over, the frown deepening in a way that looked as if he was surprised by what he saw – as if he was only just now seeing her sitting there. "And so do you, Isabella. Beautiful, in fact."

She rolled her eyes, certain the compliment was forced. But that did not stop her from blushing. It was one of the first compliments that he had given her since this whole thing began.

“Now, are you ready?” Duncan asked her, still a little nervous. “My grandmother is old, remember. She might not be able to hear you, so you need to speak up. And if she appears bored, she is not, that is just her --”

“Hey.” Feeling a sudden desire, Isabella reached down and took Duncan’s hand. “It will be fine. I promise.”

To that, Duncan smiled, squeezing her hand back, seeming to relax as if he believed her. More than that, as if he trusted her.

“... and you look very beautiful, dear,” Lady Martell said. “That dress is wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Isabella responded politely.

“Duncan...” Lady Martell looked pointedly at her grandson. “Have you told your wife how pretty she looks today?”

“Of course I have, grandmother.”

His grandmother did not falter. She kept her pointed stare on her grandson and raised an eyebrow at him. Unyielding, the look was more commanding than an eighty-two-year-old woman who’s head barely came above the table should have been able to produce.

Duncan sighed. “Do not give me that look.”

“What look?” his grandmother said as if she had no idea.



He looked at her flatly. “Grandmother, I will remind you that I am not one who –”

“Who pays his wife a compliment when she looks as ravishing as your wife does? I am one to agree.”

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Duncan levelled a warning gaze at his grandmother. She raised her own challenging eyebrow back. Then, he shook his head, even smiling, as Isabella sensed that this was a common way for the two to speak to one another. “You look beautiful, Isabella.” He smiled as he turned to face her. “As my grandmother says, very pretty.”

“Thank you,” Isabella said appreciatively. Then she did the same to his grandmother. “And thank you, my lady. And for reminding your grandson that it does not hurt to pay a lady a compliment every now and then.” She side-eyed Duncan. “Genuinely, that is.”

Lady Martell nodded her head rightly, proud of herself for coaxing the compliment, and then busied herself for a moment on her plate of food; a thick cut of meat, far too thick for one her age. She struggled for a short time until a butler standing over her shoulder stepped in and cut it for her.

A beauty in her time, Isabella had no doubt, the older woman was shrunken and wrinkled by now, and certainly a little slower than she once had been. But she had a presence about her even still, a woman of experience and wealth whom Isabella could not help but respect.

“I was being sincere this time,” Duncan spoke softly, so that only Isabella could hear.

“Excuse me?”

“What I said just now. About you and the dress. I was...” He shook his head at himself, as if suddenly feeling foolish. “I was being genuine. For a change,” he added.

“Oh.” She blinked. “I... I know you were.” She blinked again, knowing she should say something else but not sure what to. “It is appreciated.”

He smiled with appreciation, pleased with himself, and then went to his plate of meat. Still smiling softly as he cut into it and then tore into the flesh in ways that made Isabella shudder just a little bit.

That was twice this evening that Duncan had paid her a genuine compliment. Which also happened to be the first two times he had done so since they had started sleeping together. The ones he used to give her were simply a means of keeping her placid and complacent, which was the exact opposite of how he liked her nowadays.

Until tonight. Which suddenly explains why he is choosing to be so nice. Typical.

Lady Martell put her knife and fork down and reached for her cup of wine. She took a long sip and then cleared her throat noisily. “You Grace, I would be remiss if I didn’t comment on how much happier my grandson seems since the two of you wed. I suppose I should thank you for that.”

Isabella chuckled, thinking it to be a joke. “Just doing what I can.”

“I do not joke, Your Grace,” she said without a hint of humor. “Ever since that girl of yours – what was her name?” Duncan’s eyes widened at his grandmother and his face paled, but she didn’t seem to notice. “Andrea? It is not important what it was. What is important is that I do not think I have seen you smile this much since before that nasty business came about.” She sighed and looked appreciatively at Isabella. “You’ve done a fine job on him, and for that I thank you. His mother certainly won’t,” she then chuckled to herself.

The table was dead silent.

Isabella didn't know quite what to say. What girl? Who was Andrea and what had happened? And why did Duncan have a look on his face of such overwhelming dread that suggested his grandmother had asked for personal tips and demonstrations on how his wife had managed to make him so happy.

But it wasn't that.

It was that name. The girl. A clear indication that whoever she was, Duncan did not want her mentioned or spoken about.

"Grandmother..." Duncan began with a stern look. "That is not something that we have discussed." He continued to look warningly at her. "Nor should it be spoken about at the supper table."

His grandmother frowned. "Have you not..." She looked between the two and sighed. "Do you want my advice to a successful marriage?"

"I would rather you did not," Duncan said.

She ignored him. "No secrets. As soon as one of you starts keeping secrets, the entire foundation crumbles like a castle made on sand." She picked up her knife and fork and began to cut at her meat again. "Or what do I know," she mumbled. "I was only married for fifty years..." And again, a butler stepped in to help her cut through the meat.

Duncan was grimacing at Isabella, apparently distraught with worry that she might want to know more about what had happened and who that girl was. That she might even be angry with him!

The truth was confronting for Isabella because she knew deep down that she should not have cared one way or the other. It was not as if she and the Duke had a

relationship that revolved around secret telling and personal revelations and deep conversations. They didn't share. They were not open with one another. Why, try as she might, Isabella could not think of a single instance where it might have been appropriate for Duncan to tell her one of his most intimate secrets.

She should not have cared... but she still did. Yes, their relationship was volatile and aggressive and without real substance, but it was also more than that. Her mind wandered to those intimate moments the two always shared after their aggression. When Duncan would hold her and care for her and make certain that she was comfortable and that he hadn't gone too far.

It was hard to admit but a part of Isabella coveted these moments. Yes, it was easy to pretend that all she wished for was the passionate sex that had become a staple of their marriage. But the softer side of her husband was, in her mind, the real him. That which came out once the beast had been properly sated. A side of him she didn't know nearly well enough.

This marriage was surface level. Isabella frowned at the thought as she turned and looked at her husband – he was concentrating on his food now, determined to pretend nothing had been said. A brooding figure, large and intimidating in stature, classically handsome features, and a darkness to him that she did not know nearly as well as she might have liked.

It was in that moment when Isabella decided this to be a problem, and she needed to do something about it. The only question was, would her husband even want to?

“So, Your Grace,” Lady Martell began suddenly. “What is it that you do?”

“Excuse me?”

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“Do, girl?” she said as if she thought Isabella stupid. “What is it that you do. Your interests? Your hobbies? All ladies should have a hobby.”

“Oh.” She blinked nervously, feeling herself grow warm with anxiety. The question was an easy one to answer, but she was not so certain that she should. Certainly, Lady Martell would not like it. And she was sure her husband would not.

However, how could she possibly know that? Knowing so little about him. Again, that desire to do something about the shallowness of this relationship reared its head and this time, Isabella took a chance.

“I enjoy studying,” she said with certainty as she picked up her cup of wine and took a sip.

“Studying?” Lady Martell barked. “Studying what? What do you mean?”

Isabella shrugged. “Many things. Truthfully, I enjoy learning.”

“Really?” Duncan frowned, while also sounding impressed. At the very least, intrigued.

“The sciences are my favorite,” she continued, taking confidence from the look Duncan wore as he looked at her with interest. “Etymology and Ornithology are the two which I find...” she blushed furiously, the ridiculousness of her words suddenly hitting her. “Find most fascinating,” she finished weakly.

“Really?” Duncan looked as if he could not believe it. “Studying? You enjoy sitting

in your room, reading books all day? About bugs and birds?”

A slight flair of anger. “I am surprised that you know what etymology and ornithology are.”

Surprisingly, Duncan laughed, and his smile was apologetic. “I was not trying to tease, I promise. I was just surprised, that is all. It is not often that a lady devotes her time to study and expanding her mind.”

She shrugged. “I am not any other lady.”

“No...” His smile reached his eyes as he looked at her. “You certainly are not.”

“Study?” Lady Martell barked at them. “A waste of time, I say. Have you considered learning the pianoforte!”

Isabella ignored Lady Martell this time, as did Duncan. It was a small moment. Fleeting in how quickly it came and then left. But Duncan had complimented her for the third time this evening and this time, Isabella was certain it was genuine.

It made her think about those earlier compliments. Could those have been genuine too? And if they were, what did that mean? Was it possible that Duncan was beginning to have similar thoughts as Isabella?

A smile was shared between the two and despite all that the two had done and shared in this past week, it was that moment right then when Isabella felt as close to her husband as she ever had.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The idea came to Duncan as he and Isabella rode home from having lunch with his

grandmother. He couldn't say why the idea had suddenly come to mind, or why the thought excited him as much as it did. What he should have been thinking about instead were the carnal pleasures that he and Isabella were sure to engage in once they returned. But those imaginings failed to take hold as his mind continually drifted back to his original idea.

"There's something I want to show you," Duncan explained as he led Isabella through the foyer and toward the back of the manor.

"What is it?" He could hear the nervousness in her voice.

"It's a surprise," Duncan said, his grin spreading as he continued to lead her. He made sure to walk behind, one hand placed on the small of her back as they walked through the halls.

"A surprise I will like?"

He chuckled. "Make sure you let me know, won't you?"

Dinner with his grandmother had gone rather well. It was, Duncan had realized, one of the first times that he and Isabella had engaged in a real conversation and that he had learned something personal about her which he sensed that she had felt nervous to reveal.

She shouldn't have. The fact that she enjoyed studying and learning wasn't at all the scandal that she seemed to think it might be. If anything, it had impressed Duncan, as it was so unlike most of the ladies whom he had met throughout his life. Much like their sex life and her equally as perverse kinks, it was yet another side to Isabella that made her uniquely different.

It was this reveal that had Duncan thinking.



These past two weeks had been darn near perfect and if he was to do it all again there was nothing he would change. But it could not last. So far, they had done well to ignore everything outside of their sexual desires, leaving huge gaps in their understanding of one another that would very likely lead to trouble.

My grandmother accidentally revealing my past to Isabella is a perfect example of that. A story that I would have preferred to have told Isabella in my own time. If at all.

As the days went by and as he and Isabella spent more time together, the disparity that existed between them became more noticeable.

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This sudden idea of his was another small step taken, albeit in the right direction this time. An idea had which Duncan felt rather proud of himself for thinking of in the first place. It was very unlike him, but that just spoke to his eagerness.

“Where are you taking me?” Isabella asked as they approached a closed set of double doors, hidden away toward the back of the manor.

Duncan hurried forward, reaching the doors before Isabella. There, he popped them open and then turned back, taking a little too much pleasure in her confusion. “It was something that you said tonight that had me thinking.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she joked.

“You are the learned one between the two of us, it seems,” he chuckled. “Which is why I think you might appreciate this. Certainly more than I have.”

Her brow creased as she eyed the doors. “What is...?”

“Here.” Duncan opened the doors and waved her inside.

The room was pitched in total darkness, so Duncan hurried for a lamp which he set alight. It was a dull flame, barely large enough to spread beyond a few feet; the room itself was not much larger than foyer, the walls still impossible to make out with such a small source of light.

Duncan picked up the lamp but stood back as he watched Isabella slowly edge deeper into the room. He licked his lips with anticipation. His excitement started to grow.

Again, the idea that something as simple as this should excite him at all was new to Duncan, but he did not question it. Rather, he chose to enjoy it.

“Is this...” Isabella gasped as she reached the furthest wall. Duncan came in behind her, allowing the light to fall on the wall. “Is this a library?”

“Right in one,” he said. “Although library might be a generous term. I confess, it is a pittance compared to some that you may have seen. But I have a feeling that there will be more than enough here to help hold your interest.”

Indeed, the room that Duncan had brought her to was his own personal library. Not that Duncan had stepped inside the room for years, as he had never been much of a reader. If he had been, he might have added to it and perhaps moved it to a larger space so that there was room for it to grow. But all things considered, he thought it would serve his purpose well.

“See here.” He hurried to the side wall where there had to be at least two hundred dusty books stacked. “I know it is not much, but if memory serves, this section here is dedicated almost entirely to the sciences. Such as...” He leaned in with the lamp, caught sight of a thick binder, and pulled it out. “Ah, yes...” He studied the cover. “A pictured history of fauna native to northern England. A rather dry read by my mind, but I think I know someone who might say otherwise.” He put the book down and then selected another. “And this one... an A-Z listing of butterflies and their subspecies. Again, nothing something I would – what? What is it?”

Isabella was standing back, watching him with a look on her face that he could not make out properly in the darkness.

She looked confused. Wary. As if she was not certain what was going on, or who this man was whom had taken the place of her husband. Head tilted. Brow furrowed. A fraction of a smile crossing the right-side of her lips.

“You... I do not know what to say,” she said eventually.

“Do you like it?” Duncan asked.

“I do. I just...” She shook her head. “I am surprised.”

“That I was in possession of a library?” Duncan chuckled. “I am sure you are equally as surprised that I can read, also.”

“No, not that.” She laughed softly and looked away as if embarrassed. “That you would...” She forced herself to look at him and that smile grew, reaching her eyes in such a way that he didn’t have to imagine what she was thinking. He could see it. “That you would think to show me.”

“Oh. Well... I thought you might appreciate it. If not, that is fine --”

“No, no,” she hurried to cut him off. “I do appreciate it. I really, really do.”

Silence fell between them. Duncan holding the lamp in one hand, the tome in the other, not certain what he should say or do but feeling rather proud of himself for this most selfless act. And Isabella, eyeing him curiously, appearing equally as unsure as if she was waiting for the catch, the trap, the trip that he was about to play on her.

“So...” He clicked his tongue. “You like it?”

“I do, very much.” She exhaled and looked about the library, her smile growing. “You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you, Duncan. Sincerely, this is... it is wonderful of you.”

Duncan smiled; a completely natural thing. “You are most welcome.”

It was not the first time that Duncan had given Isabella a gift; the first week of their marriage, all he did was lavish her in gifts because he had wanted to keep her docile and content. But those were all superficial and he had never actually cared what she thought of them. This was different.

He could see how much she appreciated the gesture. And seeing that had his stomach knotting in ways that he wasn't wholly familiar with – it had been years since he'd felt such a thing. His relationship with his wife thus far had been physical only, purely amorous as they had not once dared to get too close. But this right here, right now, was something else.

Dammit, Duncan was pleased to see his wife so happy. A very strange thing.

“So...” Duncan clicked his tongue and looked about the room. “Shall I leave you to it?”

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She laughed. “I think it is a little late. But tomorrow, if you are looking for me, you know where to find me.”

He laughed also. “Or if I need to avoid you.”

“Exactly.”

Another silence fell. This one far more tense and unsure.

It reminded Duncan of why he had been so generous with his gifts in that first week, specifically to create atmospheres such as this. Both of their moods were high right now which was the exact opposite of how things usually went between them. Which in itself was a problem.

It was late in the evening. Time to retire to bed. A perfect opportunity for Duncan to say something derisive, for Isabella to defend herself, for them to fall back into their usual patterns of which they had both become so accustomed. Only now, after what had just happened, that didn't feel quite right to do.

She looks so happy. The last thing I want to do is insult or anger her. A rather annoying turn of events, truth be told.

It was a reminder of why they treated one another the way that they did, and the pitfalls of trying to change things.

“I think I need a drink,” Isabella said suddenly, as if she could read the mind. “Would you... like to join me in one?”

Duncan breathed a sigh of relief. “That sounds lovely. And yes, I will.”

She nodded and smiled slightly, head down as she walked past him. And Duncan followed, sensing a clear shift in their relationship but unable to decide if it was for the best or if he’d just ruined the only good thing that had come from this marriage.

Time would tell, he supposed. Likely he would know within the hour.

“So, um... your grandmother is lovely,” Isabella said awkwardly. Then she took a long sip of her drink.

“She can be,” Duncan agreed. He smiled and nodded, and Isabella returned it. Then, sensing the silence about to descend on them, he quickly added. “And she liked you too, I think.”

“That is good.”

