



# The Duke and the Hellion Bride

**Author:** *Maybel Bardot*

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

**Description:** "You can fight me all you like, but we both know how this ends—with you beneath me, gasping my name."

A ruthless businessman, Duke Magnus must face his greatest challenge yet—raise his nieces. Only, the best way to do that is to find a bride.

In a last-ditch effort to avoid an unwanted suitor, Diana ends up in the arms of the most dangerous duke. And he makes her an offer she cannot resist...a marriage of convenience.

Yet Diana is not the obedient wife he hoped for. For she will not submit to Magnus. Now, he must show this alluring minx exactly who she belongs to...

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 87

# Page 1

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## ChapterOne

“Here he comes,” Diana’s mother, the Dowager Viscountess of Langham said eagerly. “Diana, straighten up, will you? And smile – but not too much. You do not want to look simple. Nor do you want to look too eager. Yet, you do not want to appear standoffish either. Make sure you ask plenty of questions, albeit not too many. And please, whatever it is that you do, do not --”

“Mother,” Diana sighed. “Will you please calm yourself. I worry that you might have a stroke.”

Beside the two, Diana’s cousin, Evelyn, burst into a fit of giggles.

“Do not start!” her mother snapped at Evelyn, only to then turn her rancor on Diana. “That tongue...” She shook her head. “See that you mind it. The marquess is a proud man, and he will not appreciate being made fun of.”

“Even if he deserves it?” Diana chided her mother.

Again, Evelyn began to giggle.

At twenty and three, Evelyn was a year older than Diana, but the two were close, almost sisters. Albeit, their personalities were not as sisters were, because where Evelyn was somewhat of a spinster with no desire to meet a man or any indication that she ever would, Diana was at least accepting to the idea.

Her mother widened her eyes at her in warning. “Do not test me, Diana. Not today.”

“It was a jest, mother. That is all.”

“Save the jokes for your cousin.”

“What did I do!” Evelyn cried.

“This is serious business,” her mother continued. “And it should be treated as such.”

“I am aware,” Diana said, and then muttered under her breath, “You have made that perfectly clear.” To that, Evelyn smirked.

“You have no idea the strings that I had to pull so the marquess would even look in your direction. All that will be for nought if you do not behave yourself. The time I put in. The effort!”

“Oh well, I would hate to have wasted your time.”

Never mind my own time. Never mind how much of that has been wasted on this nonstop parade of suitors and hopefuls who, were the circumstances even slightly different, I would not be expected to throw a bucket of water on them were they on fire. Let alone marry.

Diana sighed at the thought. Such was the way of things, she supposed. Worse that there was little she could do about it.

It was a garden party that Diana had been dragged to today. Not that she was aware of who it was exactly that was hosting the garden party. Although now that Diana thought of it, she wasn’t entirely certain that she had been told. Really, it did not matter. What mattered was the reason that her mother had insisted that she come.

That reason was quickly making his way toward where Diana and her mother and

cousin loitered expectantly by the fountain at the garden's center. He was tall and strapping in stature. Blonde of hair, confident of stride, his face was slightly pinched, but he wore it proudly, aware that it mattered little how he looked because who he was, was all people cared for.

Lord Herrod was a man whom Diana had heard a lot about these past twenty-four hours, the most recent suitor whom her mother very much expected to be the last. For years now, Diana had suffered under the weight of expectation, forced to meet and court what felt like a dozen men of similar ilk in her mother's never-ending quest to finally see her wed.

It was getting to the point where threats were starting to be levelled her way. Those being, if you don't find a man soon, desperate measures would be taken. Whatever that might mean.

"Lord Herrod," her mother purred as the marquess reached them. "Might I say, it is an honor to see you again."

"The honor is mine," the marquess responded in kind. He took her mother's hand and gave the back of it a wet kiss. "Lady Langham, as the day is long you are all the more beautiful for it."

"Oh, my," her mother giggled.

"Ah, and this must be your daughter whom I have heard the world of." He turned his attention on Diana. "Your mother has told me of you, Miss Goldsmith. I only wish now that she had warned me." He looked at her expectantly.

"Warned you of what?" Diana asked.

"To take an extra breath, of course," he chuckled. "Because I find myself losing my

first, such is your own beauty.” He flashed a wickedly handsome smile and reached for Diana’s hand. Diana had to force herself not to groan, holding her hand out for the marquess to take and kiss... very wetly.

“You are too kind,” she said.

“And lucky to boot,” he said, releasing her hand, to which Diana had to force herself not to wipe it on her dress. “It is my hope that you might do me the honor of a dance, Miss Goldsmith? Thus, making me the happiest man in all of England.”

## Page 2

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Another suppressed groan on Diana's part.

They were all the same. The feigned compliments. The excessive flirtations. That sense that what was said was merely performative, because this little rendezvous had been set up in advance and it would not be Diana's choice if the marquess chose her as his mate.

Diana was not opposed to marriage. She, like most women of the ton, spent their young lives thinking to the future and what that might look like. She, like most, wanted to meet a man whom she could fall in love with, grow old with, raise a family with and be happy. Why ever not?

The problem was her mother. With five daughters to rear, she had done well to see Diana's older sisters married off to dukes – a true accomplishment which she spoke of often. And now with Diana as the last to worry about, she had made it her mission to ensure the same. Maybe not a duke, but a man of standing, respectability, one whom she could brag about to anyone unlucky enough to ask.

It was a level of expectation that did not sit well with Diana. She wanted to please her mother. She really did. But she did not want to do it in lieu of her own happiness.

And so it was that she had no choice in her response to his question.

"A dance? Nothing would please me more," Diana said to the marquess. "Mother, if you do not mind?"

"Please, please. You cousin and I need a refreshment. Is that not right, Evelyn?"

“What?” Evelyn hadn’t been paying attention. Her mind tended to wander, and she was gazing across the garden, likely at a gentleman who had caught her eye. “Oh!” her eyes went wide when she saw everyone looking at her. “Yes... I think?”

“Come, girl,” Diana’s mother sighed and took her hand. “Let us leave them be.”

With little choice in the matter, Diana allowed the marquess to lead them across the garden where a small space set aside for dancing had opened. There were eight couples currently in the throes, and with their addition it made nine.

“I find the waltz a tantalizing dance, don’t you?” The marquess purred as he pulled Diana into his body; his hand found her waist... a little lower than what was expected. “Ordinarily, I do not partake. Leave it to the French,” he chortled, his grip tightening. “But just this one time.”

What else could Diana do but allow herself to be led? And with so many eyes now on her and the marquess, she had little choice but to act as if she was enjoying herself. Which she most certainly was not.

Before meeting with the marquess, Diana had promised herself to be open minded. With her mother’s incessant hounding, she had wanted to be swept off her feet. Sadly, a few moments of conversation and a few more moments of dancing and she knew without a shadow of the doubt that the marquess was not for her.

A shame the same could not be said of the marquess.

“You are quite the dancer,” he complimented her as they moved across the floor. His hand was held far too tightly. His body pressed too closely. And as he spoke, he leaned in as if to whisper into her ear. “My oh my, you are trouble.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Come now,” he chortled. “Do not play games with me. I wish to be blunt with you, if I may?”

She said nothing, knowing it would make no difference.

“When I saw you earlier, I was captured in ways I knew not possible. I was told that you were a beauty, but I knew not how much...” He pulled away a little, enough to get a better look at her. Typically, his eyeline fell south toward her chest where it lingered inappropriately. “And now that I have seen you, I know that there is nothing in this world that will stop me.”

“St -- stop you?”

“From making you mine.”

“That is...” Diana felt her face pale. “Very forward of you.” She had no idea what else to say.

The smile that reached his eyes suggested he took her comment as a compliment. “I often am, when it comes to getting what I wish.”

The two continued to dance, the marquess eyeing Diana seductively the entire time. He seemed to think that she was as keenly interested in him as he was in her; the smile he wore was as sickening as it was confident. Through the crowd, Diana spied her mother watching them, and she could not have looked happier with herself.

It was all too much. Unfair. Typical, because of course this was bound to happen. A dozen men had been paraded before Diana in the past few years, none anything special, but none as forward and obvious and sleezy as the marquess.

When the dance finally came to an end, Diana was quick to speak. “I am afraid I need



to rest a moment.”

“Oh...”

“If you do not mind?” she said with a polite smile. She could see his expression harden and she added, “I will find you once I return. I promise.”

That did it. He smiled broadly, took her hand, and gave it a wet kiss. “I will wait like no man ever has.”

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She forced a smile, fluttered her eyelashes, and then hurried away before he could change his mind. Through the crowd, she made sure to go in the opposite direction of where her mother was standing in wait. Where she was going, she had no idea. So long as she could not be found.

Diana found such a spot a few moments later.

It was around the side of the great manor, technically not a part of the back garden, rather a pathway that connected the front drive to the back garden. It was a narrow maze of hedges, and she was happy to sit herself in a small alcove that they made while she pondered what she was going to do.

I cannot let him get his way. No matter what, I will not give in to the marquess.

Easier said than done. The marquess was clearly a man who got what he wanted. Worse, her mother was through being patient and if he insisted on courting her, even marrying her, she knew her mother would jump at the chance.

This meant that Diana was going to have to do something brash. Something that would turn the marquess off completely. A risk, she knew. But desperate times...

A chance presented itself a moment later.

As Diana sat hidden in that small alcove of hedges, she heard footsteps approaching. They were heavy, so they must have been male. In her mind, it was the marquess, coming to see where she had gotten herself off to.

This was her chance. Alone, so there would be no social embarrassment. If she was to... strongly turn him down, perhaps that would be the end of it? Not something that Diana wanted to do, but something she must do.

The footsteps came closer.

She was crouched down, but she got to her feet, bracing herself. An idea suddenly came to mind, a means by which she knew that she could turn him away while claiming that she was simply trying to defend herself – she was being followed, she was fighting for her life! It was not her fault, and she was simply acting accordingly.

Through the hedge she spied a thick stick, and she snatched at it, holding it above her head as if she meant to hit who came for her. Which she very much did.

Her breathing rose. Her heart began to race. Flashes through her mind of what her mother would say when she found out, pushed down because the footsteps were upon her. A shadow rounded the small alcove and without stopping to consider the consequences, she acted.

Diana swung the stick with all her might and --

A pair of strong hands caught her arm in a firm grip.

“What on earth are you doing?” spoke a voice she did not recognize, belonging to a man she had never seen before.

Diana gawped at the stranger. From his dark mane of hair to his dark green eyes to his square chin to his indomitable presence, she found herself completely in his thrall.

Her heart was still racing, but it was for a different reason than what had set it off earlier. It was... confusion? Excitement? Embarrassment because she could not

believe what she had just tried to do. And to a man such a this! Someone so gorgeous as he.

Who is this man?

## ChapterTwo

“Well?” the stranger asked again, still holding her by the arms with a firm grip; by the forearms, not so hard that it hurt, of course, simply hard enough that it was like being caught in a vice. “I confess, being physically assaulted by a woman appearing from the hedges was not what I had in mind when I decided to duck out from the party early. Is this my punishment for leaving without saying goodbye?”

“I...” Diana had no idea what to say. Mortified, was how she felt. “I am sorry.”

He frowned. “Is that all you have to say?”

“I did not mean it.”

“To attack me?”

“I was not attacking you!” She realized he was still holding her by the wrists, and she tried to pull them free, but he refused to yield. If anything, his grip only increased. “I was simply... caught by surprise.”

And still, she hung onto the stick with both her hands.

“And what are you doing out here exactly?” He looked past her, into the little alcove she had been hiding in. “Are you not a little old to be playing hide and seek? Although I admit, this is not a version of the game I am aware of.”

“I was not playing anything.”

“Were you lost?” He was smirking now, as if how uncomfortable he made her amused him. “Do you need directions back to the party? It is a straight shot down the path. Frankly, I am not certain how you came to be lost in the first place.”

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“I was not lost.”

“Then what were you doing? And why are you attacking me?”

“That is none of your business!” The embarrassment had passed, giving way to anger because she was certain now that whoever this man was, he was mocking her. Not only was that the height of rudeness, but it was arrogant because what could he possibly know of what she had been dealing with. “Now, if you do not mind...” She tried to pull her hands free.

“Do you promise you will not attack me again?”

“I told you...” She pulled her hands, and still he refused to let go. “I did not attack you!”

He did not respond that time. Rather, he looked at her with a sense of curiosity that made her cheeks flush red and her chest burn just as hot.

Now that the shock of the moment had passed, Diana was able to see that her initial assessment of the man was just. He was attractive, was her meaning. But not in the ways one might deem as ‘pretty’ or even presumptive, as the marquess thought of himself. No, there was a ruggedness to the man, a hardness to his features that told her he cared little for how he looked or what others thought of him. That he had lived ten lives or more, his eyes especially, an intelligence borne from lived experience.

The silence between them grew steadily. He was tall and he stood over her like a mountain bearing down on a small village. Ordinarily, a situation such as this might

have made Diana uncomfortable, for it was not right to be alone with a strange man. But her safety wasn't what concerned her.

What did concern her was what might be said if someone was to see them suddenly. So, with another mountainous effort, she yanked firmly on her arms to free herself, caught by surprise this time when the stranger let her go.

"Oh!" she cried out and fell backwards, arms flailing, body flying right into the wall of hedges behind her. "Urgh!" she then belched as the hedges consumed her, the stick falling from her hands.

"Careful now," the stranger said without humor, even if she felt he was mocking her. "You do not want to hurt yourself."

"You did that on purpose!" she accused him.

"Did what?"

"Made me fall!" She stood herself back up and brushed off her clothes; twigs and leaves stuck from them, and she shuddered to think how her hair must have looked.

"I believe gravity was the cause, madam. Surely, you are not suggesting that I am responsible for such a thing?"

She glared at him, quickly finding his perceived charm as nothing short of arrogant. "I think it is best if you leave."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She fixed him in a glare, no longer besotted with his good looks. She was far too annoyed for that. "I do not know who you are – and we can thank

God and all his creatures for that,” she said with a warning scowl. “But even you must know how inappropriate it is to be alone with a Lady, such as I am. If you are anything close to a gentleman, you will do the right thing and leave.” She raised an eyebrow at him, but he did not make to move. “Well?”

“Is that what you are? A Lady?”

“How dare you!”

He chuckled. “I jest, madam. I jest. And you are right...” He straightened himself up. “The truth is, I was simply walking past when you attacked me.”

“I did not --”

“And I think it will be best for both of us if I be on my way.”

“Good.”

He shook his head, smiling as if at a joke. “I wish I could say that the pleasure was all mine but --”

From down the path, Diana heard something. It was soft and were she not in such a heightened state she might have missed it entirely. But it was there, she had no doubt. Someone was calling her name. Someone was looking for her! No need to say who it was.

“Oh no!” Diana’s eyes shot open, and her heartrate spiked. She did not think. She did not consider. The marquess was looking for her and he was the last person she wished to see – even this extremely rude stranger was a step up, in her estimation. Dreading the idea of being caught by the man, having no other option, Diana did the only thing that made sense in the moment. “Quickly!” she said as she grabbed a hold of the



stranger by his shirt and yanked him into the alcove with her.

“Wowa!” he yelped as she pulled him.

She fell back against the row of hedges again, and still holding the stranger by the shirt, pulled him in with her.

His large body pressed against her own. His thick legs, trying to find their balance, spread and opened around her. A stick forced its way into her back, bringing her to a halt, but she hardly noticed it because the dark stranger was upon her like a cloak in winter.

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“What are you --”

She shot her hand up and covered his mouth. Again, without thinking. She held it there, widening her eyes at the stranger not to speak. She might have felt a tad more... undone by the position she had found herself in, was she not listening to the sound of the marquess calling for her.

“Miss Goldsmith!” he called as he walked down the path toward them. “Where have you gotten yourself off to!”

Still, she held her hand against the stranger’s mouth. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her skin. She could feel his breathing, the way his chest rose and pressed into her own bodice. And the heat that came from him made her body shudder in ways she did not understand, but that did not mean thoughts of it did not consume her.

Bodies pressed together as one, she could feel his heart beating in his chest... or was that her own? Their faces were so close too, eyes looking in one another’s, she wanted to look away but could not bring herself to do so. She wanted to push the man back, but she might have wept if it was forced. What is this feeling?

“Little bird!” the marquess called as he swept past the alcove, thankfully passing them by. “Come out, come out!”

The marquess’ voice began to soften as he strode down the path and then around the front of the manor. Still, she was careful not to move or even breathe, listening until she was certain they were alone. And then, only once they were, did the reality of the

situation dawn on her.

The stranger was all over her. One hand on her waist. The other on her shoulder. His face so close that their eyes were inches apart. And never mind the feel of his wet lips pressed against the inside of her hand. It sent a pulse through her arm, piercing her chest. It made her legs shake, her lips salivate, her inhibitions rebel in ways that had never happened before.

As she looked into his eyes, as she felt him against her, Diana was taken by a sudden urge to drop her hand, grab him by the head and --

“Oh!” she yelped and shoved him back. “I am... that is... that was not what you think!” She couldn’t even look at him, such was her embarrassment.

“And what is it that I think?” At least he didn’t seem too put-out. More amused, than anything.

“I was simply...” She reached for an explanation that was not there. “I tripped and fell. That is all.”

“Is that what happened?”

“And I took you with me by mistake. For that, I am most sorry.”

No need to say that he did not believe her. He frowned as he studied her, a curious smile spread over his thick lips. “No need to apologize. It is just lucky that neither of us were seriously injured.”

“Yes, well...” Since the second this man had appeared, Diana had done nothing but make a fool of herself. She had gone from being mesmerized by him to angered by him to mortified beyond belief. Who he was, she had no idea. Would she ever see

him again, she hoped not! And just to be certain... “I should go.” She moved to sweep around him, head down purposefully.

“Wait!” He snatched her by the arm. “I did not get your name.”

She eyed the hand around her arm, the spot where his skin touched her own turning hot and sending goosebumps up her arm. “And why would you want such a thing?”

“Curiosity,” he said.

Her heart raced at his touch. Her excitement piqued at his interest. Did he want her name because she had made such a good impression? Or did he simply need a name to attach to the mockery he was sure to lavish upon her when he told this story later? Personally, she felt it must be the latter.

“Sorry to disappoint you.” She yanked her arm free, careful not to trip this time. “I do not think that is such a good idea.”

“And why is --”

She did not hear what else he had to say. Before he had a chance to press his case, and before she had a chance to make more of a fool of herself than she already had, Diana swept from the little alcove and down the garden path, hurrying to put as much distance between herself and the stranger as she possibly could.

And then, if she was lucky, to put him out of her mind also. That entire interaction. From start to finish. Never had she been so embarrassed. Hopefully, she would never hear from or see him again.

ChapterThree

“Why do I feel as if I am the only one left in this house with any sense!” Diana’s mother cried, wringing her hands in the air as if she was having a fit. “Has the world gone mad? Or is it just my daughter who has lost her mind!”

“Perhaps you should look internally,” Diana said with feigned politeness as she continued to read her book. She was just about sick of her mother’s incessant dramatics and wasn’t about to give her the time of day.

“What did you say!”

“I think she was implying that you are the crazy one, Auntie” Evelyn chided from her perch on the couch’s arm, enjoying stoking the flames of the argument.

“I know what she meant!” Diana’s mother snapped at Evelyn before turning her rancor on Diana. “Just tell me this. What did I do to you? What have I done to deserve this!” She threw a hand over her brow as if about to collapse. “All I have ever wanted for you is what is best. I have slaved and toiled. I have crawled through hot coals. And this is my reward! A daughter who spurns me at every chance!”

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“Mother...” Diana sighed, finally looking up from her book. “I think you are being a tad overly dramatic.”

“I am being no such thing!”

“She is right,” Evelyn agreed. “I think you have it in you to be far more dramatic than what you are. Perhaps some tears, next?”

That time, both women looked at Evelyn with annoyance.

“Evelyn, will you please not make things worse,” Diana said to her cousin.

“Worse!” her mother then jumped back in, sensing the moment. “How could things be any worse! I find for you a marquess of reputable esteem. Worshipped in the town. Hounded by a plethora of young ladies who would tear out their own eyes for a chance to marry him. A man who, for reasons I struggle to grasp, wants to marry you!”

“Perhaps he is the crazy one?” Evelyn joked.

“And you refuse!” Diana’s mother continued hotly. “I do not understand it, Diana. Please, make me understand! What was wrong with Lord Herrod? He is handsome. He is rich. He likes you, although only the Lord knows why. What do I have to do? How long can this go on! Do you want to turn out like your cousin!” She waved a hand dismissively at Evelyn.

“Hey!” Evelyn cried.

“Because you will! If you continue down this path, that is where you are headed. So, please tell me. What is wrong with the marquess? And why on earth will you not at least consider him?”

It had been two days since the garden party, and the tenacity at which Diana’s mother pushed Lord Herrod on Diana had not lessened one single iota. If anything, it had only gotten worse.

Diana supposed that she should be grateful that her mother wasn’t completely ignoring her outright denial of the marquess. That she seemed at least willing to wait until Diana changed her mind. Even if in waiting she would carry on as if the ground was opening beneath her feet and might very soon swallow her whole if Diana did not change her tune.

Why does she not listen? And why does she take it so personally? I want to marry, she knows this. Just not to him. Why is the idea that I might wish to like the man who I am to spend the rest of my days with such a bizarre concept to her?

The truth was, Diana had thought little of the marquess these past two days. And if not for her mother, she might have forgotten him entirely. For two days now, Diana’s thoughts had been squarely on that of one man and one man only. A man who’s name she did not know. A man who she had not dared to mention to anybody. A man who had featured in her dreams often, ones which left her waking up hot and covered in sweat.

The embarrassment she had felt in the way she’d acted was still ever present, but with the benefit of time, Diana was able to put that aside and focus instead on far more tantalizing matters. For instance, how scrumptious he had been. There was a man whom she might have liked to have met in another setting. There was a man whom she wished her mother had organized for her to meet.

Surely too, if she had met him in a more normal situation, she wouldn't have acted like such a fool. She was even willing to look past his churlish attitude, figuring that he must have been caught as surprise by her as she was by him.

“What are you smiling at?” her mother demanded.

“Huh...” Diana blinked herself back into the room, not realizing that she had become lost in her daydreams. “Nothing,” she then added quickly.

“This is not funny, Diana! And I would appreciate it if you treated it as the serious topic that it is!”

“I am, mother,” Diana sighed, putting her book down fully now and standing. She had retired to the library today to escape her mother's incessant nagging. Now, she knew that plan to be folly. “In fact, I am taking it far more seriously than you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I wish to marry. You know this. But what I do not wish for is to be married to a prig like the marquess. For all your talk of how perfect he is, I saw nothing of the sort. I only wish you would listen when I told you.”

Her mother groaned. “Do not stake everything on first impressions, Diana. It is as I have been saying – look at your sisters. If they had been as stubborn as you, they would have left their husbands in the rain the day they met! But they listened to their mother. They persisted. And now, each is as in love as the last. And to dukes, no less!”

Diana rolled her eyes at the dramatic retelling of her sister's marriages. Where it was true that each began their relationship with their respective husbands in less than desirable fashion, it was not true that their mother had anything to do with the



successful outcome. At least not to the degree that her mother seemed to think.

And Diana decided to tell her mother just this. Or she meant to, only for the three of them to be suddenly interrupted by Miss White, one of the manor's servants.

"My lady," Miss White said from the doorway. "I am so sorry to interrupt --"

"Yes, yes," her mother sighed, clearly annoyed. "What is it, Miss White? Can you not see I am in a conversation with my daughter?"

"Never mind me," Evelyn said. "I am just a part of the furniture, am I?"

"Madam, it is..." She looked nervous. Dammed panicked! "An unexpected guest has just announced himself, asking to speak with you at once."

"A guest?" Diana's mother brightened at the same time that Diana wilted. Knowing her luck, it would be the marquess. "Who is it? Lord Herrod? Oh, it must be."

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“No, Madam,” Miss White shook her head. “It is His Grace, the Duke of Albury.”

All three ladies' jaws hit the floor.

“His Grace?” Diana’s mother gasped finally. “Are you sure?”

“I am, Madam.”

“But why? How – he is here? Right of this second?”

“He awaits you in the drawing room. He did not give his reason, but I thought it best to acquiesce to his request to see you.”

The room turned into a flurried panic. Diana’s mother half made as if to stride from the room without further delay, only to stop and then look down at herself. “This will not do! No, I cannot --” She turned back, then stopped again. Face stricken. “I cannot see the duke dressed as this – Miss White. Give the duke my apologies, that I will be with him in a few moments. I must change!”

“Of course, Madam.”

“Diana! Evelyn! Do not sit there, girls! And do not think for a moment that you will see the duke as you are! Quickly, upstairs the two of you. Your very best, thank you very much.”

“We are to see him?” Evelyn asked excitedly. “Are you sure?”

“No, I am not. But if he is here, it is for good reason. Best to present a united front – Diana! Why are you just sitting there!”

Diana was staring past Miss White toward the direction of the drawing room. Like her mother, she was shocked that the Duke of Albury was here. That he even knew of their existence. She had never heard of him before, knew nothing about the man. Which had her thinking, what did he want?

“What could he possibly want?” she asked curiously. “Miss White, he gave no indication?”

“None --”

“It does not matter why!” Diana’s mother screeched. “What matters is that he is here now. And waiting! Come girls!” She swept across the room and pulled Diana from the lounge. “Up. Up! We shall meet outside the drawing room in five – ten minutes. Miss White, please present the duke with tea while he waits.”

“It will be done.” Miss White offered a short bow and vanished around the corner.

With nothing else for it, Diana was ushered upstairs with her cousin, told in no uncertain terms that she was to dress in her very best or there would be hell to pay. And Diana, nowhere near as ecstatic as her mother, could not help but feel some sense of curiosity. Even excitement.

Is it possible that he is here because of me? No... of course not. Likely, this is some sort of misunderstanding. But still...

As she hurried up the staircase, she spared another look in the direction of the drawing room. And where she knew it was silly to think, she could not scrub the feeling that she was at the center of this most random appearance. Only why that

might be? She would find out soon enough.

\* \* \*

Diana had never considered herself a true beauty before. That wasn't to say that she was unattractive, but she had not grown up to be one of those girls who relied upon their looks like some of the other ladies about whom she knew.

Having said that, these last few days had seen a slight change in her self-appreciation. She might have hated Lord Herrod with all her heart but one could only be told so many times how beautiful they were before the words began to stick.

She looked at herself in the mirror before heading down to meet with her mother and cousin so they might greet the duke. She was dressed in an emerald pelisse with an open neck, the pattern was floral, the cut was longer on the arms and tight under her bust, while it flowed loosely down her legs. She had always been curvy, which made such garments uncomfortable to wear as she felt all 'tucked-in' as if the dress was struggling to contain her curves. But she was indeed pretty, 'adorable features' they had been described as, with big brown eyes that were a tad larger than what might be considered normal. She had never liked being called 'cute' before, but since coming of age she had come to realize how much men coveted it.

But why do I even care? It is not as if the duke is here for me.

Nonetheless, she could not escape the feeling that there was more here at play than she knew, and thus as she made her way back downstairs it was with extreme caution.

Surprisingly, her mother and cousin were not waiting outside the drawing room for her. She clicked her tongue at this, thinking them to have grown impatient and gone in without her. If she had stopped to think, she might have realized how foolish this notion was. But she did not stop, and thus she hurried into the drawing room without

delay.

She froze stiff the second she stepped across the threshold.

The Duke of Albury was standing across the room, his gaze taken by the view of the grounds through the window. When he heard the door open, he turned around, saw Diana standing there, and smiled expectantly, not in the least bit surprised by what he saw.

Diana, however, was stunned speechless.

“Ah, Miss Goldsmith, I presume,” he said with a charming smile as he made his way toward her. “What a pleasure it is to see you again.” He reached her and took her hand, rising it to his lips and kissing the back without breaking his gaze from her own. “And under far less incriminating circumstances.”

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“Y -- you!” Diana gasped, her skin prickling at his touch. “Wh -- what are you doing here?! How are you here!” She looked about as if expecting an answer. “How did you find me!”

“With great difficulty, I assure you.”

The Duke of Albury... he was the stranger from the garden party... who Diana had made an utter fool of herself in front of. What is he doing here? Did he come here to mock me? To tell my mother what I did?

Diana felt her mouth run dry. Embarrassment flooded her, that urge to turn and flee from the room. It didn't help that he was just as ruggedly handsome as she remembered him being, perhaps even more so because he was enamored with a sense of confidence that contrasted mightily to Diana's own.

“You look surprised,” he said.

“I...” She forced herself back into the moment. “Perhaps caught off guard is more accurate.”

“Is it not the same thing.”

“Why are you here?” she said sharply, again sensing that he was mocking her. “Did you come here to tell my mother of what I did?”

“What you did?” he frowned.

“Attacked you.”

“I thought you said that you didn’t attack me.”

“You know what I mean,” she snapped before she could catch her tongue. “I am sorry for the way that I behaved the other day. I was... I was not myself. But to come to my home like this is completely uncalled for.”

To that, the duke tilted his head, his frown turning into a smirk. “You are quite abrasive, you know. Do you always say what is on your mind? Or do I just bring that side of you out?”

“I am not abrasive. I am simply confused. And you are not helping the matter. I understand that you might be upset with how I behaved, but I assure you that is not who I am. You simply caught me on a bad day.”

“And what is this?” he chuckled. “A good day?”

Diana’s expression darkened. Gone was her initial shock and embarrassment. Now that she had time to readjust, she was reminded quickly of why she had treated the duke as she had the last time they spoke. He was significantly older than her by at least ten years, and perhaps the most infuriating man she had ever met.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said, standing herself up proudly. “Whatever it is you wish to speak of, you can say it to my mother. Good day.” She turned to leave, taking a few short steps.

“You misunderstand me,” the duke spoke quickly. “It is not your mother I came to see.”

She turned back, brow narrowed at him. “My cousin, Evelyn then? Ah, I see what

this is. She caught your eye at the garden party, and you have asked around about her.” She scoffed and shook her head. “She is a bit young for you, is she not? Or is that what you like? Young, impressionable women whom you can take advantage of.”

“What I like is a woman who doesn’t let herself get walked over,” he said, refusing to rise to the bait. “A woman of strong character who can say no, even push back when she feels that she must. A woman who, to be perfectly honest, won’t balk the moment she does not get her way. Do you happen to know any?”

She rolled her eyes. “So, I was right, you wish to speak with Evelyn.”

“No, Miss Goldsmith. Again, you misunderstand me.” He took a single stride, putting himself right before her. So close that Diana felt a sudden urge to scamper back, but her stubbornness demanded that she stay put. She had forgotten how tall he was, and the way he looked down at her made her feel small and powerless in a way that she rather liked for reasons she didn’t understand. “I came here because these last few days, I confess, I have been unable to stop thinking about you.”

“You... you have?” Her heart began to race.

“As I said, I require a woman who is able to stand her ground. One who is strong-willed, capable, intelligent. I require a woman who --”

“What do you mean?” she cut him off. “Require? Require for what?”

“Oh, did I not say?” He chuckled and his smile was dazzling in ways that made Diana’s stomach drop. “I wish to marry you.”

“Your Grace!” Diana’s mother called suddenly from across the room. “I am so sorry to keep you waiting!”



Diana's eyes were dinner plates. Her mouth hung open like a frog. The duke still smiled at her, but all she could do was gawk, stunned into utter silence by the duke's offer. One which, to be honest, did not sound real.

"Lady Langham." The duke turned from Diana to greet Diana's mother. She came for him, and he took her hand, giving it a kiss. "My apologies for intruding on you like this. And without warning."

"No apology required," Diana's mother assured him with a giggle. "It is I who must apologize for keeping you waiting. I see that my daughter has been kind enough to entertain you in my absence?" Diana's mother looked warningly at Diana, no doubt assuming Diana had arrived early to sabotage whatever this was.

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“And she has been doing a wonderful job,” the duke assured her. “We were just now getting acquainted.”

“I hope she has been behaving herself,” her mother chortled, again looking warningly at Diana. “I jest, of course.”

“She has been nothing but hospitable, I assure you.” The duke caught her eye and smirked. As for Diana? She continued to stare stupidly.

She must have misheard him. Surely, that was what happened? Diana racked her brain to remember everything said between the two at the garden party. And even just now. Nothing romantic that she could remember. Nothing suggestive. They had hardly even spoken! And what had been said was combative... even hostile.

This was a trick. An attempt to get back at her. That was all it could be. To turn up like this and simply expect her to say yes. No... there was no way the offer was real.

With that, Diana fixed herself and narrowed her eyes at the duke. She would not be played!

“Now, I see you are without beverage,” Diana’s mother said. “What on earth has my --” She turned about to call for a servant, only to find Miss White standing in the room.

“Ah, Miss White. I was just saying, why have you not offered the duke a drink! And where is Evelyn, while you are at it? That girl...” A shake of the head.

“I am so sorry, Madam, but I am afraid a messenger has just arrived for you.”

Diana’s mother frowned. “A messenger? From whom?”

Miss White looked awkwardly at the duke. “It is from...” She dropped her voice. “Lord Herrod.”

Diana’s mother’s eyes turned wide, as did Diana’s. That man is nothing if not persistent. “What? Now?”

“Yes. He is right outside.”

She sucked her teeth and looked back to the duke. Then back toward the door. Caught between thoughts, unable to decide upon what to do. Really, the timing could not have been worse. Or better, depending on how one looked at it.

“Your Grace, if you will just excuse me for one moment --”

“Think nothing of it,” the duke assured her. “I am quite certain your lovely daughter will be capable of entertaining me for a moment longer.”

Diana’s mother clearly did not wish to leave, and it seemed as if the effort to do so just about felled her. But she offered another quick apology and scampered from the room, leaving Diana alone with the duke once more. And not a moment too soon.

“Explain yourself,” Diana said the moment the door closed. “Now, thank you.”

The duke’s expression was placid. “I think the offer is rather clear, don’t you?”

“You wish to marry me?”

“That is right.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“But... but... but...” Diana felt herself becoming flustered. Surely, she was missing something. “But why? Did my mother reach out to you? Have you heard that I am currently looking for a husband – at my mother’s request, mind you. After the other day, I should be the last person you would wish to marry. It doesn’t make any sense!”