“Yes, it is.” Duncan took a sip of his drink also, a little longer than what was needed, but like Isabella he was clearly doing so to fill the silence rather than being forced to sit through it.

“I... I was worried she might not like me,” Isabella attempted lamely.

“Oh?”

“The circumstances surrounding our marriage – how rushed it all was. I thought she might have suspected something...” A light chuckle and she took another sip.

“I think she was just glad to see me wed,” Duncan laughed, albeit without any humor. “I know she wished to see it before she passed.”

“As she should,” Isabella agreed, only because she felt the need to say something.

“I know she wants grandchildren too,” Duncan joked. His eyes then turned wide, and he looked away, coughing to clear his throat. “Not that we are – I do not expect – forget I said that...” Another awkward bout of laughter, swallowed by the silence that surrounded the not-so-happy couple.

They sat together in Duncan’s drawing room. On the same couch. By the fireplace. Sharing a bottle of whiskey that was quickly vanishing; Isabella was drinking quite a bit, simply because she felt the need to do something with her mouth.

She had suggested that they share a drink because it had felt like the right thing to say. The mood that had existed in the library had not been one that might give way to sexual congress, so she figured a drink or two would ease tensions and re-set what had turned into a rather strange night. Strange for all the wrong reasons.

Duncan’s surprise had shocked Isabella beyond her reasoning. It was not only kind but overly thoughtful and generous. A gift that she was beyond grateful for, and for which she would have liked to have proven this gratitude in ways that she was certain her husband would appreciate. Unfortunately, she wasn’t entirely sure how to go about that.

Whenever she and Duncan had sex, it was always brought about through fire and brimstone and argument and anger. But after his most thoughtful gift, she did not feel right about upsetting him. What was more, she did not want to.

What she wanted was what she had decided during their dinner with his grandmother. To learn more about her husband so that she might see if there was a chance that the two could be more than what they were – if there was a future of any kind here.

Duncan’s grand gesture seemed to suggest he was of the same mind. Only now,



sitting in this most tense silence, struggling to have even the most basic of conversations, and Isabella was beginning to wonder if she had vastly overestimated their compatibility.

Have we reached the peak of our relationship? One of sexual aggression and exploration but not much else? And do I even want that?

“Might I ask you something?” Isabella began, deciding that she had but one chance to coax a real conversation from her husband. If this did not work, then she knew there was no hope for them.

“Yes,” he said a little too quickly. “Anything.”

“It was something that your grandmother spoke of earlier...” She looked at Duncan, and he looked away as he must have guessed what she was about to ask. “And if it is not something you wish to speak of, I understand completely. Only, I was wondering...” She trailed off, not sure how to ask.

“You wish to know who Andrea is?” he asked the question in a whisper, speaking into his chest.

“Only if you want to. I do not wish to force you or... or appear as if I--”

“It is fine,” he sighed and shook his head to himself. “Perhaps it is best if I...” He looked past them. “Might I refill my glass first?” An awkward chuckle. “I think I will need it.”

“Of course.”

Duncan rose and got about refilling his glass. Isabella watched him, feeling relieved that the two might finally engage in honest conversation – a huge step forward. Surely, once he opened up, that would be the beginning of a fresh start for them? Assuming what he told her didn’t shatter her entire reality of the man she now called husband.

“Andrea was a woman who I was seeing when I was younger,” Duncan began, still speaking softly and not looking at Isabella. His expression was pained. “I was seventeen when we met – at a tavern, of all places. She was a server there and I took

a liking to her.”

“Oh.” Isabella blinked. “She was...”

“Common, yes,” he said with a soft smile. “But I was young and impetuous and truthfully, I liked how angry it made my father. At first, that was the reason I continued to see her...” He laughed to himself. “Just to frustrate the old man.”

“You do have a way about you,” Isabella joked.

“But then something happened that even I could not have foreseen.” He took a deep breath, clearly a little shaken. “She fell pregnant. My father was furious, of course, threatened to disown me. But I would not listen.”

“What... what happened?” Isabella prompted gently. She reached over and rested a hand on Duncan’s thigh in support.

“I insisted that I marry her, as was right to do.” He nodded to himself, as if he needed reminding of that fact. “But my father did some digging and found out that Andrea was...” He clicked his tongue. “She was not quite as faithful as I had thought her to be. She was seeing other men,” he said as he snapped his head up and looked at Isabella for the first time; the pain as clear as day in his eyes. “Funny that I did not care – nor did I believe it, as I should have. In my mind, the baby was my own and I owed it to her and the child to wed. As crazy as that sounds.”

“It is not crazy at all.”

He shrugged. “The point is moot. My father and I had a big fight, and I went to see Andrea only to... for her to be...” He sniffed and wiped his nose, looking away in shame. “One of the other men whom she was sleeping with had killed her. I don’t know why exactly,” he said quickly. “Or who, for that matter. But I found her body,

stabbed, and I put two and two together.”

“Oh my...” Isabella gasped.

“My father was delighted, of course. That led to another fight, one which we never really came back from...” He sighed and his shoulder slumped. A deep sip of whiskey to steel himself and he chuckled as if he needed to, to fill the silence and cut through the tension. “So, if you have been wondering why I am so... twisted. Now you know.”

“Duncan...” Isabella squeezed his hand, feeling her heart break at the story.

It made perfect sense in its own way. How closed off Duncan was. His clear disdain for the institution of marriage. No doubt he cared for this woman, certainly for the unborn child, and her death poisoned him to the entire concept of marriage and everything that might come with it.

The after-effects of the story hovered between she and Duncan. Like a heavy winter cloak it was suffocating and Isabella regretted having asked. Her intent had been to learn more about Duncan, which she had done, but at what cost?

She wanted to comfort him. She wanted to hold him. But that wasn't what their relationship was like at all and she felt that if she did that it would have come across as awkward and forced.

“I am so sorry,” she said lamely. “That is... that is just awful.”

He nodded as he looked down at the floor. “That is one word for it.”

“And I – if there is anything I can do?”

He smiled, still not looking at her. “There is nothing, but I do appreciate it.” He then

exhaled and put his glass down. “But I think I might turn in for the night. It feels about that time.”

“Oh... yes. Of course.”

He stood and looked down at her. Smiling still, a look behind his eyes that had her wondering if he was going to ask her to join him – she hoped he would. If for no other reason than to prove that they did not need to fight for such things to occur.

He nodded once, smiled again, and then turned and left. Which left Isabella alone in that room, caught between telling herself that she had done the right thing, or that she should have just minded her own business.

If she had done, she would likely be in his room right now being savaged as she very much liked. Now, she could not help but wonder if that would ever happen again.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

It had been three days since Isabella had learned about Duncan's past and in those three days she had noticed two distinct changes in their relationship.

The first was that Duncan and she had started talking more. Having actual conversations. Revealing things about one another. Treating the other as one should be treated in a marriage. He would ask her about her studies, the library he had shown her. He would show real interest when she began to explain something new that she had learned or read, even if it might have bored him, he attempted interest. He even apologized for how he had behaved after revealing the tale of Andrea to her, apparently embarrassed by the way he had walked off and left her.

It was a sign of growth, she thought. An indication that perhaps Duncan was willing to try in this marriage as she also wanted to. The marriage had happened. They were together now forever. So why not at least attempt to find happiness?

That was the first thing and the next three days passed in a way that had the two growing closer and closer with each moment. To the casual observer it might have even looked like they were happy.

The second thing, however, and by far the most important, was that in those three days Isabella and Duncan did not have sex. Not once.

At first, she told herself that this was Duncan's effort to get to know her better. To put their squabbles aside so that they could build a relationship. But as the days went on, it felt different to that. If they were to have a real relationship, why could they not

have both? Why did it have to be one or the other?

“Are you excited about tonight?” Duncan asked as they broke their fast together.

“Oh yes, very much,” she said politely as she buttered a piece of cake.

“Have you given any thought to what you might be wearing?”

“Oh.” She blinked. “I confess, I have not. But I have a dozen dresses to choose from so --”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said with a genuine smile. “I took the liberty of having one made for you.”

“You... you did?”

He shrugged. “I remembered how much you appreciated it the last time. And a lady can never have too many dresses, no?”

“That is... thank you.”

It was kind. Too kind. Tonight was the Clementine Ball, an event which they had both discussed and were equally looking forward to attending. But not once had Duncan mention that he would be buying her a dress, likely enjoying the idea of surprising her.

It reminded her of the last time he had done so, but with one noticeable difference: this time, it was sincere.

“Although I confess, there was a selfish motivation behind it.” He pumped his eyebrows at her. “I rather like the idea of walking into that ball room with the most

stunning woman in London on my arm. It makes me feel a whole lot better about myself.”

She cocked a derisive eyebrow at him. “Are you saying that I would not have looked as stunning wearing one of my own?”

“A man can’t be too careful,” he joked. “Although truth be told, you could wear a potato sack, and the same effect would be achieved. So, you can choose between the new dress or the potato sack. I will not mind which.”

She tried her best not to smile. An eyeroll would have been better. A sneer and a shake of the head; letting him know that such flattery would not work. But alas, the smile came, and Isabella looked away, her cheeks flushing in a way that delighted Duncan who watched her closely across the table.

Why is he being so nice! And why is that a problem?

It should not have been. If she had been anyone else, her sister for example, she would have crooned over the gesture and counted herself as lucky to have married such an amazing man as Duncan. But she wasn’t anybody else. Nor was her husband, for that matter.

This was not them. Yes, Isabella appreciated the kindness and the generosity and the efforts to grow closer in ways that they had not tried before. And yes, this was what she had thought she wanted – to better know her husband.

So what am I even complaining about?!

She missed the passion. She missed the fire. She missed being put over Duncan’s knee and spanked until she was begging him to forgive her and her smart mouth.



Mostly, it was how false it all felt to her. Yes, she missed the sex, but that wasn't what troubled her. This version of Duncan was not the man whom she married, but one whom he seemed to think that she did. She knew that Duncan could be both, the sweet and the kind and the caring man who wished to get to know her better, while also letting the beast out of its cage from time to time. Surely that was not too much to ask?

"I should warn you," Duncan continued. "Lady St. Vincent is likely going to be there tonight."

"Oh..."

"But I will do what I can not to speak with her. And if she approaches me, which she may well do, I promise to do everything in my power to dismiss her. Without causing a scene, of course."

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“That is very... kind...” Isabella eyed him, sensing a chance to say something scathing, but not having the will power because dammit he was being so nice!

Something had to give.

This could not go on. She was happy that the two could speak openly now and were not constantly at one another’s throats. But she missed the heat and the intensity which that state of living had brought with it. She missed giving herself over to him utterly and completely. And if she had to choose this life right now or that... she would choose that.

Can I not have both? The compatibility and the passion? Duncan does not think so and any efforts I make to force the issue are quickly diffused.

Tonight, she decided, would be the night that she would find out once and for all where their relationship stood. With no other choice left to her, she would start a fight with Duncan and force him to become the animal that right now was trapped in a cage, living on water and scraps.

If the animal was not released, if he kept it locked away for whatever reason he was doing this, then this marriage was as good as doomed. It really was that simple.

“Can I ask you a question, Your Grace?” Richard, the Marquess of Devereux asked as he sipped on his glass of brandy.

“Something tells me that you are going to anyway,” Duncan chuckled as he took a leisurely sip of wine. “I am surprised you asked.”

“It’s the wife,” Richard sighed. “She has been at me lately to keep control of my tongue – to think before speaking, as she puts it. Apparently I have a nasty habit of saying what is on my mind without first thinking of the foreseeable consequences.”

“Do not tell me.” Duncan pretended to gasp. “Trouble in paradise? The self-described perfect marriage is on the rocks and the two of you have...” Duncan touched his chest as if struck. “Have had a fight? The horror!”

Richard’s expression was flat. “Nothing as untoward as that, I assure you. More of an animated conversation.”

“Which you lost.”

“There is no winning or losing, Your Grace. I simply agreed that she might have a point and that I would do better to watch my tongue. Or at the very least, be more diplomatic when I breach what may be a sensitive topic.”

Duncan chuckled. “How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?”

“Being wrapped around your wife’s finger? Does it hurt?”

He scoffed. “Better that than the alternative. Tell me, can you and Her Grace stand to be in the same room as one another? The last time we spoke, you were lamenting a lifetime spent in hiding, for better that than having to force conversation with a woman who you never seemed very keen on marrying in the first place.” Richard sucked through his teeth suddenly, looking guilty. “Ah, and there goes that tongue of mine again. Sorry about that.”

Duncan shook his head but laughed at his friend’s summation. “Now that you ask, my

marriage could not be better. Thank you very much.”

“Really?” Richard did not sound at all like he believed it.

“Really.” Duncan looked past Richard, attempting to catch sight of his wife among the crowd, but he could not see her. “It has taken some work but the two of us are in a good place.” Duncan resisted the urge to grimace, for he was not being entirely truthful. Not even close. “You might even be surprised to hear that we have not fought in days.”

Richard snorted. “A true measure of success.”

Duncan shrugged. “We are feeling one another out. And where we may never reach the same high standards that your own marriage has set...” Duncan rested a hand on Richard’s shoulder. “At least I do not have to ask my wife for permission to speak.”

“That is not – I do not have to ask – I was simply saying --”

“You mean your wife was saying,” Duncan cut him off with a proud smirk. “You were simply repeating.”

Duncan took pleasure in the angered glower that his friend fixed him in – as if Duncan had won some great battle. As if this little sparring of words was proof that Duncan’s marriage was on the ascendancy and Richard’s was flailing. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth.

Again, Duncan searched the room for sight of his wife, hoping to catch her because if nothing else, she was breathtaking to look at. He had bought her a new dress, canary yellow in color, modest by her standards but still cut in a way so show off her ample curves which Duncan had grown to relish.

Alas, she was nowhere to be seen. Not that this worried Duncan as the ball room was packed with dozens of bodies; colorfullydressed ladies, smartly dressed lords, waiters moving between them with trays laden down by nibbles and drinks to share.

What did worry Duncan, more than he was willing to let Richard know, was how the happiness which he spoke about so wondrously, was utterly and hopelessly false. Or at the very least, exaggerated.

It had started the other night, when he had opened up to Isabella and told her of Andrea. It was a story that he rarely thought about, for good reason, as the outcome had very nearly destroyed him and was without a doubt one of the most consequential moments of his life.

He spent the rest of the night contemplating that relationship, one which was startlingly similar to his and Isabella's. It had been a relationship based purely on sex, which Duncan had gotten carried away with, giving himself over to the intoxication completely and utterly and hopelessly until it ripped his heart out and splayed it on the floor.

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And what had happened as a result of that... Duncan was nowhere near as innocent in Andrea's death as he had led Isabella to believe.

Comparing it to his current relationship with Isabella, Duncan was forced to admit that if he did not try and change something, then he would inevitably go down the exact same path. And as he had learned all too tragically, that would end in suffering.

So, Duncan had started being nice to Isabella. Trying to get to know her. To not let her anger him or bait him or lure him into being somebody that he wanted but knew was best to avoid.

The results of this new venture were mixed, to say the least.

On the one hand, they were getting along better than ever. They spoke openly and honestly in ways that Duncan imagined a married couple should. They also never fought anymore, as Isabella's smart mouth and sharp tongue seemed to have left her completely. A blessing, most men would think. Most men, however, were not Duncan.

The passion was gone from their marriage. As was the fire. Oh yes, he loved that he was getting to better know his wife. More than that, he found that she was a woman whose company he enjoyed. More than he might have ever thought possible! But lately, they had become so concerned with developing their personal relationship that the other side of their marriage had been forgotten completely.

"I am happy to hear of the state of wedded bliss that you have found yourself in," Richard said with a coy smile. "So much that I wonder if it might be worth me

holding my tongue.”

“Meaning?”

He bit into his lip as he considered. “May I ask you something – and please, this is not me trying to start something.”

“Just tell me, Richard,” Duncan sighed.

“I am sure it is nothing,” he said. “Only...” Richard indicated over Duncan’s shoulder. “I cannot help but wonder who on earth your wife is speaking with? And why they are so friendly.”