He smiled at how frantic she was becoming. “Are you always this excitable?”

“I am not!”

“From what I have seen, you are.” He took a quick step toward her; so sudden that she did not have time to move back. Perhaps he was not as close as he had been in the hedge the other day, but it reminded her of that same sensation, and Diana’s body began to flush as a result.

“You have simply caught me at inopportune times...” She looked away, feeling her face flush.

Silence for a moment as the duke studied her. She still refused to look at him, still felt her face turning red as he watched her. There was a tension which hovered between the two, and dammit if Diana didn’t feel the sudden urge to break it by doing something foolish.

“If you think about it, it makes perfect sense,” he said suddenly, breaking the tension. “I told you I wish for a strong-willed woman. And you, Miss Goldsmith, are certainly that. Yes, the timing might seem a little --”

“Rushed.”

“Strange,” he corrected. “But my intentions are pure. I am not trying to trick you, if that is what you think. Which, based on your reaction, I think it is.”

Diana still had no idea what to think. Her first inclination was to say no. After years of courtship, of meeting dozens of men, of turning them all away, it felt presumptuous of the duke to turn up like this and just expect her to say yes. That stubborn nature of hers almost wanted to say no on principal alone.

Yet in the back of her mind, she could not escape the feeling that this offer... that she would be a fool to turn it down. At this moment, her mother was speaking to Lord Herrod, a conversation which she did not need to guess at its purpose. The man was insatiable! A real pest. And he would not take a simple no for an answer.

“I see that you still need some convincing,” the duke sighed. “I will be honest with you, Miss Goldsmith, for I feel that you deserve it. You may not know this about me, but I have only recently inherited my title upon the death of my brother. Until most recently, in fact, I had no desire to marry whatsoever.”

“So, I am what? A trophy, because as a duke you simply must have a bride?”

He laughed. “Far from it. When my brother died, he left behind his two children. Girls of eight and ten. They are wonderful little creatures, and I love them dearly, but they need more than a father to raise them. They need a mother-figure.

“A mother?” she squawked.

“Not a mother,” he corrected. “A mother figure. I am their uncle, and the only family they have left in the world. But girls require a woman in their life to guide them in the ways that are expected. Ways I cannot possibly provide. If it was up to me, I would go about this process properly – spending the Season meeting with eligible young women, creating connections. But time is not something that I have and if I wish for them to be raised properly, as they deserve, then I must put my own needs aside and think about them.”

“You...” She blinked. “You wish for me to help raise your nieces? Why not hire a governess?”

“I do not want a governess. These girls need a family.” He sighed. “What I am suggesting is a marriage of convenience, nothing more. You will come to live with me. You will be both a wife to me and an aunt to the girls. Apart from that, I will not expect anything from you that you do not wish to give. Your life will be your own. Miss Goldsmith...” He took her hand suddenly and Diana felt a pulse radiate up her arm from his touch. “I do not ask this lightly. This was not an impulse. I truly do think you would be well suited to the role. All I ask is that you consider it.”

She was beginning to feel hot. Flustered. Was that the pressure of the situation she had been put in? Or was it the way that the duke was looking at her? Diana wasn't sure.

A marriage of convenience. She had heard of such things, of course. Times were, she might have wanted one. As much as she wished to fall in love with the man whom she wed, Diana was beginning to understand how futile that dream was. How unlikely.

“What is that look?” he asked her, noting the way she was staring.

Her eyes turned wide. “Look? There is no look.”

He chuckled. "You are not thinking of attacking me again, are you?"

"As I said, that was an accident," she snapped, glaring at him now. He matched her glare with a smirk, held it, refused to blink and that tension she had been feeling from earlier began to grow.

Oh, he annoyed her. So much that it almost seemed on purpose. And where she should have hated how much he did, for reasons that she did not understand, she enjoyed it. Dammit, she almost coveted it.

But marriage? Surely, such a thing could not work. Even if the thought of being married to the duke, all of a sudden, wasn't the worst idea she had ever heard...

And then, as if to emphasize the point, her mother returned from dealing with the messenger sent by the marquess. Seeing her sweep into the room, the hardened look on her face, reminded Diana who she was dealing with – her mother, was her meaning. How insistent she had been. How persistent. The very real fact that if she did not choose a mate soon her mother would choose one for her. And that could only mean one thing.

"Yes," Diana said quickly, before she could stop herself.

"Excuse me?" the duke asked.

"Yes," she said, forcing herself to look up at him. Even forcing a smile. "To your offer. My answer..." She glanced at her mother who was frowning at the two holding hands. "My answer is yes."

## ChapterFour

"I still cannot believe it," Evelyn said for what had to be the hundredth time in the last

five days. “You. Engaged. To a duke! It defies belief.”

“I am glad you find the fact that I have found a husband so unbelievable. How comforting.”

“Oh, I do not mean it like that, Diana. And you know it.” Evelyn held tightly into Diana’s arm as the two ladies walked together. “I am simply surprised, is all.”

“Yes, you have said that.”

“Not to be taken negatively,” she hurried to explain. “It is just... well, it is all rather sudden! Surely, you can see that.”

“It has been five days, Evelyn,” Diana said rightly. “At what point will it begin to feel less sudden?”



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“A few years' time, perhaps,” Evelyn said as if serious. “Ask me again when you are fifty.”

“You are being ridiculous.”

“That is true,” Evelyn agreed. “But at least we can both agree that when compared to your mother, my behavior is the height of sanity.”

As one, the two women looked across the grounds and toward the manor. Although they could not see through the walls, they could both picture Diana's mother behaving as a tempest might were it to find itself somehow trapped between four walls. Destruction. Mayhem. Chaos! She was, for all intents and purposes, the very embodiment of the word frantic.

That was why the two ladies found themselves walking the grounds. Nothing to do with how sunny a day it was, how blue the sky, how the birds sung from the treetops in a way that was highly pleasant. No, no. It was simply to escape Diana's mother.

For five days now, she had been much the same. Besotted with the idea that her daughter was to marry a duke – another one! -- she had taken it upon herself to organize a wedding befitting of the occasion. Everything had to be perfect. Everything had to be right. No room for error, it was times like this where her mother's temperament toward control truly exploded.

Oh, how sorry I feel for the staff. Such is my mother's state that I would not be surprised to find at least one of them murdered by the time we make it back inside.

At least her mother's insistence on taking over allowed for Diana to take a back seat when it came to the wedding's organization. A good thing too for even five days later she was still not entirely sure how she felt about her decision.

"I have done a little research of my own, you know," Evelyn continued as they walked at a relaxed pace.

"Meaning?"

"Regarding your soon-to-be husband, the duke. I know you did not ask it, but I have put my feelers out so that we might have an idea of who the man is that you are set to marry."

"Evelyn," Diana sighed. "There was no need for that."

"And yet I have done it anyway!" Out the corner of her eyes, she caught Evelyn looking at her expectantly.

"Go on then," she said, knowing there was no sense in trying to tell her otherwise. "What have you learned?"

"Honestly, not as much as I might have liked to. It is strange, because a man with a position such as the duke has, one would think that if he was to so much breathe, half the ton would know about it. But I had to dig harder than I would have liked."

"Meaning..."

"Well, the reason for all the mystery is that he left the country for the Americas when he was a young man. Fled, more like. Something to do with his father, although I could not ascertain what exactly. From what people say, he made quite a reputation for himself while in the Americas too."

“What sort of reputation?”

She grimaced. “Not a good one. Although everyone I spoke to assured me that he is an adept businessman, they were also right to point out that this came with a cost. He is...” She clicked her tongue. “Said to be a bit rough around the edges.”

“What does that mean? Speak clearly, Evelyn.”

“He is mean,” she said flatly. “Intimidating. Not above flexing himself and pushing others around to get what he wants. Some even referred to him as wicked.”

Diana snorted. “He sounds like most men I know.”

Evelyn came to a stop. “I am being serious, Diana. These were not warnings given lightly. He has a temper, one honed from years of getting what he wants and acting out when he does not. I do not tell it to frighten you, but to warn you.” Her expression softened. “I care about you, is why. And I would hate for something bad to happen.”

Diana’s initial reaction was to be dismissive of her cousin. She thought back to her few brief interactions with the duke, and nothing that had occurred between them suggested the man to be the monster her cousin was implying. And indeed, she had given him every reason to show this side of himself. More than once.

In fact, the more Diana had thought of the duke, she would say she’d had the opposite impression. He seemed kind by her estimation. Even gentle – careful not to say the wrong thing or come across as aggressive. Had he been playing her the whole time? Was her cousin correct? And what did this even mean?

Honestly, it meant little, and that was what Diana decided upon. If she was marrying the man out of love or had been forced into it, the conversation might be different. But she wasn’t, so it was not.

“I appreciate it, Evelyn.” Diana took her cousin by the arm and the two began to walk again. “I hope you know that. But I am not going to let rumor poison my future husband’s name without any proof.”

“And if the rumor proves to be true?”

She shrugged. “To be fair, I am not exactly so easy to deal with myself. If he tries anything on me...” She winked. “Let us see just how wicked he thinks he is.”

The two women giggled together, and she could feel Evelyn relax.

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“At least he is not Lord Herrod,” Evelyn agreed eventually. “Rumor says that he is not happy at all with what has happened. Furious, they say.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “You and rumor.”

“It is true!”

“Good,” Diana said, meaning it. “I hope he cries himself to sleep every night.”

To that, she could see her cousin grinning stupidly. “Which will be a far cry in difference to how you shall be going to sleep each night.”

“What does that mean?” Diana frowned.

Evelyn pumped her eyebrows. “You and the duke. Married. For all the rumors I have heard of the duke, there is another that caught my interest as much as it should catch yours.”

“Yes...”

“They say that he is quite... how shall I put this delicately. He has an affinity for horses. Stallions, as it is. And they say, or rumor does, that he shares more in common with them than what most men do.” She raised both eyebrows at Diana.

It took Diana a moment to understand what her cousin meant. Stallions? What on earth is she... “Evelyn!” Diana cried when she understood. “That is... I do not believe... who have you been speaking with!” She felt her cheeks flush bright pink

and her chest turn hot.

Evelyn pumped her eyebrows. "I will never tell, you lucky woman."

Diana tried to shake it off, forcing herself to look away from her cousin's suggestive stare. Although despite her efforts at keeping her mind elsewhere, now there was little she could do but think about the duke's... um... what was she saying?

That was the other piece of this most confusing puzzle. One that Diana still did not fully understand. If this was an ordinary marriage, she would obviously be expected to bed the duke and produce children. That was what a wife was for, was it not? But the duke had been at pains to assure her that this was a marriage of convenience only. As to what that would entail, that was where her mind wandered often.

Diana found the duke attractive. There was no use in denying it. She just did not know if he felt the same about her. Again, what did he expect? And what could she expect? Was she to treat him as a wife would her husband? Was she to... to go to bed with him whenever he asked? And did she want to?

It was all very confusing, which was why she hadn't told anyone of this arrangement. Even Evelyn assumed the duke wished for a normal marriage. Hence, her mentioning of his... well, yes. That.

"Oh no," Evelyn sighed suddenly, and Diana felt her body sag. "What now?"

Diana perked up, glad for the distraction, only to see one of the household staff rushing their way. No doubt her mother was sending for her, which meant the afternoon promised to be a very long one indeed.

"Miss Goldsmith!" the servant cried out. "I am so sorry to disturb."

“What does she wish for now,” Diana said with a sigh. “Let me guess, my mother has again changed her mind on what dress I shall wear. Tell her --”

“Oh, no, Miss Goldsmith. It is not your mother. It is the Dowager Duchess of Albury. She arrived not a minute ago and wishes to speak with you.”

Diana blinked. “Albury... the duke’s grandmother?”

“The very same, Miss Goldsmith.”

“What does she want?” Evelyn asked.

It was a good question. One that Diana would have an answer to shortly, she was sure. Not that she was looking forward to this answer. Somehow, she sensed any fears she might have had about the duke were about to be realized. That this marriage of convenience was about to become very real.

## ChapterFive

Diana found her mother and the dowager duchess sitting together in the drawing room, sharing tea. It was, unexpectedly, a strange sight.

Growing up, Diana had always thought of her mother as an all-powerful being. Indomitable in her presence. Unimpeachable in her righteousness. The kind of woman that mountains would move out of the way for, because to try and stop her once she was on the path was foolhardy and not worth the drama it caused.

Seeing her with the dowager duchess shattered this reality.

The Dowager Duchess of Albury was indeed much older than her mother. Smaller too, both in size and stature. Withered, was how one might describe her. With her

greying hair and winkled skin and frail limbs, she looked as if a stiff breeze would blow her over. And yet there was a power that radiated from her very presence. A regency that was all-consuming, one that Diana felt trapped in the moment the elderly woman turned and saw her coming.

Even Diana's mother seemed powerless against her. Oh sure, she sat up straight, she presented herself well, and this was her home, her kingdom of sorts. But Diana could tell how hard her mother was working to retain some semblance of control, as if desperate to prove to the dowager duchess that she was worth taking seriously.



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“Ah, there she is,” Diana’s mother said with a little too much relief. “Diana, we were wondering what had kept you.”

“I am so sorry,” Diana said cautiously, edging her way into the room. The dowager duchess watched her closely but said nothing; judging her, it felt like. “Evelyn and I were across the garden. It took some time to come this far.”

“I told you to stay close, did I not.” She sighed and looked at the dowager duchess for support. “I tell you, it will be a relief to see this one finally made somebody else’s problem. I hope His Grace is up to the task.”

The dowager duchess said nothing. She sipped at her tea, still eyeing Diana closely.

“Yes, well...” Her mother cleared her throat nervously. “I shall have another saucer fetched. We were just discussing --”

“Alone, I think,” the dowager duchess spoke finally. Her voice was low, but it cut through Diana’s mother like a whip. “I wish to speak to my future daughter-in-law alone.”

“Oh...” Her mother blinked, taken aback by the request. “Are you quite sure? I am not busy, if that is your concern.”

“It is not.”

Diana held her breath, expecting her mother to assert her own authority, as she was wont to do. But she seemed to think better of it, choosing to bow her head and offer a

smile. "Of course," she said. "I... I have just remembered, I have a few tasks that are in need of urgent attention. This wedding!" She pretended to act flustered. "It will be my undoing."

"Quite."

Her mother narrowed her eyes quickly at the dowager duchess, then offered her a smile. "Please, make sure to call for me before you leave. And it has been a pleasure."

"I do hope so."

Another narrowing of the eyes and then her mother was on Diana. Surprisingly, she sighed and shook her head, as if to say, 'Good luck.' Then she hurried from the room, leaving the two alone.

Again, that sense that there was a force behind the elderly woman took hold and Diana felt herself being pulled closer. The chair across from the dowager duchess was available but Diana hesitated taking it. As if to commit might be the end of her.

"Well?" the dowager duchess said. "Do not gawk, dear. It is unbecoming."

"Yes. Sorry." Diana sat quickly.

Nothing was said for a few minutes. The dowager duchess sipped at her tea as she assessed Diana closely. Her eyes were fiercely intelligent, and like a storm in a teacup, Diana could sense something brewing behind them. She shifted nervously, feeling like a child about to be scorned by a parent.

"So," she began finally. Another sip of her tea and she put the saucer down. "You intend to marry my grandson. Is that the way of things?"

“Y -- yes,” she stammered and then cleared her throat. “I very much hope to.”

“And you are ready for such an undertaking?”

“I... I think I am?”

“You think you are?” she tilted her head. “Or you are? There can be no in-between.”

“I am,” Diana said, feeling herself begin to sweat. “I am ready.”

“And you know of what this entails?”

“Yes?”

“Is that a question? And please, sit up dear. Do not slouch.”

Diana hadn't even realized that she was! She sat herself up and held out her chin, trying to present some sense that she was crumbling inside. “Yes,” she said again. “I am aware.”

The dowager duchess raised an eyebrow in question.

“Oh...” Diana blinked. “I assumed it was like any other marriage.” She waited for a confirmation but got nothing. “Admittedly, I have not been married before, but that should be seen as a boon, surely?” Again, she paused, and again she was given nothing. “I am eager to learn, however. Eager to... to please your grandson. As said, I am new at this, but I believe that given the chance, I can make him happy.” She tried for a smile and again got nothing.

This is going about as well as I could have hoped. That is to say, not very well at all.

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“Of course, there is much to learn,” Diana continued, feeling the need to speak. “And your grandson --”

“His Grace,” she corrected.

“Yes. His Grace...” Diana cleared her throat. “He has told me of his nieces, and how he will need a hand in raising them.”

“Do you have any experience with children?”

“Oh. No, I do not – but I was one once, you know,” she joked, which fell terribly flat. “My meaning is, I am willing to learn. I believe that all marriages are different...” She cleared her throat, feeling herself run hot. “But I also believe that your grandson – His Grace,” she corrected before being reprimanded. “I believe he chose me for a good reason.”

“And that reason is?”

“Ah...” Diana swallowed the lump in her throat. “I... I am... he likes me?”

“Is that a question? Or are you implying that my grandson would ask to marry a woman he did not like? Well?”