“Who she is...” Duncan turned around and saw immediately to what Richard was referring. And when he did... he was not sure how he felt.

Isabella was across the ball room, engaged in a very animated conversation with a young man whom he did not recognize. He was tall and strapping and a little too handsome for his own good; square features, big, white teeth, perfectly cropped blond hair that Duncan was certain the ladies would relish.

They were only talking. It was nothing scandalous. Duncan watched the two and knew in his heart that he did not need to worry about his wife flirting – she was allowed to speak to whom ever she wanted. But a pit was opening up in his stomach as he watched them both talk, one which was filled with jealousy the likes of which he didn’t know himself capable.

“I... I do not know...” Duncan watched the two, feeling a spark of anger ignite.

“I am sure it is nobody,” Richard said. “Just a friend.”

“Yes...” Duncan continued to watch them, feeling that spark of anger grow like a fire being fed with lumber. “Just a friend, I am sure.”

Duncan wanted a companionable relationship. But he also wanted the depravity and debauchery that he knew Isabella relished – that he craved like a starved animal. And as he watched his wife speaking to another man, he could feel that starved animal rearing its head as if coming awake from a deep slumber.

She was not flirting with him... but that did not mean he could not pretend otherwise. A spark to reignite the passion that was desperately missing from this marriage.

To try and control it for the sake of the marriage? Or to let it loose... also for the sake of the marriage? That was the question that besieged Duncan and he knew that whatever ended up happening, it would come to define his marriage from this day on.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"... I

really am sorry,” the Duke of Hermon apologized. “And were the circumstances any different...”

“It is fine,” Isabella sighed, even if it was not. “I understand completely. You are scared to be embarrassed by a woman, I get it.”

He looked at her flatly. “Does that often work?”

“Does what work?”

“Insulting the man from whom you are asking a favor?”



She shrugged. "If you will notice, I did not start insulting you until after you refused to help me. You have left me no other choice."

"Ah, I see," he chuckled. "So, this is a final, and desperate effort to shock me into submission? Or to beat me bloody until I have no choice but to acquiesce to your request."

"I am desperate," Isabella said. "And you would be surprised how often that works. Most men would be so concerned with having their ego's challenged by a woman like me that they would trip over themselves to prove how wrong I am."

“I do not doubt it,” he grinned. “But I am not most men.”

“Apparently your ego cannot be bruised.”

“Oh, it can be,” he responded seriously, but with a smile hidden behind his eyes. “Just not as far as my intelligence is concerned. You might as well accuse a giant of being short.”

“Ah, and he is modest.”

“And tall,” the Duke responded with a wink. “But that’s irrelevant.” She rolled her eyes at the cheek. “I am sorry, Your Grace. Truly, I am,” he started again, sounding sincere, which she was certain to be the truth. “And if the circumstances were slightly different, then perhaps my answer would be also. However...”

“They are not different, so your answer remains the same.”

He nodded his head, lips pressed together apologetically. “Of course, that will not stop you from writing to me. Asking questions. Perhaps even receiving some answers, if I can be bothered.”

“How very generous,” she laughed.

He shrugged. “My towering intellect is not all I am known for.”

“Ah yes, that would be your ego, no?”

The Duke of Hermon was not at all what Isabella had been expecting. Knowing little of the man, save for what she had heard concerning his studies and his willingness to tutor young ladies privately if he deemed them worthy, he was also far younger than she had thought. And more handsome. And infinitely more charming than a man as learned as he should have been.

She had sought him out the moment that she and Duncan had arrived at the ball. And as soon as she had him alone, she asked the question that had been a dream of hers for as long as she could remember.

“Might you be willing to take me on as a student?”

A simple question. One which she had been certain he would say yes to. She had even prepared an argument, a few poignant questions and theorems devised to show that she was not just another lady looking to get close to the single Duke for reasons that he was surely used to. She was serious and he needed to know it!

Frustratingly, the Duke knew who she was, and had heard of her marriage to Duncan. For this reason, he denied her his help, citing the inappropriateness of them spending so much time together. Especially seeing as Duncan had not given her his approval.

It was annoying to be sure, although she could see his point. All the two had done so far was talk, but the man was charming and wholly aware of it. So much that Isabella reminded herself to be careful, even taking a small step back so as not to put herself too close.

“So...” He took a sip of his wine. “Where is your husband tonight? Close by, I would hope? He is not such a fool to leave a flower as transcendent as you on your own. I believe there are crimes against that.”

“Oh, he is here,” she said simply, resisting the urge to look but praying that Duncan

was watching. “So, you best be careful.”

“Ha!” he laughed. “You mistake me, Your Grace. I am just being kind.”

“Not kind enough to help me, however.”

“My kindness has its limits.”

Yes, he was entirely too charming and flirtatious, Isabella decided. It was a type of charm that felt forced and fake, rehearsed in that way which suggested he spoke the same way to every lady whom he engaged with. She did not know much of the man’s romantic reputation, but she was certain that it featured a litany of scandals which she would do better to avoid.

In fact, now that she had learned that the Duke would not be helping her, Isabella knew it would be best to say her goodbyes before anything untoward might happen. Best to be safe, rather than sorry.

A quick glance about the ball room, double checking that they weren’t being watched too closely. That was all Isabella needed right now. Why was it that a woman could not speak to another man without being accused of a scandal? Although she wondered what the bigger scandal might be. Accusations of her flirting, or the fact that she had approached him to ask for a favour concerning her education.

Either way, she reminded herself to be careful. If Duncan was to see her speaking with the duke, she could only imagine what he would say... and then do.

Was it wrong that a small part of her was excited by the prospect? That Duncan would see them speaking, be sent into a jealous rage, and then be snapped from the calm demeanour he had worked so hard at putting forward these last few days? That he would take her home and ravage her and do as he ought to. As she wanted!

No, no. That was not the way to go about this. If Isabella wanted her relationship with Duncan to develop properly, she could not resort to tricks. She wanted it to be real. In fact, now that she thought of it, she had spent far too much time speaking with the duke as it was. Best to remove herself before her husband saw.

At least that was the plan.

“Ah, speak of the devil,” Hermon spoke suddenly.

“Hmm?”

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“Do not look now but there is a tall, dark, rather terrifying individual coming toward us. He can only be your husband.” He sounded amused by the thought.

“Isabella.” Duncan swept in beside her. “Might we have a word?”

“Oh, Duncan.” She took a hurried step away from the duke. “I was just about to come and find you.”

“Is that so.” He did not sound happy about it.

“It is,” she said with a smile, trying her best to diffuse what felt like an unnecessarily tense situation. “This is Lord Hermon. Have you met?”

Duncan frowned and tilted his head. “Hermon... the name rings a bell.”

“As does yours, Your Grace.” Hermon winked. “And might I say, your wife is a peach beyond compare. You are a lucky man.”

“Yes.” Duncan did not return the smile, eyeing Isabella in a way she knew only too well. “She is something. But if you do not mind...”

“Not at all,” Hermon said with a large smile. “And I am sorry I could not oblige you. Truly, I am.”

“It is fine,” she said with a touch of bitterness. “But we shall speak again soon, yes?”

“Anytime.” Hermon stepped back and offered a shot bow. “Now, if you both do not

mind, my glass is empty and that is a crime against humanity any way that one might look at it.” He laughed and shuffled off into the crowd.

Isabella exhaled and turned to face Duncan. “Husband, how is your evening --”

“We need to talk,” he cut her off. “Now.”

She frowned. “About?”

“Not here.” He looked about them, taking note of a balcony that extended off the side of the ball room. “This way --” He turned to leave, only to turn back and glare a warning at her. “Now.”

Duncan stormed toward the balcony and Isabella finished her glass, handed it to a passing waiter, and then followed suit. Already her thighs were growing warm as her heart began to race with anticipation. Her husband was angry and that could mean only one thing...

## Chapter Twenty-Four

The night air was cool on Isabella’s face as she stepped outside, but she did not feel it. Such was how hot her body was already turning. Face flushed. Chest burning. She was shaking but again, it was not from the chill.

Duncan stood waiting at the balcony’s edge. It was a larger space than it had looked outside and he stood to the right, away from where he might be seen if anyone was to curiously poke their head outside. Hidden in the darkness and watching her, it was impossible to make out the expression he wore on his face.

Not that she needed to see it to know how he was feeling.

“You wished to speak with me?” she asked as she approached.

“We have a problem,” he began, sounding a little confused, as if not certain that he even wanted to speak.

“Do we?”

“The Duke of Hermon, whom you were just speaking with. That was his name. Yes?” Duncan asked instead.

“Oh...” She frowned as if unsure. “Yes, that is right. Do you know him?”

“I know of him – his reputation. Putting a face to the name and his reputation makes all the more sense.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything,” Duncan said. “I will state it for fact. He is a rake,” Duncan said simply. “A known scoundrel whose modus operandi is to lure women into his bed through promises of showing them the world. Or promising it to them.”

“And why does this concern me?”

“Let me guess,” Duncan continued, still neutrally. “You asked if he might tutor you? Or something of that nature.”



“And so what if I did?”

“It does not bother me. In fact, I wish you had asked me first.”

“Oh...” That caught her by surprise, the honesty in his voice. She tried to redirect, certain she was misreading. “And why is that? So that you could tell me no? I am not yours to command, Duncan. I thought I made that perfectly clear.”

“On the contrary. If you had spoken to me, I might have asked him myself. No doubt he turned you down, likely because of our marriage. Not much point in seducing a married woman. One married to another duke, no less.” He chuckled. “I imagine he was quite distraught.”

“Oh...” Isabella blinked. “I... I did not think – I assumed that you would not allow it.”

“And why is that?”

“Because...” She tried to answer but none came to her. If this was two weeks ago, her answer would have been simple. Because Duncan was a controlling monster who would never allow her such things. Only now, after the last few days, that argument felt somewhat flat. “I am not sure,” she ended up saying instead, rather meekly.

“We have a serious problem, Isabella,” Duncan sighed as if pained. “And I think that you know we do. I am not accusing you of flirting with the duke.”

“I was not flirting!”

“I know you were not,” he said calmly. “I would never assume such a thing of you. But when I saw the two of you speaking just now, I was...” He grimaced. “I was angry, truth be told. I saw the two of you and my first thought was...” He clicked his tongue. “Truthfully, I wished to storm up to the man and punch him in the face.”

Isabella balked. “You – you did?”

He chuckled. “I might have wanted to kill him, such was my... my anger at seeing the two of you speaking in such a companionable manner.”

“Then why didn’t you?” she said without thinking. The thought of her husband reaching such heights of anger excited her in ways she had not felt in days.

“Would you have liked that?”

“I... no. Of course not. I just meant...”

“I know what you meant,” he sighed. “But I do not think you understand what I meant.”

Isabella studied her husband’s face in the darkness. When he had brought her out here, she had assumed it was to chastise her, to remind her that she was not to speak in such a friendly manner to other men. That he might be angry!

The truth was, she had been glad for it. It might not have been her intention but at least it was something. A genuine reaction from the man, something that she had been craving because these last few days had felt false and so unlike what she wanted from this marriage.

“I was jealous,” Duncan said, almost sounding ashamed of the fact. “I saw the two of you and...” A bitter chuckle. “And it was confronting, to say the least. My mind went

to places I have tried so hard these last few days to keep it from going.”

“And where is that?” She stepped into him, meeting his eyes, wanting him to rise to the occasion because she could sense that he was working so hard to control it.

“I think you know where.”

She flashes her eyes suggestively. “Why don’t you show me?”

“Is that what you want?” There was a growl to his voice, and it sent a shudder of anticipation through her.

She had forgotten how it felt to feel so utterly and completely helpless like this. Alone as they were. Outside and in the dark. She glanced past his arm, barely able to see the door back inside the ball room. They might as well have been in the middle of nowhere, for how isolated they were.

“What do you expect?” she shot back, looking up to meet his eyes. She could not see them in the dark, but she could feel them on her. She could feel the way they burned as she trapped her.

She could sense the rage building in her husband. She could feel the heat pouring from him. He had tried to be kind. He had tried to be nice. But that wasn’t him. The real him was hidden, slowly peeking out, about to do unthinkable things to her because she had been a very bad girl and she deserved nothing less.

Isabella could feel the warmth spreading between her thighs. She could feel herself growing wet. Salivating. Skin prickling with desire. All he had to do was take her and she would melt...

And yet... for some reason, inexplicably, he wasn’t.

“I do not...” He clicked his tongue with extreme frustration. “I don’t know what I am going to do with you.”

A hot flush ran from Isabella’s loins through to her chest and she nearly collapsed from the sheer pleasure. “It makes no difference. I have been bad and there is nothing you can do about it.”

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“No, Isabella...” Duncan’s grip loosened slightly, and he took a very long, deep breath. Eyes shut, jaw clenched. “I do not mean...” Another breath and his eyes snapped open. Isabella nearly gasped when she looked in them, because the anger she had expected was beaten down by a sense of sorrow that she could not explain. “What am I going to do with you? Withus.”

She leaned back as if he had slapped her. “What does that... I do not understand what you mean.”

He turned on her quickly and grabbed hold of the railing to steady himself. “I know what you wish for. And it would be so easy to do,” he spoke softly. “And you have no idea how much I want to. Or maybe you do,” he chuckled. “That would explain quite a bit.”

She hesitated, not understanding at all what was wrong. “Did I... is something wrong?” She reached to rest a hand on his back, but then withdrew it.

“There’s something wrong with us, Isabella. With me. When you make me angry, when you push me – even when I know you are doing it on purpose. I lose control in ways that I’ve never felt before. I’m like... I’m like...”

“An animal?” she offered.

He chuckled. “Exactly.”

“Forgive me for saying...” She stepped in beside him. “But what exactly is wrong with that? As you have so obviously noted, I might be the last person who would ever

think to complain about that side of you.” She smirked. “Personally, I encourage it.”

“There is more to it than that...” He bit into his lip nervously, debating whether or not he could speak. If this was a week ago, he might not have for they did not have that type of relationship. But the last few days had changed much, and this moment right here was proof of that.

“You remember what I was telling you about Andrea?” he began softly.

Isabella frowned. “I... the woman who you were seeing? The commoner?”

“That’s the one,” he sighed. “I was brief when we spoke of her, mostly because I had done much to forget the true nature of our relationship. One which bore some striking similarities to our own.”

Isabella waited, expecting him to continue. But he was waiting for the question. “Such as...?”

“She frustrated me,” he chuckled softly. “Annoyed me. Angered me. But she did it on purpose, knowing what would happen when I snapped. She enjoyed it. And I...” He shook his head a little too much. “I enjoyed it even more than her.” He looked at her as if he needed Isabella to believe it. “But it was not real and it never could be. Even the child... a part of me was happy when she told me that she was pregnant, because I believed that maybe it would change our relationship. That it would force us to treat one another differently. To be real with one another for a change.”

“But it didn’t?” Isabella finished for him, her voice so soft that she barely heard it.

He nodded his head. “It was foolish of me to think that it would. And when I asked her...” He swallowed. “When I tried to treat her in a manner that she was not accustomed to... she grew bored. So much that she left and slept with another man,

the one who killed her. I might not have killed her myself but I am responsible. This person who I am, this monster... it is fun in the short term but it cannot last. It is not real. Andrea was proof of that.”

“It feels real to me,” Isabella muttered, not sure what to say.

“And then what?” He turned to face her, the darkness shrouding his features. Save for his eyes, through which she could see the struggle which Duncan was desperately fighting. “We are married, Isabella. Whether we like it or not, we are. And as much as I love...” He groaned and shut his eyes for a moment, taking another breath as his hands resisted the urge to snatch her. “As much as I love... that,” he managed. “It is not sustainable. It is certainly not a marriage.”

Isabella was stunned. Partly because she had never expected such reasoning from the duke – a man, of all things. Who would have thought hot sex and little commitment was something he might oppose?

Also... she’d been having the exact same thoughts as him. A marriage that she had no choice but to commit to. One which she was enjoying for reasons that she knew could not last – and would likely end poorly. Hoping for more but crashing and burning pitifully when it was offered.

“It might surprise you to hear but...” She chuckled awkwardly as she rested a hand on Duncan’s forearm. This time, she was the one who gave it a tight squeeze. “I was recently having the exact same thoughts.”

Duncan leaned back. “Truly?”

“Truly...” She grimaced. “But these last few days...” She didn’t want to say it out loud, just in case she had been horribly misreading everything.

“Have been tragic?” the duke offered.

“I was going to say boring,” she laughed. “But no, that’s not it. I have loved getting to know you better. I truly have but...”

“There is something missing,” Duncan offered.

“It has felt that way, yes.”

“What is wrong with us?” Duncan sighed.

“Should we make a list?” Isabella scoffed.

“Isabella...” Duncan took both of Isabella’s hands suddenly and looked down at her. He licked his lips, his eyes flicking every which way with nervous anticipation. “I need you to do something for me.”



“And that something is...?” She studied him curiously... and a little nervously.

“Kiss me.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Since the moment I met you, you have... annoyed me. Frustrated me. Made me want to go buy a gun and --”

“Yes, yes, I get it,” she cut him off. “What is your point?”

“That is the only you who I have ever known. From that first day that you ambushed me in the carriage...” He took a deep, steadying breath and she smirked to herself, knowing exactly what was going through his mind. “All I have been able to think about is you.” He smirked slightly. “And what I wanted to do with you.”

“With me?” She cocked an eyebrow. “I think you meantome.”

She laughed and squeezed her hands. “The point is – even when I was treating you kindly, trying to placate you. What I was really trying to do was calm myself down. Clearly, it did not work.”

“And we have God to thank for that.”

“But we can’t spend the rest of our lives fighting.”

“But these last three days...” She grimaced.

“Kiss me,” he said again, squeezing her hands and licking his lips. “Now?”

“Is that a command?” she cocked her eyebrow again.

“No,” he said seriously. “Kiss me because you want to. Not because you are angry. Not because you want me to punish you. Kiss me because you’re my wife and you don’t detest me nearly as much as you pretend to.”

Isabella couldn’t explain why but her heart was racing. Her palms were sweating. And her mouth was salivating. And her eyes... well, those flicked to Duncan’s lips.

Nothing about this should have been arousing. Nor even that tempting. Awkward, perhaps. But the idea of her husband asking her to kiss him as if worried she might say no? It was the exact opposite of what their entire sexual relationship was built upon. Perhaps that was why it struck her the way that it did.

These past few days, Isabella had thought that she needed the fire. That she had to have the anger. That the only way to enjoy her husband was through wickedly debauched scenes of such excess that she often had to pray for forgiveness after lest her soul be damned for eternity. But what if she had been wrong?

What if... was it possible that she and Duncan could enjoy one another without the spanking? The choking? The gagging? All of it? Surely not...

“Alright, Duncan,” she said, squeezing his hands and stepping into him. “I will kiss you.”

She licked her lips and looked right up at him. This close, she could feel his heart beating in his chest and she could hear his breathing; she could feel it on her skin as he leaned in toward her. A hand cupped on her chin, soft and gentle, guiding her lips into his.

It was not their first kiss. Not by a long shot. But as skin grazed skin, opening to lips, accepting tongues which gently lapped and played with one another, Isabella just about pulled away and gasped; such was the sensation that took her. Her heart might have leapt through her mouth if it was not busy. Her loins exploded as if they had been set on fire. That warmth ran so hot it swept over her body in a way that had Isabella wanting to tear her clothes right off.

Or maybe that was just because Duncan's hand moved to her waist, taking it gently, and his touch always did that to her. No matter how rough it was, apparently.

The kiss lasted for seconds, and Isabella savored every minute of it. When Duncan did pull away, she followed him, chin shaking with temptation because she missed his taste already.

"Duncan," she said.

"Yes?"

"We have to leave, right now."

Duncan smiled. "Is that so? It is quite the ride home. Do you think that you can last that long?"

Isabella considered the question. She assessed how she was feeling. She pictured exactly what she wanted to do to Duncan and how she was going to do it. And then, she came to an important decision.

"You're right, I do not think I can."

Unable to control herself any longer, Isabella threw herself at Duncan, her husband, wrapping her arms around her neck as she pressed her body into his and wrapped him

in her legs. There was no way that she could wait until they arrived home. Even the carriage felt too far a distance.

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That left just the one option and, based on the way that Duncan's member was already pressing into her inner thigh as it begged for release, she got the distinct impression that Duncan wasn't about to stop her.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Isabella had never wanted Duncan more than she did right now.

She couldn't understand why it was. For the first time ever, there was no animosity brewing beneath the surface. There was no danger or struggle or foreplay that they so often used to elicit excitement. Honesty had brought them here, the first time that either was willing to admit that what they had in this marriage might just be more than they could have ever imagined.

It should not have excited Isabella the way it had, and yet...

They kissed passionately on the balcony. Isabella wrapped her arms around Duncan's neck, and he gripped her waist. Not a tight grip, nor as forceful as she was used to. It was far gentler and more caring. Her tongue dove into his mouth and his tongue wrestled with it, but again, it was not a fight. He was not trying to overpower her as he often would. It was closer to a dance, two equals exploring one another as if for the first time.

A soft nibble on Isabella's lip and she moaned and lifted her leg to wrap around Duncan. His hands slid under her thighs and pushed her dress up. Still kissing, nibbling lips and licking anywhere that they could, Isabella's hands left Duncan's neck and made their way down to his front --

He caught her hands and pulled back. “What...?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. For a moment, she thought it might be fun to rebuke – to turn the tables and be the one giving commands for a change. But that wasn’t what this was.

Rather, she held his eyes and looked deeply into them as she gently pried her hands free and again went for the front of his pants. This time, he didn’t try and stop her.

Duncan’s member sprang forward, already hard and throbbing. She wrapped her hand around its girth and squeezed, Duncan groaned, and then he growled as she began to stroke it; she could feel it pulsing in her grip. His hands, still holding up her thigh, trembled and she knew that he wanted nothing more than to take charge as was his way. But he continued to kiss her passionately, this time giving himself over to the moment.

Isabella moved down his neck. She licked and she sucked as she steered his throbbing member toward her. Her right leg raised and wrapped around her husband, she pulled her face back and looked into his eyes. It was dark, she could barely make out his features, but his eyes shone and she could see without having to ask that he wanted this as much, if not more, than her.

He nodded his head and Isabella smiled. Then, she gently slipped him inside of her.

“Urgh...” She moaned and fell forward, her head collapsing into his chest as she felt him move deeper and deeper. “Just... there... yes...”

Duncan pulled her in closer and thrust himself deep inside of her. Then he lifted her other leg suddenly so that both were wrapped around him. His hands gripped under her backside and held her steady, her arms back around his neck, their two bodies becoming one.

They did not need to fight. They did not need the heat or the fire. That was the mistake they had been making. This belief that attraction could only come if the mood was just right. It was a false truth and they were both learning this together in real time.

Duncan spun about suddenly and pushed Isabella against the balcony. He rested her on it, giving him balance and more room to work.

His lips never once left her. Kisses filled with passion and desire, not anger. Kisses that told her he wanted to taste her because of how much he needed to, not because he had to prove anything. And she loved it.

Duncan continued to thrust inside of her. Long, slow, steady thrusts. He moved to the rhythm of her breathing, as if he was making the pleasure shared about her and not him for a change. He was careful not to thrust too forcefully, too hard, with too much power. And where she thought to ask if he was enjoying it... the look on his face was all the answer that she needed.

Over his shoulder, Isabella could see the ball still in full swing. Shapes moved past the door but never stepped outside. Music drifted but was muted by the wind. Darkness covered them fully. They were, for all intents and purposes, alone. And for that reason, they saw no reason to stop.

Duncan's thrusts increased in pace and Isabella's legs began to shudder as she felt each one inside of her.

Her lips found his exposed neck. She wrapped them around his sweaty skin and licked and sucked as he thrust harder and faster. His grip on her waist was still gentle, one hand finding the back of her head and holding it. But not grabbing. Not forcing. He didn't need that now.

“Yes...” she moaned as she felt herself getting closer; each thrust pulsed through her body and touched at her heart. Her entire being felt as if it was on fire. “Duncan... don’t... keep.... going...”

“As you wish,” he whispered, and the pace and power of his thrusts increased.

Isabella had experienced orgasms before. She knew the signs. She knew what to expect. But the one that came upon her right now was unlike any she'd had before. Beyond the realms of expectation. More a dream than reality because when it hit her entire body exploded and the only way to ensure that it would not consume her was to throw her head back and scream as loudly as she could. Or she might have liked to, have Duncan not covered her mouth.

She had idea why this one hit her the way it did, even if the answer might have been obvious. This wasn't part of some game. This wasn't forced or contrived. She had been willing to give herself to him because she wanted him, and he wanted her. This was real.

Duncan held her softly after. Still on the balcony, still inside of her, legs wrapped around his waist, Duncan pulled Isabella into a hug and held as they caught their breaths and silently came to terms with what had just occurred.

It would be spoken of later, she was sure. And what they had just done... they would be doing again... several times before the night was through, if she had anything to say about it. For now, silence was enough, that sense that the two had just turned a chapter in their relationship and that both were just as excited to see where the next one took them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

It had taken them a few weeks. There were many low points. A few high points. And



others that Duncan chose not to think about. There were fights. There were long silences. There were awkward moments and plenty of regret. A marriage that was anything but simple and easy and one that on many occasions, Duncan had assumed to be doomed because how could he and Isabella ever work together?

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Finally, he was pleased to say, this marriage was beginning to resemble one that he could be proud of. Why, it was one that he was even enjoying. As unexpected as that might have been to admit.

“Plans today?” Duncan asked Isabella as she swept into the dining room, there to break her fast with her husband as they did together every morning now.

“Good morning to you too.” She even gave him a kiss on the cheek before sitting herself down.

“Yes,” he chuckled with amusement. “How very rude of me. How did you sleep?”

“Not well,” she pretended to look upset. “But you know that already, don’t you.” Followed by a sharp smile and a wink.

“A small part of me almost wants to apologize. Alas, I will not waste the words for I know deep down that I’ll be doing the exact same thing tonight.” He sighed as if with regret. “Such is my way.”

“And tomorrow morning?” she asked hopefully.

He flashed his eyes wickedly. “If today was any indication.”

“I suppose I will just have to get used to surviving on little sleep for now on, won’t I?”

He shrugged. “Either that or you are free to sleep in a separate room. If you think you

have the self-control.”

She gasped and touched her chest as if mortally offended. “Excuse you. You’re the one I would worry after. All alone. Nobody to tuck you in. I might even be inclined to feel sorry for you.”

“How kind of you.”

“Plus, knowing you, you would end up sneaking into my room anyway. So, moving to my own would serve no purpose.”

He exhaled and shook his head. “And for that, I do apologize. But only a little...” He winked and she began to fidget. “From where I am sitting, you have only yourself to blame.”

“Me?” she gasped a second time.

Duncan’s eyes flicked hungrily over his wife. She was dressed simply, half dress for it was still early in the day and they were not entertaining guests. Just a plain white chemise with a spencer jacket worn over the top, buttoned at the front, long sleeved and nothing overly scandalous. But that did not stop Duncan from salivating.

The jacket was a little too tight, struggling to contain her bosoms in a way that made it look as if the jacket might pop open at any moment. And where the jacket ended on her waist, Isabella’s thick curves could be seen beneath as if she wanted him to take notice.

He stared at her without care, mind flashing back to earlier this morning when he was on his back as she straddled him. Hands around her breasts. Her fingers digging into his chest. Her body thrusting and heaving and shuddering as she screamed so loudly that the house shook.

“Careful now,” Isabella said, noticing where his focus was. “None of that.”

“None of what...” He tore his eyes free from her body, looking vaguely at her as if he had just come out of a dream.

“To answer your question earlier, I am busy today.” She looked at him flatly. “Far too busy to become distracted this morning.”

“Distracted again, you mean?”

She rolled her eyes. “I will be home later this evening and if you are home also...” She shrugged and then, ever so casually, ran a finger down her chest as if tracing an invisible line to her cleavage. “Maybe you and I can spend some time together.”

Duncan could feel himself turning hard at the thought and all he wanted to do was jump to his feet, storm around the table, take his wife by the hand and lead her back upstairs so they could pick up where they had left off only a few hours earlier.

If this had been a few weeks ago, he just might have done that.

Why, if this had been a few weeks ago, he and Isabella would already be in the throes of a new argument, looking for any reason to avoid having to talk to one another normally, knowing exactly where that argument was heading.

There was no need for that anymore.

Yes, Duncan wanted his wife. And yes, she wanted him. But they realized now that they didn’t need to fight and berate one another to elicit their arousal. And because of that, they were no longer fighting at every waking hour, and because of that for the first time in this marriage Duncan and Isabella were getting to know one another in a real way.

And surprisingly, although he supposed it probably shouldn't have been, Duncan was starting to see Isabella in a whole new light. One that he was more than a little taken by.

"Tonight then." Duncan tore his eyes free, and then to busy himself, he looked about for a servant to pour him a glass of juice. He caught one's eye and clicked his fingers, needing the beverage as a means of distraction. "I'll be here."

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She laughed. "Waiting eagerly, I am sure."

The servant poured his juice and Duncan took a long, deep sip as he held his wife's eyes across the table. "Don't be late," he said as he put the glass down. "Lest I am forced to start without you."

"I do not mind the sound of that."

He laughed. "Test me then. See what happens."

"And miss out on all the fun? Not on your life."

It had been five days since the Clementine Ball and those five days had been the best of this marriage so far.

Somehow, Duncan was enjoying himself even more than he had when Isabella and he had been enjoying their roleplay.

It had started on the balcony, when Duncan had taken a chance and asked Isabella to kiss him. It had felt like a gamble at the time, as if there might have been a chance that a kiss from this woman who he was clearly attracted to might not do anything to excite him.

How wrong he had been.

That kiss changed everything. What they had done on the balcony right after, had changed everything. The realization that the attraction they felt was very real, that

they no longer had to fight at every turn, and what this might mean for the future of their marriage,

“So,” Duncan sighed. “Are you going to tell me where it is that you are going?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

He snorted. “Careful now, you might make me upset.”

“Lucky that I know how to calm you...” She licked her lips as she looked at him, and Duncan groaned as if she had a hand wrapped around his member and was squeezing it.

“Isabella...”

“I am seeing my sister,” she pivoted quickly, enjoying how effortless it was to tease him. “I have not heard from her in days – nor has she replied to my letters. So, I think it is time I pay her a visit.”

“Oh. Is everything fine? Nothing to be alarmed about?”

“Likely,” Isabella sighed. “My sister, although I love her, can be a little... what is the word?” she considered. “Dramatic. And moody.”

“Coming from you?”

Isabella looked warningly at him. “Hopefully, it is nothing. But I will know once I see her later.”

Duncan nodded. “I suppose I will have to find ways to entertain myself today then, won’t I?”

“I almost feel bad for you. Whatever will you do without me?”

“You like to pretend that you have all the power here but let us be honest...” He shrugged. “You would be lost without me here to sate your appetite.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It is what I know.”

She grinned. “Keep waiting then. See what happens.”

He wanted her. He wanted her as much as he ever had. It was indescribable to Duncan, a type of attraction that he had never felt before. He had always found this sort of romance boring in the past, and safer because of it. It would keep him from becoming obsessed because how could he possibly with such a mediocre relationship?

What was happening between him and Isabella was something that Duncan didn't understand but was more than happy to go along with.

They broke their fast together that morning. Their conversation pleasant and not boring. Now that they were past their bickering and no longer nervous or unsure of how to treat the other, there was no tension or strain when they spoke, and this allowed them to speak naturally for the first time. To have conversations that meant something. Slowly, day by day, Duncan was getting to know his wife properly for the first time.

When Isabella left to see her sister afterwards, Duncan gave her a kiss on the lips which she returned in kind – no sense of surprise from her that he had done such a thing. That alone lit a fire in his belly.



“Someone is in a good mood today,” Isabella giggled.

“You have no idea,” Duncan said.