Diana was visibly sweating now. And shaking. The old woman barely spoke, but the words she chose seemed designed to unsettle. She was colder than Diana had expected. Calculating, too. Was this a test? Or did she simply enjoy putting Diana on edge like this?

Truthfully, as nervous as Diana was feeling, she was also finding herself growing angry. The fact that she was the one justifying this marriage – as if she was the one who sought it! It should have been the duke who was explaining himself, not her. He should have been sat across from her mother answering ridiculous questions like this.

Despite her best efforts, that anger began to boil...

“His Grace chose me,” she said as calmly as she could. “And I would hope that his judgement would be enough to justify this marriage. Anything I say might be seen to undercut or second guess his assurances that I am the woman whom he wishes to wed.”

The dowager duchess smirked slightly. “So, you intend to follow where he leads?”

“I did not say that.”

“So, you intend to wait on his beck and call like a common maid?”

“I did not say that either.”

“You say a lot,” she said. “And somehow manage to say so little. You must choose your words more carefully. As a soon-to-be duchess, every word spoken counts. I wonder if you understand the seriousness of the position my grandson had thrust upon you.”

“There was no thrusting,” Diana snapped before she could help herself. “I will remind you that your grandson – my soon-to-be husband, was the one who sought me out. He chose me. And if that is not good enough for you then...” She shrugged and looked flatly at the elderly woman. “Frankly, how you feel about the matter is of little concern to me.” Diana’s eyes widened the moment she stopped speaking.

Oh no...

Of course she had put her foot in it. Of course she had let her temper get the better of her. The dowager duchess must have been expecting it, baiting her, likely wanting to see her break so she could go back to the duke and tell him this marriage was cancelled.

“I did not mean --”

“Yes, you did,” the dowager duchess cut her off. Only most strangely, she was smiling now. “And quite frankly, it is about time.”

“Excuse me?”

She shook her head and chuckled to herself. “My grandson told me that he had found for himself a strong-willed stalwart of a woman to make his bride. One who would not let others, two young girls especially, run rampart over her. I was beginning to worry that he had misjudged.”

“He... he did?”

“Why do you think I am here?” she said with amusement. “To see what sort of woman my grandson has picked. Or better, to see what sort of woman would be raising my two great-nieces. Not to mention taming my grandson while she is at it.”

“I...” Diana grimaced, still not entirely sure what was going on. “I have a habit of speaking without thinking.”

“No, no,” she corrected. “You have a habit of saying what needs to be said.” She nodded rightly. “Which is a trait you will need if you are to become a duchess.” She winked. “Trust me. You are about to enter a life of people wishing to use you for no

other reason than they think they can get something out of it. A crown to put atop their heads and tell the world they are its rulers. A weakling is the last thing you should be.”

“I am not a weakling.”

“That, you are not,” she said with another wink. “Nor is my grandson, as I am sure that you have seen. Together... why, dare I say that this marriage might just work.”

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The marriage might have been one of convenience, but she couldn't help but smile at the compliment. Part relief, part gratitude because the elderly dowager wasn't at all what she expected.

Further to that point, Diana felt a small flush when she pictured the duke speaking such nice things about her. Because that's what they were. Some might interpret them as something else, but she had been chosen for a reason and this was it. Clearly, it was exactly what he wanted too.

"You think so?"

"I don't know, you tell me," she said with a wink.

Diana laughed. "Your grandson is clearly a man who is used to getting his own way. Something tells me that I might have to change this."

"And the girls?"

"I..." Diana grimaced. "To be honest with you, that I am not certain of. His Grace told me of them, and I am eager to help where I can. I agree, girls need a mother. But I am not going to lie to you and claim that I am something I am not. I was not raised that way."

"And nor will they be."

"Did he say anything else?" Diana asked, feigning being casual. "About..." She cleared her throat. "About me..."



The dowager wagged her finger. "Careful, I cannot reveal all my grandson's secrets. Some, you will have to learn for yourself. No doubt you have done some digging of your own."

"Only a little."

"And what have you heard?"

Diana thought about what Evelyn had just told her. "Nothing I am worried about."

The dowager snorted. "Liar. My grandson has a reputation, that is true. Some of it is entirely accurate. But what you should know is that he is proud, and intelligent to boot. He will not take insolence or stupidity lightly. And he prefers a woman who speaks her mind." She smirked. "At least I have always thought so."

"Noted," Diana said with a grin.

"You are entering a new world," she continued. "When I married my grandson's father, I was not as I am now. I was scared. A timid thing..." She sighed and shook her head. "It took me years before I found myself. I suggest you not take quite so long as that."

"I only worry His Grace doesn't know quite what he is in for."

"Oh, I think he does."

A pang of guilt struck Diana suddenly, because it was clear to her that the dowager had no idea the true arrangement of this marriage. Likely, she thought it was standard fair and that it would be treated as such. Clearly, that wasn't to be the case.

It was a strange thing but for a moment, Diana almost felt regretful that she was

entering into this marriage under the preconceived notion of convenience, and she wondered what it might be like if things were different. A silly thing to think, as then the marriage wouldn't be happening at all.

All she could do was be as the dowager suggested, herself, and hope that sufficed. It would simply have to do.

“Now, about my grandson...” the dowager shuffled forward. “A few tips, perhaps? Ways of dealing with him when he is in one of his moods.”

“Oh.” Diana shuffled forward too. “Yes please.”

The dowager's eyes flashed menace and Diana could not keep herself from giggling. It was early days. Still, she could not imagine what was to come. But she felt that she had found an ally in the dowager and she felt all the better for it.

Maybe this marriage would not be such a bad thing after all?

## ChapterSix

Diana couldn't stop shaking. The nerves were starting to get to her and try as she might, nothing seemed capable of stopping them.

“Are you sick?” her mother asked her with worry.

“No, mother.”

“Cold then? I don't see how. In this weather!”

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“She’s not cold,” her cousin snorted. “Obviously, she is just nervous. Poor thing,” she then added with a coy wink.

“Oh.” Her mother, surprisingly, beamed. “Well, that is to be expected. What bride isn’t nervous on her wedding day.”

“I don’t want to be nervous,” Diana pouted. “And I certainly don’t want to be trembling as I walk down the aisle. How will that look.”

“Like you are nervous,” her cousin chided.

“You will look like a bride who is excited to be joined in eternal matrimony with her husband.” Her mother took her by the hands, and her expression took on one that Diana did not recognize. It looked... it looked as if she was about to cry. “You know how I have wished for this for years. How hard I have worked. The pain and effort and --” She took a breath, her chin trembling. “That is not important. What is important is that for all I have done, you are the reason this is happening. The duke saw something in you, Diana. Something that I see every day and... and... and...” She sniffed. “And I know that if you are half as good a wife as you were a daughter to me...” She sniffed again, barely able to control herself. “You will make him the happiest man in all of England. Oh, what is happening to me!” she cried out and turned away, the tears now flowing.

“Mother... please,” Diana said awkwardly, not sure how to react. Not only had she never seen her mother act this way before, but again that feeling of guilt reared its head because again she reminded herself this was not a true marriage.

“You look beautiful too,” her cousin added. “Even if Ihateto admit it.” She rolled her eyes, and Diana stuck her tongue out as the two burst into a fit of giggles.

Not that this stopped her from shaking the way that she was. If anything, it only made it worse.

Technically, her mother was right, and being nervous was nothing strange for a bride on the day of her wedding. But Diana reasoned that she shouldn’t be feeling this way, for this was not a typical wedding. It was not as if she was marrying the man of her dreams. And it was not as if she was in love. So why could she not stand still!

The three women had found themselves in a small antechamber attached to the side of the church, there to wait for the beginning of the ceremony and to double check that Diana was properly put together for her big day. From the little room, Diana could hear the chatter of friends and family as they gathered in the church, eagerly anticipating the coming nuptials.

Before her was a full-bodied mirror and she forced herself to look once more, perhaps to distract herself and do something about all this shaking.

The dress was an elegant gown of silk, colored sunbeam yellow. As her mother had chosen it, it was more modest in the way it covered her shoulders and arms and chest, but it was still tight – her darn curves made sure of that. Her jewelry was mostly white pearls and rubies, a silver tiara in her hair, a pink blush to her cheeks. Her cousin was right, she was a dream come to life.

A knock at the door had her turning about, and her stomach dropped because she realized the time must be now. Only, when the door opened, it was not one of the guests come to tell them that the duke was ready and waiting. Rather, it was the duke himself.

“Your Grace!” her mother gasped at the sight of him. “What it is? Is something the matter?”

He lingered awkwardly in the doorway. Dressed in darker colors, it was his vest -- dark green -- that matched perfectly with his eyes. It had been over a week since Diana had last seen him and once again she was forced to admit that above all things, he was nothing short of perfection.

“All is well, my lady,” he said with a smile that was all teeth. “I was just wondering... I know this is not the normal procedure, but might I have a word alone with my soon-to-be wife?”

“With me?” Diana said stupidly.

“Yes, with you.”

“Of course,” Diana’s mother said without pause. She was quick to grab Evelyn by the arm and drag her across the room. “We will be right on the other side but take your time, take your time.” They reached the door and Diana’s mother was about to step through, only to stop and look back. “And Your Grace, does my daughter not look lovely?”

Diana’s entire face turned so red that she could have died.

“She does,” he said without missing a beat. “A true beauty.”

The door then closed and Diana and the duke were left alone. Not a situation that should have been as tense as it was, because they were to marry any minute. And yet Diana’s entire body shook even more violently than it had been already.

“Is something the matter?” the duke asked, noticing the way she was shaking.

“It -- it is fine,” she assured him. “You -- you wished to speak with me?”

He studied her for a moment, cool and collected. Under his gaze, Diana’s body continued to vibrate, and she was certain he was about to mock her. Such that she prepared herself to snap back, not at all in the mood for such a thing. Not on today of all days.

“It occurred to me this morning that the two of us have not had a chance to speak properly since last week,” he began finally, thankfully not mentioning her shaking. “Which might not be so strange, were it not for the circumstances surrounding this marriage.”

“I -- it is fine,” she stammered. “I... I am aware of wh – what this is.”

“That is the problem,” he sighed and then strode further into the room, right for her. Diana’s first instinct was to take a backwards step, but she remembered what the dowager duchess said about challenging the duke, so she stayed where she was. “I worry that you might have gotten the wrong impression of what is to be expected. That I...” He shook his head to himself. “That I may have given you the wrong impression.”

“Oh...” She blinked. “N -- no. You told me what this is. A marriage of convenience,” she confirmed while looking at him. “We will be married in name. You expect me to help you to raise your nieces. Fr – from the outside, we are to appear...” She considered the wording. “Content.”

He sighed. “And therein lies the problem. I fear that I made this arrangement sound almost like a business contract. Call that an occupational hazard,” he chuckled. “And where indeed there are aspects of it that might appear as such, I wanted to make my position a little clearer.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:15 am*

Diana was shaking so uncontrollably now she worried the floor might begin to shake with her. It had been simple enough this past week to pretend as she had been that this marriage was nothing more than procedure and there was no need to worry about what was expected of her. As the duke had made it seem, a business contract of sorts.

Today the reality had struck her. How real it all was. And the duke being here now, confirming as such, only worked to undo her further.

She tried to look at him but could not do it. She tried to act aloof, as if this was all a simple transaction for her, but it was hopeless. She did not know what she wanted from this marriage, nor what she expected, but she knew deep down that a marriage in which she treated her husband more like a business associate than a husband could not work. And surely, he did not think it could?

“I never intended to marry,” the duke began. She could feel his eyes on her and that made her shake further, unable to look at him directly. “My brother’s death changed that. Responsibility, is to what I speak, something I am sure you have fair experience with.”

“I -- I do,” she stammered.

“But I did not choose you simply because it was easy or convenient,” he continued, his voice hardening. “My grandmother told me of what you spoke, and she is right in more ways that she probably realized. I considered for a long while before I came to see you last week. It was not a decision I made brashly, and I wish for you to know this. This marriage...” He clicked his tongue as if nervous himself. “It is not a love match. It is not expected to become one – I am not asking you to fall over yourself in

obsession for me,” he chuckled.

“I will do my best,” she tried for a joke, still struggling to look at him. She didn’t understand what he was saying, and somehow it only made things worse. As if he was confirming what she had suspected all along.

“But that does not mean it needs to be difficult,” he continued. “Nor do we need to be strangers in the home that we will share. We will be man and wife, Miss Goldsmith. And I expect...” He shook his head. “I expect that we will at the very least be able to enjoy the pleasure of one another’s company.”

That had her starting and she snapped her head up to look at him.

The pleasure of one another’s company. Does that mean...

Diana felt her entire body flush pink with embarrassment. Her mind went to what Evelyn had been saying the other day and now she could not stop herself from thinking of the obvious. As man and wife, certain things were expected of her... things of which she had no experience but apparently the duke had plenty. Is that why he came here? To tell her in a very roundabout way that she was to perform her marital duties still?

Despite herself, Diana’s eyes flicked down the duke’s body. His wide shoulders. His thick chest. Further still, she found herself lingering on his waist... his thighs... her eyed widening as she remembered the other thing that Evelyn told her. Suddenly, she found her lips salivating...

“I... I... I...” she stammered uncontrollably, caught in two minds, one hand reaching out slowly as if she meant to grab him. But then she realized what she was doing and pulled it back.



A part of her she wished to tell him that he could not have it both ways. That stubborn desire to stand up for herself pushing that thought to the fore, as it was wont to do. On the other hand, she met the duke's dark eyes, she flicked her own to his thick lips, she felt his power in how he stood over her, the command that emanated from him. And dammit, she suddenly forgot what it is she was so upset about in the first place.

He seemed to notice her shaking, the look in her eyes, and the tiniest smirk rose over his lips. "Is something the matter?"

"Yo -- you wish to -- to -- I do not quite under -- understand --"

"Miss Goldsmith, you are shaking." The duke took her hands in his and the effect was immediate. It sent a pulse through her hands, up her arms, and across her body which somehow calmed her nerves as if she was melting. It was a warmth that spread through her, a sensation that made it feel as if she might suddenly explode. Only, in a good way. Within half a second the nervous shakes had stopped, replaced by a tingle which she could feel ripple across every inch of her skin. "Are you cold?"

She did not speak at first, still concentrated on the feel of his hands. He squeezed them, her knees buckled, and she stepped in closer, wishing to feel the warmth of his breath against her skin.

"Miss Goldsmith...?"

"N --no," she said. "I am..." She took a deep breath and forced her mind back to the moment, meeting his eyes as her body continued to glow. "I am feeling perfectly well, thank you."

"Good. I would hate for you to be sick on our wedding day."

She held his eyes, wondering if he felt the same sensation that she did right now. She squeezed his hands just a little, delighting in the way he squeezed them back. It was but a moment, but it passed between them like lightning striking a tree and setting it alight. Surely, he must have felt it too?

“So...” He cleared his throat, still holding her by the hands. Another beat passed, his eyes moving down her body, focusing now on her chest as he licked his lips and he mind went to places she did not need to guess. “You understand what I am saying?”

“I think I do...” She held his eyes, held his hands, continued to tingle throughout her entire body. Hot flushes from her face down to her loins and she wondered if he could feel the heat radiating from her.

“Good,” he said with a smile. “I am looking forward to this marriage. Despite the queer circumstances.”

“As am I.” And she realized right then that she meant it.

“Wonderful.” He released her hands, and she nearly cried out as if he was tearing away a limb. “I should be going, then. But I will see you shortly, yes?”

“I look forward to it.”

He smiled at that, and it made her heart race. “As am I.” A short bow, then he turned and strode from the room.

The room felt significantly emptier once the duke had left. Colder, somehow. Smaller. Diana’s heart was still racing. Her body was still warm. But she was no longer shaking as she had been. She was no longer nervous.

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A very strange moment. A revealing one, at that. Diana hadn't known what to expect from this marriage but thanks to the duke's little visit, she felt that she had a better idea than she had previously. At least she thought that she did, for surely what had just occurred could mean only one thing?

Regardless, she was ready to marry now in a way she had not been even five minutes ago. A marriage of convenience? Or could it be something more?

### ChapterSeven

"Welcome to your new home," the duke said as he opened the front door for Diana and stepped back, allowing her to walk ahead so she might see the inside of the manor for the first time.

It was a strange feeling that pulsed through her body as she prepared herself. Stepping into a new world was how it seemed, while still not entirely certain that she had left the old one behind.

The wedding ceremony had been brisk and functional. A slight disappointment, seeing as after the talk she and the duke had before it began, she had expected it to be a little more romantic. A sense that despite the 'convenient' nature of the marriage, he was going to at least try and put on airs that this marriage was real. Or had she completely misunderstood what he had been trying to say to her?

There was no after ceremony celebration either. Often, it took the form of a breakfast hosted between family and friends. But the duke had insisted that they return home immediately, as his nieces would be waiting, and he did not want to leave them alone

any longer than what was needed.

Little conversation had on the ride from the church too. A tension hovered between them, neither seeming sure what to say. His Grace did seem nervous, but not regarding her or them. Most likely, he was thinking about this moment right here, Diana and the two girls she was expected to raise.

It was thus that Diana did her best to appear calm as she smiled at her husband and stepped through the large doors and into the manor, bracing for... truthfully, she had no idea what!