As to where they went from here, that was still a question without an answer. A little too soon to tell, Duncan told himself as he watched the carriage pull out. Perhaps in a week or two, if things keep going this well.

For now, it was enough that they were able to enjoy each other’s company and the animosity that used to exist between them in droves was a thing of the past.

A smile worked its way up the side of Duncan’s face as he turned and walked back inside his manor. It came with thought of Isabella, Duncan already picturing seeing her tonight and what they were sure to do together.

But he also pictured afterwards, lying in bed as they spoke and laughed and joked as they now so often did. Her soft, naked skin nuzzled into his body for warmth. The smell of her hair. The way she played with his fingers as she spoke.

The fact that such thoughts could bring a smile to Duncan’s face was more telling than anything else. How far he had come.

The idea came to Duncan shortly before midday.

He was thinking about Isabella and this evening and what they were most likely going to do – nothing good. But he was also just thinking about her and seeing her and spending time with her. Dammit, he missed his wife.

What was more, he wanted to show her how much he did. To give her a gift, one that meant something for a change, and see that smile of hers as her eyes lit up.

Look at me, taking pleasure at the notion of making my wife happy. Who have I become?

He spent the day thinking about what to get her. More hours than he would have thought needed, or cared for, but he wanted to get her the perfect gift.

And then it came to him. He was pacing the library, deep in thought, and it appeared to him as if a candle was being lit in his mind.

Isabella had lamented how, as a woman, she was not allowed to study as a man might be. No university would accept her, and no tutor would take her. Most men did not see the point in their wife or partner wasting time with higher learning. Most men were not Duncan.

Excitement took him as he rushed to his study where he fully intended to spend the rest of the day calling in favors so that he might be able to surprise Isabella as soon as was possible. He smiled to picture the elation on her face when he told her. She is going to be thrilled!

Duncan hurried into his study and sat down, was about to reach for a piece of parchment and a quill but paused when he saw a folded letter sitting at the center of his table.

Frowning, he looked about as if expecting one of his butlers to pop up and explain where it had come from. There were no-one, so Duncan scooped up the letter himself, saw who it was from, and groaned deeply because he had wondered what might come along to ruin this blissful state of ease he had found himself in and here it was.

The letter was from Juliet, and if he knew the woman half as well as he thought he did, its contents were sure to be ruinous.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Are you certain that you have been taken ill?" Isabella asked her sister.

"Of course I am!" Louisa snapped. "What? Do you think that I am lying?"

"No, I did not say that," Isabella assured her. "It is just that..." She clicked her tongue, careful not to speak too out of turn. "You do not look particularly ill, is all. Certainly not on death's door, as you claim."

"Well, I feel horrendous! And you should know better than to be this close to me – I do not want you to risk catching it."

"I am sure I will be fine."

Louisa pushed her lips together into a pout. "Oh yes, do not listen to me. Or anyone, for that matter. Do as you please because in the world of Isabella, things just tend to work out for the best, don't they."

"I..." Isabella frowned, a little taken by her sister's snappy attitude. "I would not go so far as that."

"Be sure to let me know if you have fallen sick in the next day or two – when you do," Louisa said rightly, even a little viciously. "Maybe then you'll learn to listen for a change."

Isabella furrowed her brow at her sister but did not push the issue. She knew Louisa as well as she knew herself, because the two were twins, and she could sense that for

reasons unknown to her, Louisa was trying to start a fight.

Typical. To escape the constant shouting and arguing of my new home only to find it in my old one. Can't my life just be peaceful for once?

She had found her twin sister in bed this morning. So taken with illness that she had refused to see Isabella at all. But Isabella, forever the stubborn sister and wanting to make sure that Louisa was not as sick as she claimed, forced the issue and went and saw her anyway.

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Louisa was not pleased at the sight of her sister coming into her room, and she had pulled the covers up over her head as if hoping that Isabella might not see her there.

It was clear to Isabella immediately that her sister was not ill. But that just raised the obvious question, why was she lying in the first place? Something was clearly wrong and Isabella, ever the stubborn one, was determined to find out what.

“Tell me that I will at least be seeing you next week,” Isabella continued pleasantly. “The Stonesides are throwing a garden party and mother has told me that you were invited.”

“Maybe,” Louisa mumbled. “I have not decided.”

“There will be many an eligible bachelor there, I am sure,” Isabella prodded. “You would be a fool to miss it. The Season is almost over, Louisa and to be honest with you, I am surprised that you here in bed rather than battering away men with sticks for surely you have dozens to contend with.”

“Perhaps if I was not sick, I might be.”

“It should be a fun day,” Isabella continued, pushing her lips together with frustration because Louisa had turned around and was refusing to look at her. “It has been a while since I attended a garden party.”

“So... you and His Grace will be attending.”

“I would be surprised if we do not.” She chuckled lightly. “Even if Duncan protests, I

am sure I can change his mind. In ways that I have since learned he is not at all opposed to.”

“Urgh,” her sister groaned. “Did I not tell you that I am sick. I could do without the bawdy commentary, thank you.”

Isabella leaned back. “Sorry, Louisa. I did not mean to... to upset you.”

“I did not say that you upset me!”

“Turn you off, then. I was only joking.”

Louisa did not respond right away, and Isabella could just about see her mind turning as she worked to her next point. A point which Isabella was starting to get ahead of because her sister was not exactly the queen of subtlety.

“So... it is true then,” she began, still not facing Isabella. “You and His Grace?”

“What of us?”

“That the two of you are... are happy?”

Isabella considered. But only for a moment. “Yes, I would say that we are.”

“No more fighting? Or arguing? No more wanting to kill one another?”

Isabella laughed softly. “Not as much as we once did. In fact, we have not fought in weeks, which might sound boring and a tad vanilla for some, but it has not been anything of the sort. We are...” A tiny spread across her face at the thought. “It is as I said, we are happy.”

And they were too.

For five days now, happiness was the theme of their marriage and Isabella could not have been gladder for it. There was no more fighting. There was no more arguing. There was no more annoying and frustrating the other for no other reason than to drum some excitement into their marriage... not to mention, some passion.

It just wasn't needed anymore. Thanks to their conversation at the Clementine Ball, and then what happened as a direct result of that conversation, she and Duncan had discovered a new side to their relationship that was as impossible to comprehend as it was wonderful to live in.

No longer fighting at every waking hour, their personal relationship was growing beyond anything that Isabella had thought might be possible when concerning the sullen, brutish, bully of a Duke who she had married all those weeks ago. Now, Isabella knew that wasn't him at all.

The Duncan who she now knew... well, he wasn't nearly as bad as she had thought. Not even close.

"Well, I am very happy for you," Louisa said, sounding not at all like she meant it. "Wonderful. I wish you both eternal happiness and sunshine."

"Louisa..." Isabella half leaned forward to touch her sister on the shoulder. "Is something the matter?"

"I told you, I am sick!"

"Not that." She rested that hand on her sister's shoulder and, unsurprisingly, Louisa shrugged it off. "Is something else the matter? Concerning myself and the Duke?"

“No. Why would it be!”



“You tell me.”

Isabella could feel it coming. The pent-up rage in her sister. The anger she had been consumed with these past few days building and readying to explode because she wanted to let her feelings known.

“It’s you, Isabella. That is what is wrong.”

“Me? What have I done?”

“Of course you do not know!”

“How can I know if you do not tell me?”

“You wish to know?” Louisa demanded. “You really wish to -- I am through being there for you, Isabella,” she cried. “I have tried. The Lord knows that I have but... but... but I just cannot do it anymore. I am sorry.”

Isabella leaned back, more confused than anything. “Being there for me? Louisa, what on earth are you talking about?”

“You and His Grace!” Louisa cried. “This... this façade that you have thrown up and just expect me to go along with. Time and time again, that is all I do. And I am sick to death of it, Isabella. Sick!”

“You’re jealous?”

“I am not jealous!”

“I do not know what else it could be,” Isabella said. “And where I do not expect you to be happy for me, Louisa, I do expect you to treat me with some common decency.”

“And why should I? When all you do is lie.”

“When have I lied?”

She scoffed. “I do not believe for a second that His Grace has changed the way you claim – or that you have, for that matter! For weeks you told me what a monster he is, and now what? He’s suddenly an angel borne from heaven and --”

“I never said that!”

“It’s all a lie,” she continued hotly. Furiously! “I have tried to work out why you are lying. I have thought about it for days and days, Isabella. And I cannot think of a single reason, save for the fact that you are scared.”

Isabella laughed, because she could not help herself. “Scared of what?”

“Of being hurt,” she said, the anger fading, taken now by sadness. “Worse than that, admitting for a change that you are – that this perfect marriage is not what you have told us and then having to face the fact.”

“Louisa...” Isabella had no idea what to say, or what to make of her sister’s outburst.  
“I –”

"And do you know what the worst part is?" Louisa sniveled, tears beginning to form in her eyes. “It will not last – it cannot last! For a few weeks, maybe. Even a few months. And all the while you will rub it in my face and force it down my throat

because you love knowing that you have what I never will.”

“Louisa --”

“But then it will change,” she spoke over Isabella, her voice turning thick. “It cannot last, you know that. The Duke might be kind and caring now, but that is not who he is. I know it because you have told me countless times! He will change, he will hurt you, and then I am expected to be there for you when all the while I knew this to be coming because even a blind man can see the truth.”

Isabella scoffed as she attempted to rear up and shoot down Louisa’s arguments. “I am having a hard time understanding what exactly it is that you are upset about? Is it that I am happy? That my happiness will not last? Or that you are doomed to die alone and for some reason this is all my fault?”

Her chin was wobbling furiously. “I am angry because ever since we were little girls, your whims and fancies have been my burden. When you are upset, who do you think it is that comforts you? When you do not get your way, who is it that has always been there to help? Me!”

“Oh, I am so sorry to have burdened you with the chaos of being my sister,” Isabella said sarcastically.

Louisa shook her head, eyes now welling with tears. “You wish for me to be happy for you? You wish for me to dance for joy because for once you and the Duke are not fighting? And then what? When he hurts you, when he pushes you away, when he turns back into who he has always been? When you come to me in tears as you always do...” Her face dropped, her chin shook, tears streamed down her cheeks. “I do not think I will have the energy for it, Isabella.”

“And here I was, thinking that as my sister you would support me. No matter what the

cause.”

“You cannot have it both ways. You cannot expect me to be over the moon for this --” She shook her head in Isabella’s direction. “And then curse the man’s name when he hurts you. And all the while, as you filter between love and madness, I am left to wonder if I will ever experience what you have. Even if it’s only for a moment.” Her lips curled and she shook her head again. “I am happy for you, Isabella. But that does not mean that I do not have the right to be furious. Furious because I know that he is going to hurt you, even if you refuse to admit it. Furious because... because I hate to see you hurt, and every time that I do, it kills me. It truly does.” And with that, she turned around and lay back down.

Isabella was speechless.

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She stared blankly at her sister, unable to comprehend where this was coming from. And what it all meant.

Louisa just doesn't understand! That is why.

"I am sorry you feel that way." Isabella stood up, doing her best to ignore her sister's tears because she was starting to feel angry. Even manipulated. "Truly, I am. But your preconceptions about my relationship with Duncan are wrong." She strode from the bed and to the doorway, pausing in it so she could look back at her sister. "For the first time Duncan and I are getting along. And rather than celebrate that with me, you choose to be petty. You think so little of my husband, perhaps you should look at yourself."

A final glare at her sister's head, a pause because she wanted Louisa to turn around and apologize – she did not like fighting with her sister.

But Louisa did no such thing, leaving Isabella to storm out, furious in ways she had not felt in weeks.

Most of it was for her sister, as was deserved. But it was later, as she began to calm down on the carriage ride home, that Isabella wondered if maybe the reason that she was so angry was because her sister's words had struck just a little too close for her liking.

Yes, she and Duncan were close right now. And yes, they were happy and thriving. But among it all, Isabella had wondered from time to time if it might last. If such a thing was possible? Was Duncan just one bad day away from snapping and turning

back into his true form? And was Isabella just one day or boredom away from provoking it?

She had never wanted to marry in the first place.

Duncan was not the kind, caring, even softly spoken man whom he had been at pains to portray himself as these last five days.

Eventually, something in this relationship was going to give. There would be a breaking point, a test that would force their true selves to the fore once more. And when that happened, what would become of this marriage?

Would they take it in stride and grow from it, proving that they were in fact meant to be together?

Or would it shatter their reality and be the final straw that broke them apart once and for all?

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Are you really saying no to me?" Isabella laughed softly as she traced a finger on Duncan's chest. "You were quick to say yes a few moments ago."

Duncan laughed. "Under very different circumstances."

"Still..." She leaned over and pressed soft kisses all over his upper body. This had Duncan moaning as sparks of pleasure rolled through his chest and across his body.

"You really want me to say yes, don't you?"

"Is it that obvious?" she grinned as her teeth grazed over his pec. Then she slowly

pulled back, Duncan gasped, and she let go.

“Personally, I am surprised that you’re so eager to go,” Duncan continued, wiggling back slightly so that his nipples were out of reach of Isabella’s mouth. “And so pushy.”

She gasped. “Who did you just call pushy?”

“The person who is pushing me, is who.”

“Fair.” She wiggled up closer, this time resting her head on his chest. Then, her fingers began to trace over his nipple once more. “But I thought it might be fun? And when I mentioned it a few days ago...”

“I never said I wanted to go.”

“But you didn’t say that you did not want to, either.” She pushed herself up on her elbow and raised an eyebrow at him. “Which I naturally took as an acquiescence.”

“Are you going to fight me on this?”

“Only if you make me.”

Duncan grimaced. “Isabella, I really, really am not so sure --”

“It will be fun,” she cut him off. “And besides, I told my sister and mother that we are going so if we do not, that will make me a liar. You wouldn’t make me a liar, would you?”

He groaned. “Why did you tell them we were going before asking me?”

She shrugged. “What are you going to do about it?”



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It was a strange thing, and likely Duncan was reading too much into it, but if he didn't know any better, he might have thought that Isabella was trying to start an argument. Surely not?

They were lying in bed together, naked and dripping in sweat, out of breath and running hot because they had quite literally just finished a very intense session of love making. It had been as blissful as expected, both fighting for control as they gave themselves to the other completely. The pleasure they felt intensifying at the mere thought of their partner feeling the same as they pushed and pressed and tempted one another to reach climax.

And once they were done, Duncan had expected the same as what always happened. He had been looking forward to it! They would lie in bed, wrapped in one another's arms, laughing and chatting and getting to know the other that little bit better than they had the day before.

This time, things felt different. But again, Duncan wondered if he was imagining it.

The topic of choice was the Stoneside garden party in three days' time. It was an event that Duncan had showed middling interest in, and which he had thought Isabella to be on the same page as him. But most surprisingly, she was now insistent on going, pushing them both to attend as if their lives depended on it.

What was more, the greater Duncan's protest, the harder than she pushed.

"I'm not going to do anything about it," Duncan said. "Except announce my extreme disinterest in attending – why bother?" He turned on her, propping himself on his

elbow. “Those events are always so boring.”

“So, you are calling me boring?”

He frowned. “I never said that.”

“I will be there, so if you are bored, then I must be the reason for it.”

“No, that is not what I – you are twisting my words.”

“I am interpreting them correctly.” She raised a daring eyebrow at him, as if trying to bait him.

It was confusing to say the least. Which led Duncan to the obvious conclusion that seemed impossible but was all he could think of. She knows the reason that I do not wish to go.

That was the irony here, Duncan wondering why Isabella was pushing so hard when he was purposefully pushing back because he was trying to avoid both the event and telling her why he did not wish to go in the first place.

Times were that he would have held out, pushed back, refused. But he was careful not to start a fight, worried what that might do for where they were in this relationship. He liked this space, and he didn't want to leave it.

“You really wish to go?” Duncan sighed.

“I do. And we are going...” Still, that eyebrow remained raised.

“Fine,” he said and fell back in bed. “We will go.”

“Re -- really?” she balked and stared at him as if she could not believe it.

He laughed. “Yes, really. That was what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

Isabella frowned and her eyes searched him. A sense of confusion grew in her, the suggestion that she didn’t understand why he was being so kind. Or that she didn’t believe it. There is no way that she knows. I destroyed the letter as soon as I read it. It was unsealed!

“Perfect.” She leaned in and kissed him on the lips before lying back down beside him. “And thank you for saying yes. I...” She hesitated. “I appreciate it.”

“Who would have guessed I could be so understanding,” Duncan chuckled.

Perhaps he was imagining things, and this was just a test to see how he would react? But why would she do such a thing? Things were going so well, and Duncan couldn’t fathom why she might want to sabotage it.

It must have been that letter. The one from Lady St. Vincent. Somehow, she had found out about it.

In said letter, Juliet had told Duncan in no uncertain terms that she was in love with him, and she wished for them to run away together. Knowing how tenuous his relationship with Isabella was, Juliet seemed to think that he was a given and that already he would be packing his bags, desperate to leave with her.

It was absurd! Insane! So unlike the woman that Duncan might have thought it written by another, if he hadn’t recognized the handwriting.

He did not send a response, because he did not think one necessary. However, Juliet had told him also that if she did not hear from him then she would wait to see him at

the Stoneside garden party, as if his mere being there was proof that he was of the same mind as she...

It was no wonder he did not wish to go. And it was no wonder why Isabella might be pushing for it. No doubt she wanted to see for herself if these last five days had been real, or if Duncan was exactly who she expected.

Why must everything always be so darn difficult? Why, for once, can it not be easy?

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Juliet was apparently in love with him. Isabella was seeming less content than usual. Duncan was happy but knew that happiness to exist on a razor's edge. All that was to say that the honeymoon period that was this marriage looked as if it was set to end.

What might come next... Duncan was up late into the night worrying about just that.

Their relationship was nowhere near as stable as they pretended.

On the surface, everything seemed perfectly fine. Better than fine. To those who might see them, they would surely describe the couple as happy and in a good place, nothing to worry about, moving in the right direction in all the ways which mattered.

Isabella wanted to believe this. She tried her best to, because she was happy and did not want to go back to the way things were. But as the days wore on and the splendor continued, her sister's warning echoed in her head.

Surely, I am being ridiculous? Why am I trying to force something to happen that I do not even want? Why can't I just be happy!

Isabella's fear was that one day soon, Duncan's true self would return and this perceived sense of happiness that the two were existing in would cease to be. And that once it did, there would be no going back.

Such a foolish way to think because outside of these darkest thoughts, everything was as good as it had ever been.

"A ride today?" Duncan asked the morning after she had forced him to agree to

attending the Stoneside garden party. "I thought we might spend the day out."

Isabella very nearly said yes without pause. With no plans today, spending it with her husband as they explored the countryside was as much as she could have hoped for. Plus, out in the wilderness, alone, who knew what might happen...

"Hmm?" She bit into her lip instead. "Maybe..."

He laughed. "Did you have something else on?"

"No..." She frowned to herself, knowing that what came to mind was the wrong thing to think, but she unable to keep herself from saying it. "It is just that... well, a whole day together? What if I get bored?"

Duncan blinked. Frowned. Looked at her as if she wasn't certain whether she was being serious or not. "Of me or the ride?"

"Both?" she shrugged casually. "Pick one."

Duncan eyed her curiously. For a moment, she thought she saw his lip twitch. For a second, she braced herself because two weeks ago such words spoken would be enough to send him down an anger spiral which would pull her along with it.

"What if I grow bored of you?" he said instead, laughing along. "In fact, perhaps I will take a book. Just in case."

"So, you do not wish for me to come?"

He winked. "Oh, you might as well. In case I get bored of my book."

He refused to take the bait. He refused to rise to her argumentative comments. He

remained composed and jovial, amused by her rancor, seemingly enjoying it as if he thought she was playing with him!

Maybe he has changed? But if he has, does that mean that I am the problem?

There was something very wrong with Isabella. Happiness had found her, yet she refused to answer its call. She did not want Duncan to turn back into the man he once was, but she also refused to believe that it wasn't inevitable and thus there was no point admitting that she was happy because the heartbreak that would then come might be too much to handle.

And so it was that the next few days played out on a razor's edge.

Isabella and Duncan spent those days together. They laughed and joked and made love and existed in a state of happiness that had become the norm for their marriage. Isabella would occasionally pick at him, and he would rebuff it without incident. She would find herself getting a little too comfortable, and then pull away because she felt that she had to. She would imagine the two of them together in years to come and then push those thoughts down and refuse to consider such a thing.

Happiness was there for the taking and despite all the signs screaming for Isabella to snatch it... she simply could not.

Duncan would change soon. He had to! And when he did, Isabella knew that even as prepared for it as she was, it would still hurt. Despite her recent efforts to keep her distance from him, she was beginning to fall for the man whom she once despised.

That scared her more than anything, and if she stopped to wonder why she was the way that she was, why she refused to accept happiness as it was given to her, she might have wanted to start there.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

"You seem nervous?" Isabella said to Duncan as they walked around the side of the Stoneside manor, arm in arm.

"Am I?"



She shrugged. "I know you pretty well by now, you know."

"Is that right?"

"Well enough to know that for reasons I cannot fathom, you are nervous. What's the matter..." She winked. "Worried what people might say when they see us together?"

"They have seen us together already," Duncan laughed, albeit with a hint of nerves.

"Not fighting, however. They might not know what to think."

He laughed again. "That is one state of shock I am happy to bring about in others. Certainly nothing to be nervous about." He swallowed noticeably, which he then cursed himself for.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "If you say so..."

Duncan smiled and shook his head and attempted his best to not look nervous. Even if he was. Even if he was so darn worried that he could feel the sweat dripping down his back and pooling under his arms.

It is going to be fine. I am sure that she is not even here. And if she is, even Juliet is not such a fool to make a scene. Is she?

It was the day of the Stoneside garden party and despite his protests, Duncan was attending if for no other reason than it made Isabella happy. Indeed, she had been at him these last three days, reminding him, prodding him, seeming to want him to

argue and say he wasn't going.

She knows. And she is trying to get me to confess.

But Duncan would not confess. If Juliet did attend, he would subtly pull her aside and tell her he was not interested. That would nip it in the bud and Isabella would never have to find out.

They arrived shortly before midday, breaching the back garden to dozens of pairs of eyes turned on them as if they were the guests of honor. A few waved. Many smiled. And Duncan kept his composure as he swept his eyes across the back garden and over the guests... searching.

"Ah, there is my sister," Isabella said. "And my mother."

"Shall we say hello?"

She pushed her lips together. "No, I do not think so – later. Let us do the rounds first, shall we?"

"As you wish."

For the first twenty minutes or so, Duncan and Isabella played the perfect couple and despite himself, Duncan found that he enjoyed it. It was a strange thing, having another on your arm, an extension of you it seemed, there to act as support for the mindless drivel and palaver that these little events tended to bring.

Even better was that Duncan found that he trusted Isabella.

He did not have to worry that she might say the wrong thing. He did not have to pay attention as she spoke, fearful that she would embarrass or anger him in any way. He

knew her well by now, and he delighted in seeing the looks of both jealousy and approval in his contemporaries.

Throughout it all, Duncan's mind was only half engaged. As they walked about the garden and said their hellos, he searched and scoured for the one person who threatened to drive a knife through this day as if trying to murder it.

"Are you sure you are fine?" Isabella asked as they said their goodbyes to Count Wellington and his wife. "Your mind seems to be somewhere else?"

"Does it?" He forced himself to look at her. "Just... marveling in your beauty."

She rolled her eyes, but he saw her smile to herself. It was a smile that delighted Duncan in ways that were new to him but not at all unfounded. Lately, bringing a smile to Isabella's lips was one of his great pleasures and that as much as anything gave him courage for what he knew was about to come.

Indeed, no sooner was Isabella looking away as if embarrassed, did Duncan see none other than Juliet enter the garden.

Her eyes met Duncan's, and they flashed delight. She licked her lips and smiled at him, and he felt his stomach sink.

This madness had to stop. He would not allow Juliet, or anyone else for that matter, to disturb this newfound peace he'd achieved. Especially, if it meant Isabella might get hurt or grow cold toward him again, as she once had.

"Ah... I need to visit the washroom, I am afraid." Duncan pulled his arm free.

"Oh?"

“I will be right back. Perhaps it is time you spoke with your sister?”

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Isabella looked about. “I can’t see where she is. Probably hiding.”

Duncan frowned. “From what?”

“Never mind,” Isabella sighed. “My mother is waving me over, best say hello.” She indicated to her mother, who was already on her way.

“And that is my cue to leave,” Duncan laughed. “I’ll be right back, I promise.” He turned and met Juliet’s eyes and then, as she watched him, he made sure to lean in and give Isabella a kiss on the cheek.

He then ducked away from Isabella, keeping low as he made for Juliet. But he did not go straight for her, walking around the long way and then coming in from behind.

Even then, he made sure to stand back, and he did not face her directly as he spoke.

“I was not sure if you would come,” he said, focusing on a rose bush, as if it brought him great interest, while refusing to look directly at Juliet.

“I had no choice. I had to --”

“Not here,” Duncan demanded, concealing his fury with great difficulty.

“Where?”

“Inside, the kitchen. Meet me in two minutes.” He did not wait for an answer, putting his head down and powering toward the manor.

Once inside, he ducked through the back hallway and walked into the kitchen, where he began to mentally prepare himself for a conversation that he did not want to have but knew he must.

Juliet swept into the kitchen a moment later and the very second that Duncan saw the look in the woman's eyes, he knew this was not going to be as easy a conversation as he would have liked. Not even close.

"Your Grace!" she purred as she went for him, already reaching out her hands as if she meant to take his head in them and pull his lips into a kiss. "I was hoping I would see --"

Duncan snatched her hands and held them back. "Juliet, there will be none of that. We need to talk."

She tried for a disarming chuckle as Duncan released her hands and she folded them behind her back. "Why do you think I am here? To talk."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "This is not a conversation that you will enjoy, Juliet. I need you to understand this."

"Duncan..." She sighed and looked at him knowingly. "Do not play the fool with me – and do not lie to yourself, either. I think we are both passed that. Don't you?"

"I read your letter, Juliet and I had hoped that my lack of a response was answer enough."

"It wasn't an answer at all. But in that, I saw what you wanted to say. What you needed to say, even if fear is holding you back. That is why I came, to give you the chance to say it to my face."

“Juliet...” He groaned. “I do not love --”

“Don’t say it!” she cut him off. “Not yet. Please, before you say anything, let me explain. I did not write that letter on a whim. And I did not come here today because of some delusion. I would hope you know me better than that.”

“I thought I did.”

“Then please.” Again, she went to take his head in her hands and Duncan snatched them and held them back. She smiled sheepishly and pulled them away. “I just want to talk, that is all.”

“Then talk.”

Duncan’s affair with Juliet had never meant to be more than what it was, a sexual relationship with no strings or expectations because as he had told her when it began that he did not want anything serious. And she had concurred with that reasoning. She had told him that she was of the same mind.

Indeed, throughout their brief affair, it had been this way. And when Duncan ended it, although she had been upset, she had accepted it soundly and without protest. That was, after all, why he had chosen her.

She had an elegant and refined beauty about her. Regal in how well put together she was. Tall and lithe, sharp features, soft white skin, and dark hair. At the time, she had been the epitome of beauty in Duncan’s eyes, perfect because that was how he liked his women.

Funny that to see her now, when comparing her to Isabella, he could not help but feel surprised that once he had been so sexually drawn to this woman.

Now all he could think was that she was no Isabella.



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:36 am*

“When you ended things between us,” Juliet began carefully. “I was surprised to say the least. And hurt. But I was also understanding – even you must admit that.”

“I do.”

“And for a brief time, I tried to accept it, that there was nothing I could do to change your mind so why fight it? But Your Grace...” She looked at him pleadingly. “I do not accept it. I cannot! It has been weeks now, months, and each day that I am forced to live in a world where I know I will never get to see you again, where I will never feel your touch...” She reached out with one hand, but then held it back. “It is more than I can bare.”

“I do not care, Juliet. I am married,” Duncan said, not wanting to give any sense of false hope. “There is nothing that --”

“Run away with me,” she said quickly.

“Excuse me?” Duncan blanched.

“I know you are married. I know that you think you must commit – that your honor demands it as so. But it does not have to be that way. I love you Duncan, I always have, I know it now. And... and if you feel the same way about me, what does it matter what people think or say? Let us go where their voices cannot follow and we can live how we wish. Let us leave all of this behind, for who needs it. Let us --”

“That is not an option.”

“It is!” she cried. “Remember what we had...” She took a step closer to Duncan, her chin beginning to quiver as tears welled in her eyes. “What it was like when we were together. Picture it, please. And then tell me that you do not miss it.”

“I do not miss it,” Duncan said, not even feeling a pang of guilt when he saw the hurt in Juliet’s face. “I am sorry, I am. But I do not --”

“You love her?” Juliet cut him off.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you love her? Because if you do...” She bit into her lip as she considered. “If you can look me in the eyes and tell me that you do, then I will accept that. But if you cannot...” Her stare became hopeful.

Duncan balked.

He took a step back and looked away, his face turning red as if he was embarrassed. Such a simple question, one that he should not have struggled to answer – or even lie about. Yet it was more complex than that and lying felt wrong to do. As if he was betraying her.

Perhaps that should have told him the truth of the matter.

His mind immediately drifted to their love making. First, those bliss filled weeks of domination and debauchery. Those he would always cherish, the luck that he had found someone with the same proclivities as him.

Then his mind went to these past two weeks. Yes, the sex this week had been different to what Duncan thought he enjoyed, but that was also the point. It was better. Better because their relationship was no longer so dependent on it for survival. And

that made it real.

The sex was proof that they could work as a couple – that they did work. Because when they weren't making love, they were spending time together, getting to know one another, learning and growing in ways that Duncan hadn't considered fully until now.

Isabella pushed him like no other.

She angered him as if it was a sport.

She tested him. Teased him. She frustrated him! But she also knew him, and that was what Duncan now understood. She knew where the line was, how to flirt with it, how to provoke not just anger but interest and companionship.

Duncan had spent his life convincing himself he did not wish to fall in love. But perhaps that wasn't really what he had been avoiding? Perhaps he had simply feared falling in love with the wrong woman, and for the wrong reasons.

That wasn't Isabella. What was more, Juliet wasn't Isabella.

“You want to know how I feel?” Duncan said.

“Yes,” Juliet pleaded. “I love you, Your Grace. And I know that you feel the same for me. But can you say it of her! Can you?”

A soft smile spread over Duncan's face.

“What? What is it?” Juliet demanded.

Duncan opened his mouth to tell Juliet that he did indeed love his wife. Only he

paused, because something about the confession didn't seem right. This was after all, the first time he had admitted to himself that he loved Isabella and it felt that if anyone should learn of this first, it should be her.

"I do not love you," he said to Juliet. "And that is all which matters."

“So, you do not love her!” Juliet cried hysterically.

“Juliet...” Duncan sighed. “I am sorry that things have transpired this way, truly I am. But I must ask that you leave me and my wife alone --”

“She deserves to know the truth!” Juliet cried hysterically. “That you do not love her.”

“I did not say that.”

“You did not have to. I can see it!”

“Juliet...” Duncan growled. “I suggest that you calm down.”

She shook her head and took a step back. “She does not love you like I do – and you know it!” Her eyes flashed zealously, as if she had been taken over by a demonic force hellbent on destruction. “But if you will not admit it, she will have to for you instead.”

“Juliet!” Duncan strode for her, but she spun about and stormed from the room.

At least that was her aim. But she reached the door which led from the kitchen, only to find her way blocked.

“Who are you!” Juliet barked. “Out of my way.”

“I am not going anywhere. Not if you mean to try and ruin my sister’s marriage.” It

was Louisa of all people, arms folded, face set in a way that was reminiscent of her sister.

“Miss Gouldsmith!” Duncan gasped.

She grimaced. “I am so sorry, Your Grace. I saw the two of you come in here and I followed and...” She grimaced further. “I may or may not have overheard what you were saying.”