“Uncle!” she heard a cry the moment she was inside.

“Uncle!” came another from behind.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the setting, all she could make out was the grandeur of the manor. Typical, for she had been in many a home like this before. A gigantic foyer. A winding staircase. Marble flooring. Rich tapestries on the walls. A decorative chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Everything expected from the home of a duke.

Through the haze of her adjusting sight, two figures rushed toward her. She gasped, expecting them to come upon her like wild animals on a freshly lain carcass. But they skirted her, she stumbled back in shock and nearly fell, and then she heard her new husband let out a grunt as they smacked into him.

“Careful now,” the duke said with cheer. “What did I tell the two of you?”

“You tell us a lot of things,” one of them said; Diana couldn’t tell which as she was still catching her balance.

“To be on our best behavior,” the other said. “But you did not tell us what that means.”

“Adeline...” the duke groaned. “You know very well.”

“It is not our fault, Uncle.” Steady now, Diana was able to see the two girls more clearly. They were eight and ten, she had been told, almost twins to look at, with the only noticeable difference being their size. “We are bored – you promised you would not be gone for so long.” That was the eldest speaking... complaining, more like.

“Excuse me?” the duke said, his tone firm and warning.

“You promised you would be home before midday,” the youngest of the two agreed. “You lied.”

“I did not such thing.”

“You did! You did!” the eldest cried. “You lied!”

Despite herself, Diana could not keep from laughing. The two little girls hung from their uncle’s legs, clutching at him as if to let go would see them fall. But they were rowdy and brave, happy to chastise him in a way that skirted the lines of playfulness and geared toward abrasive.

In a strange way, they reminded Diana of herself.

The duke looked up when he heard her laughter. His brow creased as if to warn her off amusement. “And this is how you behave when we have guests, is it?” he asked the two girls.

“Is that what I am?” Diana said. The youngest of the girls looked at her and she

winked back. “A guest?”

The duke peeled himself free from his nieces and stepped about them, making his way to Diana. Her breath caught as he approached, and for a second she thought he was going to put his arm around her. Maybe take her by the hand. Indeed, the thought alone had her body tingling...

But no. He simply stepped in beside her, careful it seemed not to get too close. There was certainly no touching.

“Josephine. Adeline. This is...” He caught himself and smiled. “This is my wife, Her Grace, Lady Albury.”

“You may call me Diana,” Diana corrected with a big smile for the two girls. She had little experience with children, but she sensed that she might like these two. Again, it was the rebellious nature she could see in them both, one she felt a kinship with. “Her Grace is a little formal, don’t you think?”

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“Hmm...” the duke cleared his throat. “Perhaps that is a tad too familiar? They should not be calling you by your first name. At least not so soon.”

“Oh, it is fine,” she waved him down.

He stiffened. “As I said, for now, I do not think it proper.”

Diana frowned and leaned back, utterly surprised by his reaction. Had she gone too far? “Oh... well... I simply thought, seeing as we are a family, why not begin to act like one.”

“Diana,” the eldest, Josephine said, nodding her head. “May I call you that? Truly?”

“Yes,” she said, to which she felt the duke stiffen again. “But only if I may call you Josephine.”

“And me?” Adeline asked.

“I would expect nothing else,” Diana said. “We are to be friends. Let us begin to act like it.”

The two girls brightened, and she sensed that they wished to rush her. Balls of energy, standing in the one place for two long was clearly a struggle for them both. Before they got the chance, however...

“Girls, if you do not mind, I would like to speak with Her Grace for a moment. Where is Miss Brooks?” He looked about.

“Here I am, Your Grace!” an elderly maid hurried into the foyer. “I am so sorry. They got away from me – girls.” The maid widened her eyes at the two. “I told you not to run off like that.”

“Perhaps you should be faster,” Josephine shot back.

Again, Diana laughed. And again, the duke eyed her in reprimand.

The two girls were quickly led away by Miss Brooks, told to take them outside until called for. It was a stiff demand, given with an even stiffer upper lip. And when he gave it, he looked between the two girls to make sure they understood it was not to be broken.

Miss Brooks dragged the two girls away, that was until Josephine broke free and charged ahead, which had Miss Brooks calling after her. It was all quite amusing, a mood which vanished the moment Diana and the duke were alone because he turned on her in a state of annoyance that radiated from him like heat from a fire.

“I hope that you understand what you did wrong just now.”

She frowned and leaned back. “What I did wrong?”

“Regarding my nieces,” he said sharply. “I appreciate that you wish to make a good first impression but that is not what I expect of you.”

“What you expect of me...?”

He sighed. “You are not their friend. You are not their equal. You are, for all intents and purposes, their mother. And I would expect you to act like it.”

Diana looked at the duke with confusion, almost as if she expected him to break into



laughter. Surely, this was a joke? “And what was I to do? Reprimand them for being excited?”

“It is not about punishment or penalizing. It is about creating proper boundaries to which they will adhere. I have brought you into this house to educate them, to ensure that they are raised in a manner that is expected of their class. But the first thing you do is...” He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “I would appreciate it if in the future you did not contradict me in front of them.”

Diana had no idea what to say.

Where she understood well enough what the duke meant, the manner that he was explaining it was completely uncalled for. As if she should just be expected to know how to treat two children she had never met? As if she should have spoken down to them for no other reason than to assert her authority? She knew little about children, but she guessed that doing so would have been a terrible well to start things off.

The duke was scowling at her expectantly. No doubt, he assumed she would apologize and agree to be more wary in the future. And she very nearly did too. No need to antagonize the man twice in one day. Only then she remembered her conversation with the dowager duchess...

“I think you’re wrong,” she said frankly.

The duke blanched. “Excuse me?”

“I understand the point you are making, but I believe it to be the wrong one.” She straightened herself up, matching the duke’s scowl with her own raised eyebrow. “If I am to help rear these two girls, it will not do for them to be frightened of me. Or to hate me.”

“I was saying no such thing,” he argued carefully, although she could sense the anger brewing. The first time, she realized, that she had seen it. “I simply believe that if you are to be their mother, they must respect you.”

“There are other ways to earn respect than through fear.”

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:15 am*

“Nobody said anything about scaring them!” he snapped. “But rules are what they need. Rules and boundaries.”

“Which I will establish,” she continued, despite the anger now flowing from him. “Once I have their trust. If they like me, they are more likely to do as I ask.”

“This is not a debate.”

“Oh, I agree,” she said. “It is not.”

Until this point, the duke had been more playful than hot tempered. He had mocked her. He had pressed her buttons. There had been a childish nature to him that Diana had found intriguing, for it mixed esoterically with his rugged physicality. So much so that when Evelyn had told her what she had heard of his nature, she had been dismissive because she simply had not been able to imagine it.

All that changed in an instant.

The duke swept toward her. Short strides, quick and powerful, so sudden that he was on her before she had a chance to blink. Once she realized that he was coming, she did take a step back, and then another, soon finding herself pressed against the closed doorway. The duke, however, followed her, trapping her between the door and his hulking frame.

It was a strange sort of anger. Not visceral in nature. Not even fiery. More stern and demanding. A man who was used to getting his way and not used to having to fight for it.

“Perhaps it is time we had another chat,” he said. His tone was calm, but she could hear the rumble of thunder in his throat. “About expectations.”

“I... I am perfectly aware of what is expected.” She felt herself begin to flush, reminded only too quickly of the thoughts she’d had of him of late... and Evelyn’s words concerning his...no, no, do not let your mind go there!

“Is that so?”

“You have made it perfectly clear.” Her heart was racing, and her body was on fire. His body was a mere inch from her own, and she could not believe how calm his breathing was compared to hers. “Per -- perhaps you are the one who is unsure?”

His jaw clenched and he closed his eyes as if to calm himself.

Diana could not say exactly what she felt in that moment. She knew that she should have been careful, even afraid. Evelyn’s warning sounded out in her head and all good sense told her to head it. And yet...

Excitement flooded her. A thrill that made her limbs tingle. She forced herself to meet the duke’s dark green eyes, to hold them, to show him that she was not scared. No idea what would happen next, she again thought to their conversation earlier. That phrase. The pleasure of one another’s company...what sort of pleasure did he mean?

“You have a nasty habit of speaking without thinking, don’t you?” he growled as he leered over her, matching her stare with one that cried out in warning.

“Oh, I think well enough,” she shot back, unblinking, her entire body trembling under the weight of his presence. “Remember, you are the one who chose me. And I thought that was for good reason.”

“I am beginning to forget why that was.”

“Then you are the one at fault, not me.”

He sucked through his teeth. “I wished for a strong-willed wife who would help me raise my nieces. Not an insubordinate one.”

“Is that all you wished for?” she asked daringly, her heart racing so fast now that it hurt. She could feel her tongue salivating, a sensation she did not understand but could figure out the meaning well enough.

He frowned. “I... I told you. This is a marriage of convenience. Nothing more.”

“And what you said earlier?” she pressed.

“Earlier?”

“About...” She could not believe she was about to say it! That she would dare! But her body was on fire. Her mind too, with wicked thoughts. This was not a regular marriage, but did that mean it had to be stale? “Enjoying the pleasure of one another’s company...”

The duke frowned. Then his eyes widened in realization. She held those eyes, daring him to look away. By her waist, her hands dangled, but suddenly she felt his fingertips graze her own. Light. Sparks shooting up them. She caught her breath as he stepped in closer...

“My meaning was...” He groaned as he bore over her. “That our relationship should not be antagonistic.”

“And yet so far you are doing everything to ensure that it is.”

His eyes flashed anger. “I am doing no such thing. You are the one who... who... who takes pleasure in testing me. If you would simply behave, then there would be no cause for antagonization.”

“So, that is all?” she dropped her breath into a whisper, not even knowing why she was doing so – the effect it would had. It simply felt right. “A marriage of convenience... nothing more?”

“What else is there?”

She caught her breath, unable to say the obvious. Evelyn’s comment swept her mind. The duke’s body on hers, how she shuddered, washed over her. Her chest hurt. Her loins burned. All thoughts pointed toward the obvious and all she could do was stare and wonder if he was feeling as she did or if this was all in her head.

“I... I... I...” she stammered.

“Speak clearly or don’t speak at all.”

“You are not my master,” she said without thinking for the words felt right. “You are barely my husband.”

“This is my home...” He stepped in closer. “And you will do well to remember that.”

“Or what?” She raised both eyebrows. His hand wrapped around her own. Closer again, their bodies now touching. Diana had never been in this position before, but instinct was a strange thing, and it took over as if she was borne to it.

The duke kissed her there and then.

Like a lion mauling a gazelle, he was on her. His right hand pulled her in close while his left took her by the face. His lips clashed with hers. His tongue pried them apart and swept into her mouth. It was messy. It was wild and untamed. It was filled with passion that set Diana alight, and she felt alive in ways she never had before. That she never knew was possible.

Almost on instinct she leaned back but he held her there. His tongue explored her. His lips devoured her. His hand around her face gripped her as if for dear life. The kiss was for her lips, but she felt it across her entire body, such that she nearly collapsed as it ran down her spine and touched between her thighs so that her knees gave out.

Both hands about her waist now. His body pressing against her as if he was trying to mount her – as if he was trying to tear her apart so he might feast! She squirmed as if on instinct, but she did not wish for him to let her go. In fact, he hands soon found their way to his waist also, and she held him tight, hoping he would never stop --

“No!” the duke roared suddenly, letting her go and stumbling back. “That was...” He looked away as if ashamed. “That was... I should not have done that.”

Diana was frozen, leaning forward as if to follow him, her feet stuck to the ground. “I... wh – what?”

Her shook his head. “I am sorry, I should not have...” He took another step back. “That was wrong of me.”

“It was?”

He grimaced as he spoke. “When I came to you earlier, my true intention was to let you know that nothing... that I expected nothing from you. Yes, we are man and wife, but it is in name only and I did not want you to think that you...” He clicked his tongue, fidgeting nervously in a way she did not think was possible for the duke. “My nieces are what matter. And for them, we must present a united front – as they would expect. But regarding everything else, what I wished to tell you was that I do not expect you to... to...” He laughed bitterly, more at himself, it seemed. “I will never force myself upon you.”



“Oh...” Diana blinked, truly taken aback. “Thank you?”

“I wish for you to feel safe, Diana,” he said. “I do not wish for you to fear me or worry what I might do. Or what I might try and do. What happened just now...” He shook his head. “I am sorry. I should not have... that was my mistake, and it will not happen again.”

“I...” Diana had no idea what to say. “Alright.”

He nodded, seemingly happy that he had said what he felt he needed to. As for Diana? She was as confused as she was aroused as she was unsure of what the heck was going on.

Does he think that he took advantage of me? Does he truly not know how much I wanted it? And should I tell him...

“I will send the staff to help you settle,” he said, still not looking at her. “They will bring your things to your room and help you to unpack. If that is acceptable.”

“It is...”

“Good.” He forced himself to look at her, forced a smile, then nodded once and turned away. “If you need anything at all, please do not hesitate to ask.” And with that, he swept quickly from the foyer, leaving her standing there like a dolt.

If I need anything? How about to finish what we just started!

To say that Diana was confused would be an understatement. She knew now that she wanted the duke. That this marriage of convenience was very inconvenient for how determined the duke was to keep things platonic. Unless he was simply waiting for her to tell him otherwise? Or did he not want that, and this right here was simply an

er that was a onetime thing?

Diana had no idea. Nore did she know what to do about it or what she could even do. Unsure of this marriage from the day it was announced, the confusion she felt then paled to how she felt now.

She did know one thing, however. One thing she was certain of above all else. Nothing about this marriage was going to be convenient.

## ChapterEight

“Your Grace, is this a bad time?” Miss Brooks stood in the doorway of Magnus’ study, catching him completely unawares.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:15 am*

He jumped in fright, so lost in his own machinations that she could have walked across the room and slapped him across the face before he had noticed her.

“Miss Brooks,” he said as he tried to regain his composure. “Is something the matter? The girls?”

“Have been put to bed, Your Grace,” Miss Brooks assured him. “They were excitable, as is to be expected. But they know better than to push. At least they know better than to push me,” she finished with a curt smile.

Magnus breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. And thank you for today, Miss Brooks. My hope is that now we have a duchess living here, the burden of fostering my two nieces won’t fall so squarely on your shoulders. The Lord knows you could use the help.”

“They are little angles,” Miss Brooks assured him. “It is no bother.”

“Nonetheless, Her Grace will be taking a greater hand in their care from now on. And if you require anything regarding either of the girls, she is who you should seek first.”

“Understood, Your Grace.”

Miss Brooks had been a lifesaver these last few weeks. A true gift from God who had saved Magnus more trouble than he could imagine. She was the girl’s governess, hired originally by his brother, kept on once Magnus took over for the sake of consistency and ease – it would not do for so much to change in the girls’ life in such a short time.

As adept as she was, she was also not a mother. Well into her sixties, looking after two girls who were but eight and ten was a task that might just break her if she was left to it on her own. Besides, where she could teach them well enough in the ways of learning and education, a mother-figure was needed to hone the girls into proper ladies of the ton.

As to whether his new wife – he still felt strange referring to her as Diana – was up to task... that remained to be seen.

“Was there anything else?” Magnus asked, noting that Miss Brooks remained in the doorway.

“Regarding your supper, Your Grace. I was asked to enquire when you would be wishing to eat.” She considered and then wore a coy smile. “I believe Her Grace might be hungry also.”

“Ah...” Magnus grimaced. “Yes... supper...”

It was only right that Magnus joined his wife for supper this evening. Freshly wed, her first night in a new home, the right thing to do was to join her to make her feel more comfortable. Wasn't that what he wanted? For her to feel as if she belonged.

Alas, if only things were that simple...

In hindsight, Magnus was beginning to realize how short sighted he had been when he'd approached Miss Diana Goldsmith and asked for her hand in marriage. A marriage of convenience... to ensure that his nieces had a mother to help raise them... what could possibly go wrong?

It went without saying that Magnus had found his new wife attractive when he'd first met her. But that was not why he had chosen her. Truly, their brief interaction at that

garden party had been enough to tell him that she was possessed of the exact type of personality needed if she was to take control of two young girls in ways that he simply could not. Ironically, that was also the problem.

He found her confrontational wiles utterly intoxicating. The way that she stood up to him, pushed his buttons, refused to heed his demands seemingly to spite him was unlike any woman he'd met before. It did things to him. It made him feel... enamored, and excited, and lustful in ways he had never felt before. Dammit, it made him lose control!

Just now for instance, Magnus had completely lost his sense of reason, forcing himself on his new bride because his head had swum and all he'd been able to think about was how it might feel to take his new wife in the ways that a husband should – that was his right.

The problem, as he saw it, was that this went against what was promised. He has given his word that this was a marriage of convenience, and it simply did not feel right to force himself on her because he could not control his most base desires. Magnus knew how it felt to be powerless, to have no control or action in one's own life. He would not wish that upon anyone, especially his new wife.

As such, he had retired to his study, a chance to regroup and think what he was going to do, if he could be around his wife without being overcome by his raging libido. Even just to think of her right now had his body turning hot and his manhood... awakening.

"I am afraid that I will have to skip supper tonight," Magnus said eventually. "I am swamped with work and cannot spare the time."

"Oh..." Miss Brooks frowned. "And Her Grace? What shall I tell her?"

“That she is free to take supper as she needs. This is her home now, and it should be treated as such.” He nodded once but then decided to add a final note. “But please, send her my apologies, won’t you? It is regrettable but unavoidable.”

Miss Brooks eyed him curiously, the sense that she didn’t believe a word of what was said. Magnus cocked an eyebrow at her, warning her off saying anything. She thus offered a smile and a small curtsy.

“It shall be done,” she said and stepped from the room.

Magnus exhaled and sagged into his chair, feeling like a proper coward while knowing that for tonight at least, this was for the best. He could not avoid his wife forever. Nor did he intend to. What he needed was to learn to control himself when he was around her. Surely, that should not be so hard.

But then he remembered her scent, the feel of her skin, the taste of her lips, and he became undone once more. A marriage of convenience? Has a greater lie ever been told? Magnus highly doubted it.

## ChapterNine

Diana was not surprised to find that on her first morning living in Albury Estate that she would be breaking her fast alone. Indeed, after being thoroughly rebuffed last night, she had expected it. Not that this made the situation any easier to deal with. Or less confusing.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:15 am*

When she entered the breakfast room, dressed in a modest morning dress, seeing the room to be empty, she did not waste time asking if His Grace would be joining her. She was not such a fool as that. Rather, she seated herself toward the head of the table and instructed the staff to make her a plate.

So, this is what I can expect from now on, is it? A husband who wants nothing to do with me? Why, exactly? Perhaps if he would speak to me, I'd have an answer.

Diana had spent most of the previous evening running through her head what had transpired between herself and her husband, trying to figure through what she had done wrong and at what point exactly His Grace had decided he wanted nothing to do with her. No clear answer came to him, for the circumstances yesterday were as unclear as could possibly be.

Ultimately, she was forced to contend with the likely fact that His Grace was committed to this marriage of convenience and truly he only wished for this marriage so she might help raise his two nieces.

Speaking of which...

"Adeline! Josephine!" Miss Brooks swept into the dining room suddenly, a frantic look painted across her aged face. "Adel -- oh! Your Grace," she started and came to a sudden halt. "I am so sorry. I did not see you there."

"Is something the matter... Miss Brooks, wasn't it?"

"That is me, Your Grace." She offered a quick bow. "And no, no. It is nothing I

cannot handle. I should not have disturbed you.”

“Nonsense.” Diana waved her away. “You are searching for the girls, I take it? What has happened...” She smiled playfully. “Have they run off on you?”

Miss Brooks flushed. “We are supposed to be taking reading lessons, and I instructed both Adeline and Josephine to meet me as soon as they were dressed. But they are nowhere to be found, and I fear...” She flushed further with embarrassment. “I fear that they have purposefully absconded.”

Diana laughed. “I used to hate reading lessons when I was a little girl. I empathize with them.”

“It is not for you to worry yourself with,” Miss Brooks said quickly. “I will find them. This is not the first time they have acted in this way. Please...” She turned to leave. “Continue.”

“No, no,” Diana said as she rose from her seat. “If the two girls are hiding, I dare say it will be much faster if we look for them together. Do you not think?”

“Your Grace, there is no need...”

“And yet I am going to help you anyway.” She swept down the length of the table. “Now, tell me, where is it that they like to hide? My guess is that they have their favorite places? If we split up, we will find them in no time.”

Miss Brook could not help but smile. “That they do. They are not so clever as they like to think. Albeit they are just as troublesome.”

It was thus that Diana spent the morning searching for Josephine and Adeline with Miss Brooks. There were five places in the manor which the girls enjoyed hiding, and



Diana took two of them to herself.

The first was the library, for it was a maze of tables and couches and bookshelves, so easy for young girls to scurry away in. She looked through every nook and cranny that she could, finding no trace of the two girls.

The next location was the stables outside, and that was where she struck gold.

It was the moment she ducked her head inside the stables that she heard the girls whispering to one another in the back corner, tucked away in the furthest stall. When she heard them, Diana smirked to herself, realizing suddenly that this was a perfect opportunity.

The concept of motherhood was new to Diana, and she'd had little time really to decide what type of mother she might be. Not that she was to be a mother to these girls, more a mother-figure, a female elder for them to look up to. But that only confused the matter further.

Her only experience in such a thing being her own mother, whom she loved dearly but was strict and no-nonsense and not at all in line with how Diana thought she should approach the situation.

If she wanted these girls to listen to her, they had to like her. And if they were going to like her, she needed to give them a reason to. And so, she decided upon a game...

"I wonder where they might be," she said loudly as she started across the stables, toward where she heard them whispering. "Oh, where could they be?"

She heard them gasp. One of them told the other to be quiet. Diana's smile grew as she came closer.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are...” Closer she came to their hiding place. “Clearly, this is not the right place to look,” she continued. “If I was hiding from the wicked Miss Brooks, I would not be such a fool to hide here.”

She crept closer to the stall, standing right on the other side. The girls were both silent now, holding their breaths, surely praying that Diana would move on. But she did no such thing.

She crouched down just a little. She set her expression to one of menace. Then she pounced around the stall, throwing the door open, and holding her arms out as if to trap the two girls from running past her.

“Got you!” she cried out.

“Ahhhh!” Adeline, the youngest of the two cried out.

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“Run!” Josephine pushed her sister forward.

“I don’t think so!” Diana was quick to spread her arms and keep them from fleeing.

“That is not how this game works! You’re cheating!”

Josephine came to a sudden halt. “Ch... cheating?”

“We are playing hide and seek, are we not?” Diana asked as if she was serious. “And I must admit, while you two are wonderful hiders, I am an expert seeker.” She shrugged. “You never stood a chance.”

“What is she talking about?” Adeline asked her older sister softly. “We are not playing – ow!” she yelped when Josephine pinched her.

“Yes, we are.” She widened her eyes at her little sister to keep quiet. “Which means...” She smiled conspiratorially, as if she was in on it. “... that we get to hide again. And you cannot peek!”

To this, Diana laughed. “I do not think so.”

“But you just said --!”

“I know what I said,” she cut the little girl off. “I also know that as I am the one who found you, I have won. Perhaps tomorrow, you will do a better job of hiding because really, this is not a very good spot.” She winked. “If you are lucky, I might even teach you how to hide so that nobody will ever find you.”

Josephine narrowed her eyes. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Why would I not? Miss Brooks might not like it when you hide like this, but I think it is fun. Don’t you?”

She could see how confused the two girls were. Could they trust her? Was she trying to trick them? They had no idea what to think, which Diana counted as a good thing.

“Now, seeing as I found you, I get to decide what we do next. Is that fair?”

Josephine still had her eyes narrowed. “Maybe...”

“There is no maybe about it. I am the winner and as the winner, I think it would be fun if we...” She shrugged. “Found Miss Brooks so we might continue in today’s reading lessons.”

Josephine’s eyes went wide. “I was right! You are tricking us! Miss Brooks sent you to find us!”

“Should we run?” Adeline whispered to her sister.

“You could try it,” Diana said, making sure to block the way. “But I am very fast.” She pumped her eyebrows and pulled a face and Adeline, only eight, could not help but giggle. “Believe me, I would love nothing more than to play with you all day, but Miss Brooks scares me also. And if I do not send you back...” She shuddered. “I do not know what she would do.”

Josephine did not look convinced. “She does not. And if you do wish to play more, all you need do is tell her.”

“Ah, yes, that is true. But life is not all games, and sometimes we must study even if

we do not want to.”

“But --”

“How about this.” Diana held up a finger to silence the two girls. “Return with Miss Brooks now and spend the rest of the morning in study. If you do that without causing a fuss, we can continue to play hide and seek for the rest of the afternoon. Although it is as I said, I am an expert at this game and neither of you two stand a chance.” She winked and pulled another face.

It was working... sort of.

Adeline was clearly amused by Diana, and she crept out from behind her older sister as if to show that she was happy with this compromise. But Josephine was distrustful and still she narrowed her eyes at Diana.

“You are trying to trick us again.”

“I promise you, I am not.” She held her hand over her chest. “I swear that come a few hours' time, I will show the two of you what it means to hide so you will never be found.”

Slowly, she could see Josephine coming around to the idea. Strange that Diana wished so hard for the approval of a ten-year-old girl but she felt that if this worked then it would be a huge step forward in their relationship. And where it was not the sole reason, she was doing it... it did make her stomach flutter just a little to imagine how pleased the duke would be to hear of this.

“There you are!” Miss Brooks called from across the stable. “Girls! What is the meaning of this!” Miss Brooks stormed toward them.

“I found them,” Diana winked at the two girls and spun about to intercept Miss Brooks. “And now that I have, they have both agreed to come with you to study. In fact, they were insistent.”

Miss Brooks blinked. “They... they were?”

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“Isn’t the right, girls?” Diana spun back to look at the two girls.

“Y -- yes,” Josephine said. “We are.... we cannot wait.”

“Yes!” Adeline said, tripping over herself to stand beside her sister. “We lost the game. Yes?” She beamed at Diana. “And now, we must study.”

Miss Brooks narrowed her eyes at the two girls. “Yes, well... you best hurry inside then. You know how your father feels about you being outdoors. Go!” She shooed the two girls who were quick to scurry away.

On the way out, Adeline made sure to look back at Diana and smile. Josephine however... she still eyed Diana with a sense of reservation. She will be hard to win over. But this was a very good start.

“That was very well done,” Miss Brooks said as soon as the girls were out of sight.

“Excuse me?”

She offered Diana a coy smile. “His Grace was right about you, it seems. Very well done, indeed...” She tittered to herself and began to cross the study.

Diana stayed where she was, her stomach swarming with feelings of pride. Such a small thing in the grand scheme of this marriage but a huge step in the right direction. And that compliment paid to her at the end, Diana was tickled pink to think that the duke would be impressed.

Not that I care...she told herself, knowing that the duke's esteem was all she cared about. If only the same could be said of his feelings toward her.

\* \* \*

It was shortly after noon when Diana made her way toward the sitting room where she knew the two girls to be engaged in their lessons with Miss Brooks. She had made the girls a promise and she intended to keep it.

"What is this?" she asked as she entered the room to find the two girls hard at work.

Adeline looked up immediately and beamed. Josephine was a little slow to do so, and she didn't beam, so much as she did frown as if she were confused.

"Lessons, Your Grace," Miss Brooks explained. "Which I must say, are coming along rather well."

The two girls were seated at a table, each with a book in front of them, while Miss Brooks walked back and forth behind where they sat in instruction. By the looks of things, Adeline was in the middle of reading a passage, but she closed the book and went to stand.

"Adeline," Miss Brooks stopped her. "We are not finished."

"I am afraid I must contradict you," Diana sighed. "For today, I think, we can take a short break from lessons." She winked at the two girls. "What do you say?"

"Yes!" Adeline cried out.

Josephine was still unsure. "Re -- really?"



“I promised you, did I not?”

“Your Grace...” Miss Brooks looked caught in two worlds. “I must protest – His Grace was adamant that the entire day be given to the two girls and their lessons. He would not approve.”

Diana hesitated on this point, wondering for a moment what the duke would say if he found out that she was overriding the girls’ lessons for playtime. But she also reasoned that it was more important for now to earn their trust. And besides, the girls were still of that age where they needed to learn to have fun as much as anything. To grow up without enjoyment was a sin, in her mind, and if she allowed them to play and live a little, that would see them open to her.

Besides, one afternoon could be missed.

“Oh, I am sure he won’t mind,” Diana said. “And besides...” She winked at the girls again. “What His Grace doesn’t know, won’t hurt him.”

“And if he does know?” a deep voice spoke from behind Diana.

Diana jumped in fright and spun around, taken by complete surprise to find the duke standing there watching.

She felt her face flush red as memories of the last time the two spoke swept over her. Despite her best efforts, she could not look at him, for to do so found her eyes tracing his lips, and then she remembered how they felt on her own and her heart began to race.

“Uncle Magnus!” Adeline was on her feet. “Dia – the Duchess has said we can take the afternoon to play. Can we? Please?”

“She has, has she?” He eyed Diana with an expression she could not read. Staunch and determined, like a bulwark standing against the coming tide. Was he impressed? Was he angry? She wished she knew.

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Diana forced herself to be brave. “I have,” she said, standing up to him while ignoring the way her stomach fluttered. “My feeling is that to study all day without being allowed some time off is... is counterproductive. Surely, a few hours missed will not be such a bad thing? It will give them time to relax.”

“And is that what they need? To relax?”

“They are girls,” Diana said. “And girls need to have fun.”

“They need to learn.”

“Which they will do,” she shot back without pause. As with the last time the two spoke, she found herself unable to keep her tongue at bay. It was as if she enjoyed provoking him. “Later. I promised them that they could spend the afternoon outside playing. You would not make me a liar, would you?”

He stayed by the door as if scared to enter the room. As he did, his dark green eyes flicked between Diana and the two girls in decision. Diana did what she could to hold his stare, to not back down. She was right in this, she knew. And he needed to see it.

“No,” he said finally.

“But --”

“I said no,” he said again, this time with bite. “The time to play is later. And I will remind you...” He fixed Diana with a warning glare. “You are not here to be the girls’ friend. You are to be their mother. I suggest you start acting like it. Now...” He raised

an eyebrow at her. "Is there anything else?"

"I guess not," she said, a curled lip so he could see how upset she was.

"Good." And with that, he turned and strode from the room.

"See," Diana heard Josephine whisper to her sister. "I told you she was lying."

Diana felt herself growing angry. Deep down, she knew that she should heed the duke's words for this was his home and the girls were his nieces. If he wished for them to study, who was she to say otherwise?

I might not be their mother, but I am here to help raise them as one should. An aunt, perhaps? A mother-figure who they can trust and hopefully one day love. Surely, that means I should have some say?

In the back of her mind, good sense told Diana to take the loss and try for a win another day. But she was stubborn. And she was also annoyed at the duke for treating her so poorly. Not just now, but since she arrived. His message was confused, and she was through being confused by it.

"Girls, up you get," she said. She turned and clapped her hands at them. "Come on then."

"Wh - what?" Miss Brooks stammered. "Your Grace, His Grace asked that --"

"I heard him well enough," she cut through Miss Brooks. "But he is not here anymore now, is he. I am..." She pumped her eyes at the two girls, her expression wicked. "And I say it is time to play. That is unless you would both rather study..."

Adeline was out of her chair in a second. Josephine, struggling to decide if she

wished to be cantankerous or trust Diana finally, was a little slower.

“That’s what I thought,” Diana beamed. “Now, I seem to remember a large oak tree in the back garden. I would race the two of you there but surely I am too fast for either of --”

Adeline flew from the room as if she was carried by a wind, giggling the whole while. Josephine, again a little slower, was unable to hide her smile as she rushed after her sister.

“Miss Brooks...” Diana fixed a warning look on the governess. “I trust this will not be a problem?”

Miss Brook sighed and shook her head. “You are their mother, not I. Although I cannot speak for what His Grace might say.”

“Good, because I can.” Diana nodded once and then turned to hurry after the two girls. Her heart raced as she did. Part happiness, for she knew now that she had the girls on her side. Part fear, for she wondered how the duke would react. And part... something else, for she was excited to see how the duke would react as no doubt when he found out what she had done, he would be angry.

Let him be angry. At least that way he won’t avoid me as he has been doing. And that thought excited Diana more than anything.

## Chapter Ten

I probably could have handled that a little better...

As Magnus walked back toward his study, he chastised himself repeatedly for his less-than-optimal handling of what was a delicate situation. One that he now decided

hadn't been dealt with in the best possible way.

He had panicked, was why. Faced with giving into the Duchess' demands and looking weak in front of his nieces and Miss Brooks, he had stood his ground as if afraid that he might lose the respect of the household. Now, he realized he had lost the respect of his wife instead.

What did she expect me to do!?She knows what I want of her. It is as if she was purposefully trying to undermine me.

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Further to that point, Magnus had resolved not to let himself become undone by his wife again. The last time they had argued, he had crumbled on account of his lust, letting her get away with standing up to him when she should have known better. At least now she would know that he wasn't one to be taken so lightly.

And hopefully a precedent might be set. Hopefully now she will know better than to argue with him. Hopefully that might nip in the bud any future... testy engagements.

"Your Grace!" Miss Brooks called to him from down the hall. "Your Grace!"

Magnus turned to find Miss Brooks hurrying after him, looking vexed as she did.

"Miss Brooks," Magnus said. "What are you doing – why are you not with the girls?"

"I debated if I should tell you." She came to a stop, out of breath and red in the face.

"I was not certain if I should. But I worry for the girls. And you deserve to know."

"What happened?" He looked past her, fear spiking through him. "Are they hurt?"

"What? No, of course not. It is..." She bit her lip. "It is... Her Grace. She has... she has ignored your order and taken the girls outside to play! I tried to stop her but --"

"What!"

"She was insistent! And what could I do?"

Magnus had stopped listening. Where before he was confused with how he felt

around his wife, now that confusion was a thing of the past. Anger was what he felt. Fury at being so directly disobeyed.

To stand up to me is one thing. To have conviction in one's own belief is one thing. But to go directly against my orders...