“How dare you!” Juliet cried.

“Me!” Louisa was back on her. “You are the one who is trying to destroy my sister’s marriage. Her reputation! And if that is what you mean to do...” She unfolded her arms and held them up as if she meant to tackle Juliet. “You will have to get through me.”

“Is that so?” Juliet cast her eyes about the kitchen, landing on a stray knife lying on the bench. She snatched it and held it before her. “I suggest that you move.”

“Juliet!” Duncan cried and lunged for her.

“I love you!” Juliet screamed as she leapt at Louisa.

“No --” Louisa cried out as she reached for Juliet’s arms to hold back the knife.

It all happened so quickly. Three bodies coming together in a glorious clash. Knife flailing. Legs kicking. Bodies writhing. And as was to be expected, blood splattering...

Chapter Thirty

"What are you looking at?" Isabella's mother asked her. "Isabella?"

"Hmm?" Isabella responded vaguely, without turning to look at her mother.

"Isabella, I am trying to have a conversation with you. What are you – oh, for heaven's sake, girl!" She threw her hands in the air. "What has gotten into you today?"

Still, Isabella was not paying her mother any attention.

Her attention was all for the Stoneside manor, which she had been staring at for the past three minutes, ever since she saw Duncan disappear through the back door. That was not interesting. What interested her, what confused and worried her, was seeing Lady St. Vincent follow him inside a moment later. More interesting still, they were yet to return.

To keep the confusion coming, because why not at this stage, her own sister was then quick to follow Lady St. Vincent just a few seconds later.

They were still inside the manor. All three of them. And the longer that Isabella watched and waited, the more her mind spun and turned and drifted toward thoughts of what it might mean... and why she was suddenly beginning to feel sick.

"As I was saying," her mother continued. "You and His Grace seem rather happy. More than happy, in fact. And to think, you were against this marriage." She chuckled. "As I have always said, a mother knows best."

What are they doing in there?

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:36 am*

Duncan and Lady St. Vincent being alone like that was worrying enough. She knew a little of their past, but not enough to come to any resolute conclusions. Perhaps the woman was following him? Perhaps Duncan was dissuading her? Or perhaps... Isabella's stomach knotted when she considered the third option.

No... Duncan would not do that. Not to me. Not here, in public, with so many people around.

That thoughts of her husband touching another made her feel so physically ill was telling and spoke loudly to how Isabella was beginning to feel about her marriage. Not that she had time to ponder on this, as her sister chasing after them brought with it a whole host of new problems.

Louisa was distrusting of Duncan. She must have seen them leave together and decided to follow – to catch them in the act. Only, Isabella knew her sister wouldn't find what she was looking for. And even if there was nothing to catch, Louisa was so certain of Duncan's character that she would likely assume and then accuse and then... nothing good.

“Sorry, mother.” Isabella stepped around her mother. “I need to... I will be back.”

“Isabella!”

Isabella did not bother appeasing her mother's shrill cry. She hurried across the garden, through the crowd, and toward the manor.

It was just as she was reaching the house, however, that she heard a shrill cry rip from



inside. A cry of such anguish and suffering that it tore across the entire party and had all heads turning suddenly to see what the cause of such misery could be.

“Louisa!” Isabella cried out and rushed for the house, through the doors, and down the hallway.

She heard the commotion immediately. Screaming. Shouting. Yelling! Impossible to make out what any of it meant or who was the cause of the clamor, but that did not matter for she saw it with her own eyes soon enough.

Not that she understood what she was seeing.

Isabella came upon a scene that had her gasping in shock, as if she had stumbled into a nightmare and was failing to wake up. There was blood. There were bodies. There was confusion.

The first thing she saw was Duncan. He had his arms wrapped around Lady St. Vincent’s waist, lifting her into the air and roaring as she thrashed and kicked and shrieked for all her life was worth. There was blood on the woman, some on Duncan too, and Isabella’s mouth dropped open.

Then her eyes fell to the floor, and she saw the cause of the blood.

“Louisa!” Isabella cried out and dropped to her knees where her sister lay prone and shaking. “Louisa! What happened!” She snapped her head up and snarled at Duncan and Lady St. Vincent. “What did you do!”

There was blood everywhere. Louisa lay in a ball, holding her face, weeping as blood seeped through her fingers and pooled on the floor. A bloodied knife lay beside her, which Isabella kicked away as she tried to embrace and comfort her sister, not certain what she could do.

“Louisa! What happened? Are you – speak to me! Please!”

“Isabella!” Duncan cried out. “I am sorry!”

“No!” Juliet shrieked. “No! She doesn’t love you like I do! She does not!”

Louisa’s body trembled but she did not speak. Gently, Isabella tried to pull her hands back... “Please,” she said. “Show me what...” She gasped at what she saw.

The knife had slashed down the side of Louisa’s face, from the top of her right eye all the way down to her chin. A hideous gash which poured blood and looked so painful that Isabella could feel it as if it had happened to her own face.

“Oh no!”

“Isabella!” Duncan dropped the countess and pushed her away as he rushed for Isabella. “I can explain!”

“What happened!” Isabella cried out.

She could not believe that this was Duncan. That was madness! The reason for Isabella’s sudden verve of anger had everything to do with how she felt about herself... because this right here, she knew, was her fault.

“What on earth – Louisa!” Isabella’s mother shouted. “What has happened! What have you done!”

“Your Grace, what have you done!” another party guest accused.

“He attacked her!”

“He stabbed her!”

“Someone! Stop him! Take the knife!”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:37 am*

It was a calamity. Pure chaos in the tiny kitchen. The dozen or so party guests who had swept inside at the sound of the commotion fell upon the scene with a sense of anarchy. Some of the men tried to shield Louisa from Duncan. Some of the women tried to cover Louisa and pull her back. A few more rushed for Lady St. Vincent, assuming that she too was a victim of Duncan's violence. And as for Isabella? She looked upon her husband for an answer.

Their eyes met across the kitchen. There was a sadness in them that made her gasp. That made her ache, as if he too knew that this was her fault.

Before she had a chance to speak, her mother was at her. "Isabella..." Her mother had her arm around her. "Quickly, dear."

"But what of --"

"We have her." Her mother indicated past the kitchen where a few of the women were helping to shield and protect Louisa. "Please, you must..."

She spared a final glance for her husband. Through the bodies that were blocking him, he did not fight, he did not argue, he did not try and reach her. The defeat in his eyes was ever-present, which in Isabella's mind was all the proof she needed that whatever had happened here was indeed her fault.

The marriage she had never wanted, the one that she had begun to accept, even covet, looked to finally be over. And the most surprising part of all was how much that notion crushed her.

## Chapter Thirty-One

It had been two days since Duncan had heard from Isabella. But that didn't surprise him. In fact, he preferred it that way. Even more to that point, if he had his way, he might never see her again.

He sat at the desk in his study, a blank piece of parchment before him, quill in hand as he tried to will himself to write a letter that he knew would do no good in postponing, for nothing was going to change. But that did not make the words come any easier, nor did it make them any less painful to accept.

How did it come to this? Where did I go wrong? What could I have done differently?

Those were the questions that had danced through Duncan's head ever since the Stoneside garden party, the last time he had seen or spoken with his wife.

The answers to his questions were obvious, but he had spent the past two days denying them, until this morning when he knew that he could deny them no longer.

This was all Duncan's fault. He, a violent and angry and dangerous man, had gotten involved with a woman who he shouldn't have, and as was entirely predictable, she had ended up getting hurt.

It was a miracle that Isabella herself wasn't physically harmed, but that was through sheer luck. Thoughts of what might have happened if Juliet had gotten to Isabella, and Duncan shuddered.

Isabella deserved better than him.

If he could go back in time, he would have forgone his honor and cancelled this marriage before it had a chance to destroy lives, as it had.

The best thing he could do now, the right thing to do, was to separate himself entirely from Isabella, this town, the town, and pray that no more harm was caused to those whom he loved.

He chuckled bitterly at that.

The irony. It is just as I admit my true feeling that I am forced to sever ties, doomed to live a life alone. Which I had once wanted, before discovering there was something even better...

He loved Isabella. Duncan now knew that. What else could it be? Unable to stop thinking about her. Refusing to move on. The pain and hurt that he felt from sunrise to sunset whenever he dared to picture what the rest of his life might be now that she would not be in it.

Only she had been able to control him.

Only she had been able to bring out a side in him that he had not known existed.

Only she had accepted him as he was, even if it was for a short time, and made him open to her in ways that he had never known himself capable of doing. He had loved her and, as was typical with Duncan, he had ruined it.

So he sat himself down to write her a letter. The last time he planned on communicating with her. Ever.

As to its contents? Yet to be written but an apology would be a start. Apologizing for forcing this on her. For tricking her into believing that he had changed. And for what had happened to her sister, which Duncan bore full responsibility for.

The apology would be the easy bit. What came next...

Isabella had never wanted this marriage and where he could not divorce her, he would give her the next best thing. Duncan planned on leaving England for good, travelling to places unknown so that Isabella would never have to worry that she might hear his name spoken again. He did not even care what people said of him. The truth would likely come out soon, that it was not his fault per se, and people would scramble to believe it because they would not be able to comprehend that he could do such a thing.

But this was his fault. He did do this. Maybe not how people thought he had, but the point remained the same.

Isabella would be free of him, finally. And where Duncan did not expect her to ever forgive him for what he did, he hoped that this last act might at least stop her from hating him.

Even if I deserve every bit of it.

With a bereaved sigh, he dipped his quill in the ink and began to write.

My dearest Isabella...

Isabella stayed by Louisa's bed for two days straight. She hardly slept. She barely ate. She refused to so much as move until her sister woke up so that she could see Isabella sitting there – so that Isabella could apologize and beg for forgiveness before any other words were spoken.

Even two days later and she still could not believe what had happened.

The truth had since come out. Whether it be through Juliet's crazed bemoaning of events, or her sister's retelling of what happened before passing out from blood loss. A calamity of events that had seen her shut herself away from Duncan because in this, Isabella knew herself to be the real villain.

Isabella had done this. That was what she was forced to comprehend. She had played with fire and her sister was the one who was burned. If only she had listened to her sister. If only she hadn't tried to play games. Then none of this might have happened.

Isabella forced herself to look at that scar, shuddering to her very core. A bandage covered it at the moment, but she had seen it. Oh, how she had. It was a jagged, hideous thing, carving its way down the right side of her face so that Louisa would never be truly beautiful again. A punishment, it felt like, one which her sister had taken but which should have been for Isabella.



Shame flooded Isabella as much as anything. And she could not imagine what Duncan thought of her. Did he think she had sent her sister there to spy on him? Did he think that she did not trust him? She could not blame him with the way she had acted of late.

Ultimately it came down to the very real fact that Duncan and Isabella's relationship... it had always been tenuous at best. Violent and chaotic. Fine when it was just the two of them, but now her sister was forced to pay the price and for that Isabella would never forgive herself.

"Isabella..." The voice spoke softly from the bed.

"Louisa!" Isabella started with shock. "You're awake!"

"Very observant."

She threw herself at her sister, careful not to get too close to her face. "You're awake! You're awake – I am so glad! You have no idea how much I --" She caught her tongue, forcing the sanctimony down, because that was not what she had stayed by her sister's bed for two whole days to do.

A deep breath and Isabella pushed herself back and sat back down. Expression pained, she met her sister's eyes, tears brimming in them.

"I am so sorry," Isabella began. "You have no idea how much I am. For all of this... everything. It is my fault, Louisa. And where you may not want to forgive me – I will not blame you. You need to know how truly and completely sorry I am."

Louisa frowned. "Sorry? Whatever for?"

Isabella frowned. "Louisa... your face. You do remember what happened --"

“Of course I do,” Louisa cut her off. “I was there, remember.”

“Then you know why I am sorry. And you should know too that from this day forward I will do everything that I can to make it up to you. You have my word.”

Still, Louisa frowned. “Isabella... why on earth are you apologizing? This had nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it did,” Isabella said. “I might not have held the knife but... but I also did not listen! You warned me. You warned me and I ignored you because I am a fool. And now you are hurt, and it is all because of me.”

Her sister frowned. “You? But Lady St. Vincent was the one who –”

“Yes, she might have been the one to hold the knife, but I might as well have put it in her hand,” Isabella sighed. “You warned me. Duncan and I... we are not good for one another. And this right here is proof of it.”

Louisa sighed and shook her head. “Trust you to make this all about you.”

“But it is about –”

“Me,” Louisa cut her off. “Not you. Nor is it about your husband. Speaking of, where is he...” She looked about as if expecting Duncan to be standing in the room.

“I do not know,” Isabella said, feeling a stabbing in her chest. “But it is for the best.”

“And why is that?”

“Have you not been listening? You were nearly killed, Louisa. Killed because of my stupid games. You were right from the beginning. Duncan and I cannot work. We are

poison and we forced you to have a taste! I have thought about it long and hard and... and..." Her chest cracked. "It is for the best if he and I do not see one another again."

“Surely, you are joking,” Louisa said.

Isabella pushed her lips together. “What? No, of course I am not. Why would I be?”

“Because I was wrong about him. Clearly. And you, for that matter.”

“But... but... but...” Isabella looked at her sister as if she had lost her mind, which she very well may have. As if that scar ran so deep that it touched her brain.

“Isabella...” Louisa shook her head. “When we last spoke, I said some not very nice things about your husband.”

“You spoke the truth!”

“I thought I did,” she agreed. “So, when I saw he and Lady St. Vincent sneaking into the manor alone, I thought to catch them in the act.”

“And the fact that you felt the need to do this is my –”

“Will you just listen!” Louisa snapped. “Honestly, you are being rather self-righteous. One would think that you were the one who was stabbed.”

“I am just saying –”

“All the wrong things,” Louisa sighed. She reached out and took Isabella’s hand, squeezing it as she met her eyes. “Lady St. Vincent...” She scoffed. “She was confessing her love for your husband. What was more, she believed that if he refused

to admit that he loved you, then she might have a chance. It was rather strange..." She chuckled. "Even more so that when he refused to, she completely lost her mind."

"Yes, I know all of this," Isabella said.

"And yet you refuse to listen." She looked pointedly at Isabella. "He might not have said it in so many words, but it was clear to me that your husband loves you. Far more than I thought he did – hence, my being wrong. Perhaps your relationship is a little odd. Perhaps the two of you are a tad antagonistic compared to most. But if that is what works, then so be it. Who am I to judge?"

"I –" Isabella opened her mouth to argue the point but no words came out.

Duncan loves me? Surely, Louisa misunderstood?

"Are you certain... what makes you think that?" she asked.

"Think what?"

"That he loves me." Her pulse began to race.

Louisa sighed. "Because I could see it, Isabella. I could hear it in his words. I admit, I am not expert in love, but I like to think that I can tell when a man is in love with someone – his wife, especially. And if you had heard the way that he dismissed Lady St. Vincent, well..." She shrugged. "What else could it be?"

The room seemed to turn around Isabella.

It should not have been such a strange thing to hear that one's own husband loved them but, when considering the strangeness of Isabella and Duncan's marriage, it was almost unbelievable.

They had never spoken about love before. They had never even spoken about their feelings. With how tumultuous their relationship was, it was enough that they had found a rhythm which allowed them to enjoy one another's company intimately and completely without muddying the waters with talk of love.

She had not even been certain that Duncan was capable of love. She certainly didn't think that she was. For all her life, love was the last thing that she had ever wanted, thinking it a waste of time and a distraction. Why tie oneself down with longings of love when there was a world to explore and endless study to get lost in?

But now that the words had been said, that she knew them to be true, she could not help but wonder... did she love Duncan?

I do not even know what love is. How can I be expected to answer such a question?!

She supposed that she did miss him, now that she thought about it. The sex, she clearly missed, for that was the backbone of their entire relationship. But beyond the sex... those intimate moments they spent together when they were not tearing at the other's bodies like starved animals...

They fought often. They argued all the time. They pushed one another. They teased and tested and annoyed. It should have been a recipe for disaster, a calamity of a relationship that never had a chance of working. Yet the more that Isabella thought about it, the more she realized that was exactly what she loved about their marriage.