He stormed past Miss Brooks, his body shaking now with rage.

Magnus heard the girls before he saw them. Laughter was what he heard, coming from the back garden. If he was in a better state of mind, he might have stopped to realize that it was the first time he had heard the girls laughing in such a way since their father had died. He might have understood the importance of such a thing, conceding that in this, his wife had been correct.

Magnus was not in a better state of mind. And so, when he entered the back garden and saw the girls running around the large oak tree in the back corner, falling over and covered in dirt, he snapped.

“What is this!” he roared as he strode across the garden. “Josephine! Adeline! What do you think you are doing?”

The two girls froze as if they were statues. At first, it was just the two of them who he saw, his sights set squarely on their shoulders. But then his wife rounded the tree, hands held above her head as if she was chasing them.

“Do not stop!” she cried. “Otherwise, I will catch...” she trailed off when she saw Magnus coming.

“Duchess!” Magnus exclaimed as he came toward his wife and two nieces. “What is the meaning of this?”



In his wife's defense, she did not look nearly as petrified as he might have expected. Although that was also a problem, as he sensed immediately this wasn't going to be nearly as easy an argument to win as it should have been.

"I wish to say that we are playing... but that seems entirely too obvious an answer."

He came to a stop a few feet away. Adeline and Josephine cowered back, half-hidden behind Diana. He hated to see them like that, to think that they feared him. He did not want them afraid! That was not his intent at all. What he wanted was for them to be raised properly, to appreciate what he was trying to do.

"Did I not make myself clear, earlier?" he said, doing what he could to keep his temper under control.

"Concerning?"

He sucked through his teeth, rage building. "You know well what. I asked that Adeline and Josephine be left to their studies, and you deliberately disobeyed me."

"I thought --"

"I did not ask for what you thought," he snapped. "I gave an order, and I expected it to be followed."

"And order?" she scoffed. "I was not aware that I worked for you."

"That is not --" He bit back his tongue, only too aware of the two girls watching. He took some heart in seeing them hide behind the Duchess in defense, as clearly, they were warming up to her. But why did it have to be in defense of him? "Girls, Miss Brooks is waiting for you inside."

Josephine looked at the duchess. “But... but she said...”

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“I know what she said. Sadly, your studies come first.” He attempted to soften his features, noting now how filthy the two girls were. Covered in dirt, that alone piqued his rage once more. “Before you see her, please clean yourselves up. It will not do to be covered in filth.”

Both girls looked to the duchess for confirmation.

“Go on,” she said. “The emperor has spoken.” She winked at them both and then pushed them along. “I promise we will play again soon. I still must teach you both how to be better at hiding, don’t I?”

“You promise?” Adeline asked.

“Just try and stop me.”

The two girls giggled at the response but then turned serious when they caught Magnus watching them. They bowed their heads and hurried past him, properly chastised, a state of being that Magnus took no pleasure in.

Only once they were out of ear shot, did he speak again.

“I wish you would not make me out to be the bad guy,” he said.

“Then you should not act like it.”

“I am not --!” He started to snap, again forced to catch his tongue. “I only want what is best for them.”

She scoffed. “And what do I want? To ruin their lives?”

“I did not marry you to be their friend. I married you to raise them in the ways of theton, to be a mother.”

“Which is what I am doing,” she shot back. “If I am to help rear them, they need to trust me. And if they are to trust me, they need to like me.”

“Liking you has nothing to do with it.”

“I disagree.”

“And why am I not surprised.”

She was unlike any woman that Magnus had ever met, and never before had that been more apparent. Oh sure, when they had first met, she was hostile and argumentative, but he had written that off as nerves and embarrassment. Clearly strong willed, he did not think she would be so... so... so obstinate.

Worse still, nothing he did or said seemed to have an effect on her.

Magnus attempted to stare her down, standing over her as if to force her to bend to his will. He decided immediately that this was a bad idea as not only did she stand up to him, but it forced him to look at her properly, something he had been avoiding doing since the previous evening.

He nearly gasped when he met her dark eyes. When his own flicked down to her pouty lips. When he then searched a little lower, gazing briefly at her covered bosom which struggled mightily against the confines of her top. She was quite short compared to him, all curves, a soft body that with his blood boiling as it was, he wanted nothing more than to get his hands on and --

No! Do not become undone. Do not let her get to you.

“I appreciate what you are doing,” he said evenly, forcing himself to look into her eyes and not at her chest and body and lips. “But you must understand why I do not wish the girls to be outside playing like this. It is... it is unseemly.”

She frowned. “It is nothing of the sort.”

He groaned and he felt his pulse rise. “Why must you argue?”

“I do not do it on purpose. Only when I disagree... which seems to be often,” she added with a smirk.

“Women of the ton should not be out playing, covered in dirt. That is a man’s business.”

“They are not women. They are little girls. And if they remain cooped up indoors all day, they will grow to be lifeless bores that resent you. Surely, you do not want that?”

“I think you are being a tad over dramatic.”

“You will just have to trust me.”

He snorted. “Would that I could, Duchess. But so far, you have given me no reason to --”

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“And please,” she cut him off. “Duchess? That is so... formal. We are married. Surely it is not too much to call me by my name? Diana, in case you had forgotten,” she chuckled.

He swallowed. “Diana...”

“There, that wasn’t so hard.”

It was harder than it should have been. A sense of intimacy that seemed to announce the situation in a way that Magnus had been trying to avoid. They were alone. Their tempers were frayed. She was baiting him, as if she wanted a repeat of what happened the last time they argued.

“Be that as it may,” he said. “From now on, you are to do as I request. Is that understood?”

Please. Let this be the end of it...

“No,” she said.

He groaned again, his eyes drifting, and his hands wanting to take her.

“We are married,” she continued. “And that means that we are to raise these girls together. I am aware that this is a marriage of convenience, but isn’t the very point for me to be a mother figure to them? For they need such in their life.” She raised an eyebrow at him, her expression becoming suggestive. “Unless there is another reason you married me...?”

“I...” He felt his tongue begin to salivate, his mind wandering to places he dare not let it. A growl escaped his lips, blood flowing south of his waist... “It is as I always said. The reason is a marriage of convenience.”

“As you say...”

It might have been his imagination, but she almost sounded regretful. Was it possible that Magnus had completely misunderstood her own feelings and intentions? That what had happened yesterday wasn't a case of him forcing himself on her...

“Good,” he said. “I am glad we are on the same page, finally.”

It was subtle. And it happened quickly. But their eyes met, locked onto one another, and the intensity of that stare seemed to wrap around the two like a cocoon. Standing mere feet apart, all he had to do was reach out and take her. He knew she wanted it. He could feel it in the way she looked at him.

And oh, how he did too. And why not? She was his by right. She liked to argue. She liked to fight. Perhaps the best way to shut her up was by busying her mouth with something else.

Another groan escaped his lips. Magnus felt himself stiffen at the thought of what he wished to do. His body began to shake, hands sweating, the desires swirling inside of him so powerful he could hardly control them any longer.

“I... don't do it again.” Magnus tore his eyes from her and spun about, intending to rush back inside before he did anything foolish. But in his haste, he stepped in a patch of mud, his foot slipped out from under him, and before he could do much of anything... “Wowa!”

It all happened so quickly.

Magnus went down like a bag of dirt. He was on his back, looking up at the sky, dazed and confused and unsure. Not to mention, covered in dirt.

“Magnus!” Diana cried out. She hurried toward him, reaching down to pull him up.

In that moment, Magnus did not think. His head spun. His pride was wounded. Diana’s hand reached for him, he took a hold, a pulse rushed through his entire body as if fire sprung from Diana’s fingertips and without worrying about consequences or what was right, he pulled her down with him.

Diana didn’t so much as resist.

Her body seemed to mold into his own as she fell on top of him. His legs spread and she found herself between them. His legs closed and she moaned as their lips met. His hands on her waist. Her hands around his face. His tongue opening her mouth and exploring her sensually and passionately and erotically because he wanted to taste every inch of her.

In the mud, they rolled. His hands moved from her thick waist to her thicker, softer rear. He grabbed and squeezed, and she yelped and then bit into his lip.

For a few seconds nothing seemed to matter. The fight they were having. Magnus’ determination not to succumb to his ravenous arousal. His promise that this was but a marriage of convenience and he would not force himself on her. He was not! He could tell at that moment that she wanted him as much as he now knew he wanted her...

Only then, as quickly as it had happened, it ended.

A stick found its way into Magnus’ back, driving in deep, forcing him to yelp and snapping him out of his sexually induced trance. He realized suddenly what the two



were doing, how inappropriate it felt, even if it probably wasn't. His hands all over her. The way he held her – forced her onto him. He was thirty-three, she was but a girl by comparison. Somehow, it did not feel right.

“No!” Magnus erupted and shoved her backwards.

“Ow!” she yelped as she tumbled.

Magnus was on his feet, blood pumping through his veins, breathing stagnated and harsh. He looked down at his wife in the mud, he felt a pang of disgust in himself for putting her there, he very nearly went to help her only to curb that notion because he did not want to risk touching her again.

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“You... you should clean yourself up,” he said instead. “It would not do for the girls to see you like this.”

Diana could not have looked more perplexed. Was it so wrong that even in that state, he still found her impossible seductive. How he wanted to lean forward and push back her matted hair, wipe the dirt from her face and...

“Excuse me?” she said from her position still on the ground.

“I told you...” Magnus forced himself to straighten, putting on airs of being disgusted even if the opposite was true. “Women do not play in the mud. You should lead by example.”

For perhaps the first time, Diana was rendered speechless. Huh, so that is what it takes? She stared at him in shock, quickly turned to anger, quickly turned to disgust which had her lip curling into a snarl.

Magnus did not wait for a response. He raised a warning eyebrow at her and then turned and strode across the garden, desperate to be away from Diana before she ensnared him once more.

It was only once he was inside, ducking into a spare room, closing the door behind himself, that Magnus stopped to think about what had just happened – what he had just done! He had lost all control. Dammit, he had wanted to lose control! He was attracted to his wife, that was now undeniable. The only question was... what was he going to do about it?

To that, he had no answer.

## ChapterEleven

“It is not funny,” Magnus snapped.

“On the contrary, from where I am sitting, it is rather hilarious.” Magnus’ best friend, Theodore, Earl of Northwood, cackled gaily. He slapped his knees and shook his head and looked positively delighted.

“Are you quite done?”

“Yes, yes,” Theodore said, sobering up. Only then he caught Magnus’ eyes once more and double over in laughter for a second time.

“Now, really...”

“I am sorry,” Theodore cried out through the tears and laughter. “Truly, I know it is a sensitive topic, but you must see things from this side. My, oh my, Magnus...” He took a deep breath and wiped away the tears. “Were you always this much fun? Or has marriage changed you.”

“I did not come here to be mocked.”

“And yet mocking you is the only possible outcome. I would almost say you were a sucker for self-punishment. According to your tales of marriage, you certainly are.”

“I don’t know why I tell you anything.”

“As I said, a sucker for self-punishment,” Theodore chided Mangus. “That, and you have nobody else to tell. Make some more friends if it please you. Ones who fear

you, as nearly everybody else this side of the Channel seem to.”

Only Theodore would dare speak to Magnus this way. And strangely, despite Magnus’ current antipathy toward his best friend, he rather liked it. The problem with being a duke was that most people were either scared of you, or wanted something out of you, both outcomes leading them to do and say as they thought you wanted to hear, not what you needed to. Theodore was one of the few people in Magnus’ life who treated him as an equal.

They had been friends since childhood, a friendship which had faltered when Magnus fled across the ocean to the Americas, but one that had picked up right where it left off upon his return. Magnus had changed a lot in the years he had been away. He had become more hardened. More serious. More discerning and distrusting of others. Theodore, on the other hand, was the exact same.

He was blonde of hair and boyish in the face. Slightly stocky but trending toward muscular as he was a renowned horseman and spent his spare time rearing them as if he was a stablemaster and not an earl. The type of man that everyone just seemed to like, Magnus had always been privately pleased that Theodore seemed to covet their friendship nearly as much as Magnus did.

That was the only reason that Magnus had felt comfortable in coming to see him this evening. Desperate to get out of the house. Desperate to unload his woes on another. Desperate for answers, that's what! He sought his best friend and regaled him with tales of married life... perhaps going into a little too much detail, as evidenced by his friend’s mockery.

“Tell me it is not as bad as I think,” Magnus sighed. He had in his right hand a tumbler of whiskey, but he hadn’t so much as taken a sip, such was his state of mind.

“Oh, it is worse than that,” Theodore jested as he took a sip of his own drink. They

were in the drawing room of Theodore's manor, sitting by the fire. "You are attracted to your wife! What a nightmare to behold."

Magnus sneered. "You know things are not that simple."

"Only because you choose to make them complicated."

"As I have explained," he sighed. "When Diana and I entered into this marriage, it was promised that it would be for convenience only." Theodore was the only other person in the world who knew of this arrangement, another testament to how much he trusted the man. "My nieces are what matter, and I made this perfectly clear."

"And your lovely wife?" Theodore asked with another sip. "Is she in agreement? By the sounds of it, she might wish to reassess the tenants of the arrangement. Just as you clearly do," he added with a wink.

Magnus looked at his friend flatly. "And as I explained, I do not wish to force myself upon her – as I have done consistently. For all I know, she reviles me but has felt obliged to indulge with my tenacious actions because she thinks she must! I have not given her a choice, truth be told."

“Is that what you think? Truly.”

“It is the truth,” Magnus said. “You know my...” He grimaced. “History, as well as anyone. And I as well as anyone know what it is like to feel powerless. To do as others tell me, while pretending that it is as I want. What if she is the same?” He shook his head with guilt. “I cannot do that to her. I will not.”

Magnus bowed his head in shame as memories of his childhood flooded back to him in droves. He had been a sickly child. Weak and withering. Bedridden, for the early years of his life it was believed that one night he would likely go to sleep and simply not wake up – a mercy, most thought this would be.

Yes, he had grown stronger in time. But he would never forget what it was like in those harder days, forced to do as he was told, wanting to appear as if he was not weak and pathetic. Lying to himself and going along with the whims of others simply because there was no other option.

His body shuddered at the memory and finally he had a drink.

“Do you want my opinion?” Theodore said. He threw back the final mouthful of his whiskey and rose to his feet, strolling across the room to refill his glass.

“I did not come here for the pleasure of your company.”

“Your reasoning just now,” Theodore said as he poured himself a fresh drink. “It is the height of, pardon my tongue, bullshit.”

“Excuse me?” Mangus frowned.

“You heard me.” He finished pouring his drink and waltzed back to the couch, falling into it with a grunt before taking another sip and smacking his pink lips. “It is bullshit – an excuse, concocted by you for reasons of... well, I can only assume guilt.”

“Preposterous.” Magnus blew through his lips.

“You continue to bring up your nieces, as if they are all which matter.”

“They are!”

“They are important, no doubt. But they are not the be-all end-all – and I am not trying to insult you,” he said quickly when he saw a flash of anger behind Magnus’ eyes. “You care for them, as you should. But you also feel guilty, blaming yourself for your brother’s death.”

Magnus attempted to wave him down... albeit, weakly. “I do... I do not.”

“His death is not on your hands, Magnus,” Theodore said, his voice turning soft. “And raising his nieces, although it is admirable, will not change what happened.”

“That is not --”

“I am not saying you should not care for them,” he spoke over Magnus. “But what I am saying is that raising them should not take absolute precedence over everything else in your life. You can be happy and see them raised into respectable women of the ton. The two are not mutually exclusive.”

“Who says I am not happy.”

He scoffed and took another mouthful of whiskey. “And thus we come onto the topic of your lovely wife.”

“Oh...”

“Clearly, you are attracted to her – and do not insult me by saying otherwise.” He waved Magnus down as if to preempt the argument. “And clearly, she has some attraction toward you. Although why she does... tell me, is she blind? You did not say.”

“Funny,” Magnus said very dryly.

“Exploring this attraction is not taking advantage,” he continued. “And using your nieces as an excuse is not nearly the argument you think it is.” He looked at Magnus. “It is a damn shame, if what you told me just now is even half true. Truth be told, I would be shocked if your wife wasn’t at least curious to see where this marriage might go – it’s protentional. Because I tell you now, she did not marry you because she has an affinity for raising another man’s children. And unless she is mentally dull, well...” He pumped his eyebrows at Magnus. “I am sure she can raise the girls and perform her wifely duties.”

“How aptly put.”

“I do have a way with words, don’t I?” He winked and then threw back the rest of his drink in one mouthful. “You deserve to be happy, old friend. And this wife of yours...” He laughed and shook his head. “I always thought that if you were ever to marry, she’d need to have an iron will and a tongue like a whip. It sounds to me like she has both. If anything, she is the one taking advantage of you.”

“Oh, please...” Magnus blew through his lips.



Theodore shrugged. “Just a thought. Just a thought...”

Magnus’ natural inclination was to be dismissive of his best friend. More often than not, Theodore preferred tomfoolery and absurd humor, rather than moments of honesty, so it was usually a safe bet. In fact, try as he might, Magnus couldn’t think of another instance in which his friend had been so darn insightful as this.

Was it possible that he had been overreacting to the clear chemistry that existed between himself and his wife? Even trying to subvert how obvious it was with feelings of guilt and shame felt for what happened to his brother?