Forever against the concept of falling in love, perhaps what Isabella had feared was falling in love with the wrong person? Someone who bored her. Someone who tried to change her. Someone who did not like her for who she was but for who they wanted her to be.

That was not Duncan.

And so it was, as her sister eyed her knowingly, and as Isabella searched her feelings like she never had before, she came to realize an answer so obvious that it was almost embarrassing it has taken her this long to admit.

Isabella loved Duncan. And more than that, he loved her too.

“I was wrong about him,” Louisa continued, smirking slightly now for she could surely see the look in Isabella’s eyes. “And I was wrong about you too.”

“I... I... I...” Isabella stomach began to turn with regret. And fear. For two days she had avoided her husband for reasons that were not his fault, and she could not imagine what he must be thinking.

“Should be leaving,” Louisa picked up for her. “And quickly. You and your husband have a lot to talk about and you’re not going to do it sitting around here. Now...” She nodded her head toward the door. “Go and tell him how you feel. And for once, Isabella, be nice. I can’t help but think that he’s earned it.”

### Chapter Thirty-Two

Duncan was busy doing a final walk through the manor when he heard it. The front doors flying open. His name being called. A sense of hope wrapping itself around his heart like a hand; there to either squeeze the life from him or to restart what had been close to death.

He had been so close to leaving too.

The carriage was already packed with most of his things – those that he would need to begin his trip. He had also left detailed instructions with the staff on how they were to proceed once he was gone; what to pack, what to leave as is, and most importantly to do as Isabella instructed them for this was her home now.



The letter he had written to her sat on the table in his office, signed and sealed, there for her to find whenever she chose to return.

All in all, it was done and finished. That just left this final walk through the house, a few moments of regret taken, and then Duncan would leave and never look back...

“Duncan!” the voice cried from downstairs. “Duncan! Are you here!”

That was when the hope seized him. He recognized the voice well enough, for he would know it in his dreams. But the tenor of it... the tone... she called his name, but he could not tell if it was in anger or joy.

“Duncan! Duncan, are you here!”

Duncan very nearly snuck away. Fear seized him and he wondered if he might be better leaving through the back and then taking the carriage before she saw him. Anything to avoid a confrontation that he did not think his heart could handle.

But he steeled himself and forced his feet to walk down the hallway. She called him still from the foyer, so Duncan was careful to stay back and then sneak toward the banister so that he might be able to see Isabella before she saw him.

She stood in the middle of the foyer, hands clutched to her chest as she spun about and called his name. Now that he was nearer, there was no mistaking the tone in her voice. And if not that, the look he could see on her face and in her eyes as she searched were of such joyous beauty that Duncan very nearly threw himself over the staircase to reach her sooner.

But he did no such thing.

In fact, he stayed watching her a moment longer. The sun was coming through the

doorway, shining its brilliance behind her. This made her glow, angelic and radiant, like a dream turned reality. Duncan had always been physically attracted to Isabella, that was not the question. But as he watched her, he realized that he had never admitted to himself just how beautiful she was.

“Duncan!” Isabella looked up and saw him watching her. “What are you doing up there?”

“Watching you,” he admitted. “What... what are you doing down there?”

“Being watched,” she shot back with a smirk. “And looking for you.”

“You’ve found me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But are you going to come to me? Or do I need to come to you?”

Duncan almost laughed to hear the humor in her voice. Impossible to fathom, as he was certain she would be angry with him. Unless this was a trick of some kind? A final chance for her to anger him and ruin him that little bit further because it was the least that he deserved.

For that reason, he stayed where he was.

“Isabella...” His hands gripped the banister as he looked down at her. “What happened with your sister --”

“Was my fault,” Isabella cut him off.

“What? No! It was --”

“Do not say it was you,” she warned him. “You saved her. If you were not there...”

“It should have never gotten that far to begin with.” All of this was written in the letter, and he would have preferred that she read it there. But she was here now, and she wanted answers. Shedeservedanswers. “I put your sister’s life in danger, Isabella. Me! I was the one who --”

“Do you love me?” she cut him off.

Duncan balked. “Wh -- what?”

Isabella walked to the steps and took the first one. “Do you love me?”

“Isabella...” He grimaced. “That is not... regardless of how I feel, what happened was my fault. Lady St. Vincent was there because of me. She was there because I --”

“Do you love me?” she said again, trepidation in her voice. “Answer the question, because it is the only one that I care about.” Another step taken. “I must know. I do not care how guilty you feel. I do not care if you think this is your fault. All I care about...” Another step, halfway up the staircase now. “Is if you love me or not.”

Duncan began to sweat. Isabella was halfway toward him, and he was caught between going to her and turning to flee. Not because he was scared of her, but because he was scared of what might happen when he told her the truth. If he confessed and she laughed in his face...

“And if I do?” he said carefully.

“Do you?” She took another step, and then another.

“What... what would you think if I did?”

“That depends on whether you do or not.” Another step, and then two more.

“I am dangerous, Isabella. That is all which matters.”

“Not as dangerous as I am.”

He shook his head. “No, I am the one who –”

“Saved my sister.”

“Put her in danger.”

“Because of me. She was only there because of a fight that she and I had. To prove me wrong, even if there was nothing to prove. Now...” She took the final step, onto the landing, less than five feet from where Duncan was standing. “Tell me the truth, do you love me?” She raised both eyebrows and stared at him, unblinking, commanding, filled with a determined force that only someone like Isabella could ever truly hold.

Again, Duncan almost laughed.

This right here was so them. Even in confessions of love, they still could not help but argue. Two heads butting and he wondered what might happen if he was to refuse her answer further. How far he could push it.

His heart began to race, and his excitement began to build because he could see in her eyes the answer which she wanted. One which, he was beginning to see, was returned fully.

“And what if I did?” he shot back with a smile and a raised eyebrow of his own.

“Then I would have a right to know.”

“As I would have a right to know if you felt the same?”

She hesitated and he saw the smile flash behind her eyes; enough that it gave him hope because now he understood the true reason that she was here.

“Maybe,” she said, smirking slightly. “But that all depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not you love me.” She raised both eyebrows again, a smile crept up her face, and her body shook. Caught between looking like she wanted to slap him or kiss him, Duncan could not guess which it might be. “Now, stop being so annoying and just tell me!”

Again, he wanted to bait her.

Again, he wanted to tease her.

Again, he wanted to fall back into their old games.

But all that did was confirm how silly this all was. They both knew the answer. They both accepted what it meant. But neither was willing to say it first; the two most stubborn people in the whole world and they had reached an impasse because of it.

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Knowing that this would be just one of many battles that Duncan was sure to lose from this day forward, he swallowed his pride, stepped forward, took Isabella by the hands and looked deeply into her eyes before speaking.

“Isabella...” He squeezed her hands; they were sweaty, trembling in his grip. “You are the most frustrating, stubborn, fury-inducing person who I have ever met.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I should hate you,” he continued, smile growing. “I should wish to never see you again. I should... I should hate the way you anger me, infuriate me, send me crazy with how you bicker and argue seemingly for the sake of upsetting me.”

“And yet...” She licked her lips.

“And yet, you don’t. And the only reason that I can think is because...” Still holding her hands, he raised them to his chest. “It is because I love you, Isabella. I have loved you for longer than I care to admit. Longer than any reasonable person should take to realize it. Longer than...” He shook his head. “Longer than any sane man should take to confess how much they love you.”

“Oh...” Isabella grimaced, and she gently pulled her hands away.

Duncan’s stomach dropped. “Oh...?”

“This is a touch awkward but...” She sucked through her teeth. “And that was all very lovely to hear. Thank you.”

“You are welcome?”

“But I was thinking that perhaps we should just be friends?”

Duncan’s mouth ran dry. His stomach, having dropped already, was burrowing beneath the earth. The hand that wrapped around his heart was squeezing as if trying to kill him. While the room turned because his reality was shattering in ways that he did not think possible but now found himself in the middle of --

And then he saw the look in her eyes.

It was devilish. Wicked. Pure evil, in how much she was enjoying the misery flooding Duncan’s soul. That look in her eyes was joined by a most sinister smirk and that was when Duncan knew.

“You think you are funny?” he said dryly.

“I am hilarious.”

“You know what, I have just changed my mind. I take it all back.”

“It’s too late for that now!” she cried.

“It’s never too late. Now, if you do not mind...” He shooed her away and pretended to turn around.

She grabbed him by the arm, and he looked down at her hand. He curled his lip and growled. “I suggest that you let me go immediately.”

“And if I refuse?”



“You would not be wise to.”

“When have I ever done anything that might be considered wise?” The grip tightened.

“From the moment that I met you?” He turned into her, stepped forward, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her into him. “Not once.”

“Like, for example, falling in love with you?” she said as her tone softened and she melted into him, her own hands finding their way around his waist.

“The most foolish thing you have ever done,” Duncan grinned.

“Strange then that I do not regret it.”

Duncan laughed. “Well... let us see if I can change your mind.”

He was finished flirting. He was finished playing games. He had Isabella in his grip. Complete and utter control, so that if he wanted, he could do with her whatever he liked.

It almost felt as if the opposite was true. As if she was the one who had him in her power, that she had her talons sunk deep into his skin, and if she so wished it she could make him do just about anything that she wished for.

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I suppose that's love for you, isn't it?

Duncan leaned forward and kissed Isabella fully on the lips, and she kissed him right back. The sparks that flew between them in that moment was the final proof that they needed: this was love. A love that was as dominating as it was powerful as it was all consuming.

The beast inside of Duncan roared, happy to be tamed this one time because if there was anybody in this world whom Duncan was happy to be under their thrall, it was Isabella.

### Epilogue

Isabella was more nervous than she expected herself to be.

I should feel thrilled! Excited! Sprinting ahead because I cannot wait to start! But if Duncan asked me right now if I wished to go home, I might just take him up on that...

It made no sense. She had been looking forward to this moment her entire life. Never thinking it would come, dreaming of it, knowing that if it ever did that she would take the opportunity by both hands because it was what she was born to do.

Or so she had thought.

"How are you feeling?" Duncan asked her.

"Fine!" she shouted. "I mean..." She forced a smile and took a deep breath. "I feel

fine, thank you.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Why would I not be?”

Duncan laughed. “Because your hands are sweating, and I can feel you shaking.” He was holding her right hand and he gave it a squeeze. “There is nothing wrong with being nervous.’

“I’m not nervous.”

“Or scared.”

“I’m not scared!”

Duncan smiled knowingly to himself. “I am so glad to hear that because I was hoping that I might be able to leave you early. I have a few errands to run and...” He pretended to pull his hand free and turn around as if to leave her.

“What! No!” She grabbed him with her other hand. “You can’t leave me! Please!”

“I was only joking, Isabella.” Duncan turned back to face her, still holding her hand as his other reached up and rested on the side of her face. “Don’t worry, I am not going anywhere.”

“You promise?”

“I mean, I do not think they will allow for me to join you inside. But I told you I would walk you to the front door and I meant it.”

She bit into her lip and looked ahead, able to see the door. It should have elicited a thrill inside of her. Again, she should have let go of Duncan's hand and ran for it – eager to get inside. But the door was large and intimidating and seemed to speak to her directly as if to warn her away.

“I... I... I do not think that I can do this,” she said.

“Isabella...”

“I am sorry!” She looked at him pleadingly, praying that he would not argue with her, that he would accept her words and give in. “And I know how hard it was for you to organize this – the favors you called in. But... but... but...” She stammered as her tongue grew thick and heavy, her entire body seeming to rebel against her.

This wasn't how today was supposed to be.

Even last night, Isabella had lain awake as she pictured this moment right now, albeit with less fear and far more eagerness than what she was currently feeling. It was not until she broke her fast and she and Duncan left that the fear began to creep up inside of her, as she began to wonder if this was all a horrible mistake, and she was hopeless out of her depth.

In the distance, the sound of a bell ringing echoed across the grounds. It had the people around them hurrying forward, some even running, because that bell signaled a beginning to the day.

To Isabella, it was the sound of her own doom.

“You really wish to go home?” Duncan asked.

“Yes!”

“And it is what you want? You are not going to regret it the moment we leave?”

“I want to go. Now!” She looked back in the direction of their carriage.

Duncan considered. He looked down at her, studying her, hopefully seeing the truth in her eyes. Knowing that it was better to agree with her than to fight about it. She needed him to be on her side here.

“Alright,” Duncan said with a smile, then he kissed the back of her hand. “If you insist...” Slowly, still holding her hand, he turned and started leading her away.

Isabella breathed a sigh of relief, and she felt better immediately.

This is for the best. I am in over my head, and I was a fool to think that I could do this. Even if it was my life’s dream. Even if it was everything I ever wanted. Even if...

Unable to stop herself from doing so, Isabella cast a glance back in the direction they had been heading. There it stood, the eastern wing of St. George’s University, London. Through the doors was located an auditorium which any second now would be host to an introductory course on the human anatomy.

Duncan had surprised her last week with the news. As he told it, he had reached out to a professor friend of his who taught there and asked a favor of him. That favor being, would Isabella be able to take some classes this summer. A seemingly simply

request, even if it was anything but.

To look around, it was easy to see why Isabella was so nervous. Although there were plenty of woman hurrying across the campus, they were with men, and it was those men who were attending the lectures and seminars, not the women. Study was man's business and few women, if any, were allowed to partake in such a prestigious vocation.

Yet Duncan had pulled those strings. He had applied pressure. He had used his title and name to force the heads of the university to accept Isabella as a student. At great personal cost to him also, not that he cared.

All he cared about was that finally, Isabella was living her dream. And here she was, about to spit in his face by turning it down.

She came to a stop. Still looking back at the eastern wing, she was caught in two worlds. On the one hand there was the fear and it would be so easy to give in to that fear and walk away. But on the other hand...

"Having second thoughts?" Duncan asked.

"What? No!"

"Can I let you in on a secret," Duncan said, smiling at her as he turned and took her by both hands. "I know that you are scared."

"I am not scared!"

"And that is normal. But look around..." He indicated to those who hurried past, many of whom were paying them curious glances. "You might be scared of them and what they think but would you believe that they are even more terrified of you."

She blew through her lips. “Doubtful.”

“Truly, they are. They see you here, with your books, attending classes that no lady should attend, and they can’t help but wonder. Who is she? Why is she here? And how fiercely brave she must be for doing what so few have dared to do. You are a lion among cubs, and they know it.”

She blushed furiously. “That is... ridiculous.”

“You are also the bravest and most stubborn person I know,” he continued. “So brave that the idea of walking into that auditorium as the only woman there excites you. And so stubborn that even if you were terrified --”

“Which I am not!”

“Which you are not,” he agreed. “But even if you were, it wouldn’t make a difference. In fact...” He grinned. “I can’t help but feel that all this --” He indicated to the two of them about to walk back to the carriage. “-- is just a ruse to make me think you changed your mind. Right?”

Isabella could have kissed him. She could have done a lot more than that!

She was scared, that was no lie. And yes, the idea of walking into that auditorium, surrounded by men judging her and snickering behind her back had her legs shaking. But that was always going to be the case. From the first day that she’d dreamed of doing this, she had known it would be her against the world, and she had known that if she wanted this as much as she did, it would not be easy, that she would have to fight for it, that she would have to be brave.

All she needed was a reminder.

She beamed, leaned up and kissed Duncan on the lips. “Thank you.”

“For what? I didn’t do anything.”

She felt tears welling in her eyes. “You’ll be here in an hour?”



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“I’ll be right here,” he said. “I promise.”

“Good.” She let go of his hands and stood up straight. Then she made sure her dress was straight, and her hair wasn’t a mess. “How do I look?”

“Fiercely intelligent.”

She rolled her eyes. “Just you wait and see.”

Her stomach still turning, her legs still shaking, Isabella turned around and started across the park and toward the eastern wing of St. George’s University. She had been waiting her entire life for this and a little bit of last-minute resistance wasn’t going to change that.

Honestly,if I can tame Duncan the way I have, then I am capable of anything.Now it was time that she proved it.

The End?