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He knew deep down that his brother's death wasn't purely his fault. His brother had died due to poor health, brought on by alcoholism. But Magnus hadn't been there to stop it as he should have been – forcing the role of duke onto his brother's shoulders was likely what had caused it in the first place. And when he had returned, he hadn't done nearly enough to try and stop it.

None of this was Diana's fault, of course. And her attention to his nieces, what he wished for them, wasn't a reflection on how he should feel about her. Yes, they had entered this marriage as a convenience and nothing more, but did it have to stay that way?

Despite himself, Magnus began to smile, tinges of excitement prickling his senses because he wondered if his friend was right. More than that, he hoped he was.

“And there it is,” Theodore said with a proud nod. “He has come around.”

“And now I have to suffer through you gloating,” Magnus sighed. “I wonder if it is worth it.”

Theodore shrugged. “I am rather insightful, if you give me a chance. So, why you have me, take advantage. What should we tackle next? Your relationship with your father? Perhaps those nightmares you once told me you suffer through. Or even --”

“Enough,” Magnus said, feigning a smile, even if he was slightly annoyed. Theodore, although meaning well, often went too far. His father was one thing, but those nightmares to which he spoke... those were a dark secret that he regretted mentioning, done so in his darkest hours, not to be discussed ever. “Unless you want to see why

everyone is so afraid of me.”

Theodore looked nonplussed. “And there is the other side of the coin... no, wait. There have already been two sides. The other side of the triangle?” He rubbed his chin. “What is an apt metaphor?”

“What are you talking about man?”

“You wish to be with your wife? You wish for her to want to be with you? Well, I have some bad news for you, my friend. Woman...” He clicked his tongue. “They are not like us men.”

“Thank God for that.”

“They are not one to give in to sexual desires purely for the sake of carnal delight.”

“Meaning?”

“It won’t be enough to simply tell your wife you find her attractive and want to bed her. If you wish for this to work, you need to do the one thing that you are perhaps worse at doing than any man I have ever met.”

“Which is?”

He looked flatly at Magnus. “Opening up. Talking about yourself. Giving her more to latch onto than your rugged good looks and supposed charm, of which I am yet to see proof of, for I guarantee that the moment you bed her, she is going to want more. And you, Your Grace, are as closed off as a brick wall surrounded by a high fence, girt by a moat filled with sharks.”

Magnus blew through his lips. “I am not that bad.”

“You are worse.”

He waved his friend down. “You are getting ahead of yourself, Theodore. For all we know, she will want nothing to do with me anyway, making your point moot.”

“And if she does want something to do with you?”

Magnus shifted uncomfortably because he knew his friend to be right. He also knew that when it came to talking about his past, his dark secrets and trauma, there wasn't a force on this earth that could pry it out of him. “Then I will cross that bridge when it comes.”

“A bridge that in your estimation will be on fire and guarded by --”

“Will you stop with the metaphors!”

Theodore grinned. “Just trying to help.”

## Chapter Twelve

Diana never thought that writing a simple letter would feel so dangerous. Words were all they were. And they weren't even controversial. A simple invite written to her mother and cousin to visit her in her new home at their earliest possible convenience.

Yet her hand quite shook as she penned the letter. Her heart raced. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention; part anxiety, part fear, part excitement. It was so much more than just a letter, she knew, and the consequences might very well be dire.

So what if they are? I am doing nothing wrong. This is my home. And I should be allowed to invite my mother and cousin to visit me, if I so choose.

The reason that she felt as rebellious as she did was rather silly, but that just spoke to how strange all of this was. She had not bothered asking her husband permission before penning the letter, deciding that he could and would find out whenever he chose to speak to her next. If he did.

In fact, she couldn't even say for sure if he would be upset. She expected that he would be, and she sensed that he was a man who liked to be in control. But at the same time, the contradictions in the way he behaved toward her were so vast and unexplainable that she truly could not say for sure how he might react.

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I hope he is upset. I hope he is furious. I hope... I hope... dammit, I hope this leads to another fight because at least then he will speak to me.

It wasn't that Diana enjoyed fighting with Magnus. Frustratingly, it was only when they argued that they spoke at all. He avoided her otherwise, such that she had not seen him since the previous evening after he had fled the garden and left her sitting in the mud.

She had spent hours that afternoon and night trying to fathom what her husband wanted from her. And what she wanted from him in return. This was supposed to be a marriage of convenience, and he had been at pains to ensure that nothing was expected from her as would be a normal marriage. All well and good, barring the simple fact that twice now they had kissed in the heat of passion, and twice now he had fled immediately after.

Was he embarrassed? Was he ashamed? Or was he simply not as attracted to Diana as she was to him – even if she wished it to not be the case. Oh, how much easier this would be if I did not covet the feel of his lips and the touch of his skin as I do.

It was the morning following the incident in the garden that Diana sat down and, with a huge smile on her face, wrote the letter to her mother and cousin. She told herself it was a simple act of rebellion to teach the duke a lesson. But deep down, she wanted it to bring him to anger. She wanted the confrontation. She wanted him to take her in the heat of passion and finish what they had twice now started...

She wrote the letter quickly and then sealed it. Smiling happily to herself, she pushed back her chair and rose from the table, turning about to leave the room, only to leap

into the air in fright because Magnus was standing in the doorway watching her.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” he asked.

“N -- no,” she said, composing herself and then standing tall as if in challenge. “You simply startled me.”

“I did not mean to.”

“Yes, well, perhaps you should not lurk in doorways as you are.”

“I’ll try and remember that.” He was smiling coyly to himself as if amused. Typically, this only annoyed Diana further.

“If you do not mind...” She put her head down to walk past him.

“What’s this?” He blocked her passing and indicated the letter in her hand.

“Nothing,” she said a little too quickly, hiding the letter behind her back.

He snorted. “That’s clearly a lie.”

Diana’s eyes flashed in anger and a fire lit inside of her. “It is none of your business, is what it is. You have made it perfectly clear that the only thing you care about are your nieces, and this has nothing to do with them. So, if you do not mind...” Again, she tried to walk past him and again he blocked her.

It was easy for him to do, too. He was so much bigger than her. So much stronger. He was a mountain, and she was but a molehill, totally at his mercy such that he could have snatched the letter from her hand if he so chose to. The power he had over her... it did not frighten her, for she did not think he was violent in any way. Rather, it

elicited excitement inside of her and again she wondered if perhaps she should push and test him as she had yesterday.

“You are angry with me,” he said simply.

She scoffed. “And you are not as big of a fool as I thought.”

She had expected that to do it. In fact, she braced for his visceral reaction. Shockingly, the duke smiled in amusement, his dark green eyes matching the smile as he looked down at her.

“I think I owe you an apology.”

She jolted. “Wh -- what?”

“An apology,” he repeated. “For yesterday. How I behaved. And...” He sucked through his teeth. “And how I left you.”

“In the mud, you mean,” she said sharply.

“Yes, that. Admittedly, that was wrong of me. Damn despicable, truth be told. You are my wife, and you did not deserve to be treated that way. For that, I am sorry.”

Diana did not know what to say. Surely, the shock written across her face was indication enough of how unexpected this apology was. It added even more confusion to the situation, furthering that gap which existed between herself, her husband, and her understanding of their relationship.

Her first instinct was to accept the apology, but she curbed that instinct because she also reasoned that a simple apology was nowhere near enough. Was this short sighted of Diana? Most likely. Did she care? Not one little bit.



“And you expect what from me, exactly? Should I be gracious that you saw it in yourself to apologize finally? That a full day later, after having left me in the mud – after having acted as if I was the one who was responsible, mind you. Should I get on my knees and thank you for your kindness? Is that what you wish, oh master?”

Magnus leaned back as if struck. “I... I am only trying to apologize. I wronged you. You did not deserve it and...” He hesitated, somehow sensing that whatever he said would not be enough. “I am sorry.”

“I heard you the first time.”

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To that, his lip twitched, and she could see him biting back anger. “I appreciate that you are upset with me --”

“Oh, you have no idea how I--”

“But I am still your husband. This is still my home. And I do not know how things were done where you were raised, but in this home, when somebody goes out of their way to apologize for a transgression, it is expected that they are not insulted in return.”

“You did not come here to apologize,” she said.

He frowned. “That is exactly why I came here.”

“No.” She shook her head. “You came here to make yourself feel better. You did the wrong thing. You realize it. And all this is...” She waved him down dismissively. “Is a vain effort to alleviate your guilt. Admit it.”

Again, his lip twitched. “I take it you are not going to accept my apology.”

“Give me one reason why I should.”

She expected him to explode. In a way, she almost wanted it. She braced herself, her mind wandering ahead as she pictured them fighting, and where that would inevitably lead.

“You are right,” he sighed. “I do not deserve your forgiveness.”

“What was that now?” she stammered, sure she had misheard him.

“Since the moment you arrived here – since the moment we married, really, I have treated you poorly. So much so that I shouldn’t expect a single apology to simply fix everything.”

“You... may you please repeat that?” she blinked with confusion.

“Duchess Alb – Diana,” he corrected, smiling in a way that unnerved her, while making her stomach flutter at the same time. “I need to be honest with you, if I may?”

She eyed him curiously, feeling a sudden need to take a step back because surely this was a trick. “You may...”

“When I approached you about this marriage, I was shockingly naive. Embarrassingly so, it seems. Desperate for a mother to raise Josephine and Adeline, I had convinced myself that a marriage was the answer to this – and that whomever it was that I married would be perfectly content to fill this role and this role only.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “I am speaking of course about our marriage of convenience.”

“I am aware of it.”

He chuckled at the cheek. “Since then, I have learned that marriage is nowhere near as simple as I believed or wanted. And you, Diana...” The smile he wore reached his eyes and then pierced her heart. “You are nowhere near as simple as I believed or wanted.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” she asked with a tad more aggression than was necessary. A subconscious reaction, borne from every other time they had interacted.

“That we should start again,” he said. “I understand that I have been unfair to you, perhaps unnecessarily harsh at times. And if you would let me, I would like to prove that I am not the monster you think I am.”

Diana had not expected this.

An apology? An admittance of wrongdoing? Honesty? Who is this man and what has he done with the duke?

“I... I do not think that you are a monster,” she said, looking away, feeling her cheeks flush red with embarrassment because he was trying to be kind, and she had responded with hostility. “I hope you know that.”

“Prove it then,” he responded coolly. “Show me what it is that you hide behind your back.”

Diana’s eyes went wide, for she had completely forgotten about the letter! Written almost with the intent of antagonizing the duke, she now felt foolish for wanting such a thing. As if she was somehow in the wrong.

“It is nothing,” she said nervously. “I... I was not going to send it. I just... I was angry with you, and... and... and I am sorry.”

He frowned. “I am sure that whatever it is, it cannot be that bad. Come now, tell me.”

She still could not look at him. “It is a letter to my mother and cousin, inviting them over for tea at the earliest opportunity. Tomorrow, was my thinking.”

“Huh,” the duke said, and Diana braced herself for his anger. “I shall make sure the staff are well prepared. If your mother is to come here, we must impress her, yes?”

Diana's head snapped up. "What?"

“I said we should --”

“I heard you,” she cut him off, her brow creased as she studied him, searching for the lie. “But... but you are not angry?”

“Why would I be angry?”

“Because I did not ask for your permission. The truth is...” Her cheeks reddened further. “I wrote this letter hoping to anger you.”

Magnus laughed. It was deep, like thunder rumbling from over the horizon “And why does that not surprise me.”

“I am sorry.”

“Oh, somehow I doubt that,” he laughed again. “This right here is the problem, is it not? We have spent so much time fighting that we assume it to be the only way that we can talk. I do not enjoy fighting with you, Diana.”

Despite herself, Diana smirked. “Are you sure about that?”

Magnus’ eyes widened at the presumption, but his lips curled into a smirk and he glanced down at her before he could stop himself. Her body... he had thought about it often. Too often, for his own liking, because he had convinced himself he would never have to himself. Only now...

Is it possible? That all this time...

“I do not mind our arguments,” Diana said bravely. “At least not...” She felt her heart racing as she considered what she was about to say. Was it too bold? Or was she finally starting to understand her husband? “At least not always. In fact...” She could hardly breathe she was so nervous, but she took courage in the way the duke began to fidget. “I might even go so far as to say that I enjoy them.”

He seemed to understand her immediately “Is it the arguing you enjoy? Or what it does to me?”

“That depends...” She stepped toward him, into his space, close enough that if he wished it he could reach out and grab her. I hope he does. “What exactly does it do?”

How quickly things could change. How unexpectedly. Magnus stood firmly in the doorway, erect now, confidence brooding from him as he knew exactly what was on Diana’s mind – she was making it clear enough! He eyed her with a cool smirk, a slight tilt of the head, a lick of the lips which made her legs shake.

It was strange that Diana had assumed they needed to fight to illicit this reaction in one another, when really all they had needed was honesty. She had felt attraction to Magnus from the moment she had met him, and now she was certain he had felt the same way. Why had he taken so long to explore it? She did not know. And to be honest, all things considered, she did not care.

“I think you know,” he said, his voice a low growl.

“I would not have a clue,” she said innocently.

Suddenly, Magnus stepped into the room. Just as suddenly, he swung the door closed behind him. She gasped as he swept toward her, almost daring her to back away. But she did not. She stood up to him, chin raised and meeting his eyes as he stood over her, tall and brooding and powerful.

“I told you before we married that I would never take advantage of you,” he said in a deep whisper. As he did, one hand moved to her waist, squeezing as if to keep her from moving. She gasped but pressed herself into it.

“A shame that I did not promise the same of you.”

His eyes flashed excitement at the answer. “If I didn’t know any better, I would say that you are trying to seduce me.” His hand squeezed her harder.

“I do not mean to take advantage of the situation,” she purred back, holding his deep stare, pressing her body in close to his. “Or you, for that matter. But I am rather new to this marriage business, so I was hoping...” She looked away as if shy suddenly. “If you might show me how?”

“Only if it is convenient for you.”

“Nothing has ever been more convenient.”

His hand reached under her chin and brought her eyes back to his. His other hand continued to hold her waist. They both seemed to sense that the time for words was over, that action was now required. Diana’s heart raced like it never had. Her entire body flushed. She waited for the duke to make his move... agonizingly, she waited... licking her lips... looking at his... her entire body shaking and still he did nothing.

“Will you just do it already --”

Magnus pulled her in suddenly and kissed her full on the lips. There was no fighting this time. No anger. No heat or fury. But that did not matter. The second their lips met, the same sparks that Diana had spent days remembering flew so fully that the room itself seemed to catch fire around them.



What was more, as one hand moved to the side of her face and the other wrapped her waist, she knew that this time, it would not end at a simple kiss. Not if she had anything to say about it.

## ChapterThirteen

The kiss was explosive in ways that Diana might have expected but could never have imagined. Knowing now that Magnus wasn't going to turn and run, she gave herself over to it, accepting him completely, wanting him to push it further because moments like this needed to be taken advantage of.

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His tongue was inside her mouth. His teeth nibbling her lips. The hand that he held against her face found its way to the base of her neck, gripping it firmly but not too tight. She gasped as he pulled away, and then moaned as his tongue licked her ear and then down her neck.

For only a few seconds, although it might have been minutes, they stood in the middle of the room, wrapped around one another, kissing as if their lives depended on it.

But a kiss would not be enough, and both seemed to sense it.

Now that she had given Magnus permission, she could feel from the way he devoured her that it would take the hand of God to stop him. Both hands grabbed her waist and held her. Through the front of her dress, she could feel his manhood pressed against her. Panic suddenly struck her, a realization that she did not know what she was doing and that maybe she was in over her head...

“Magnus...” She pulled away, but he simply moved his lips to the nape of her neck. Soft, wet kisses that sent prickles all over her body. “Perhaps we should...”

“Should what?” he purred between kisses.

“We are married but... but... I do not know if...” She wasn’t even sure what she was trying to say! She wanted this. Oh, how I do. But five minutes ago she had convinced herself she hated this man, that this marriage was doomed to failure. It was a marriage of convenience and that was all! Clearly, things had changed.

Magnus pulled back, a hunger in his eyes that fought with confusion because her protests had clearly caught him by surprise. “Oh... do you not...”

“No -- I mean, yes – I mean...” She grimaced. “It is just that, I am rather new to this...” “I could die of embarrassment! Her entire body turned red, and not from arousal. “And I have not had a chance to think about... about what it is that...”

To that, Magnus smiled coyly. “I would not expect anything of you, Diana. And as I said, I would never force myself on you. But perhaps...” There was a sparkle in his eyes that she did not understand but that made her heart hammer. “Perhaps if we take this one step at a time?”

“R - really? You do not mind?”

“I am in no rush.”

She felt relief wash over her, and disappointment also. A part of her almost hoped he would ignore her trepidation and take the lead. “That is... thank you.”

“However...” His hands remained around her waist. The hunger was still in his eyes. “I am also thinking that I have not treated you very well since this marriage began. If you would like, I very much wish to make it up to you.”

She frowned; her chest tight at the implication. “Make it up how...?”

Magnus did not speak. Rather, he took her hand and led her to the bed. She thought to resist, knowing she did not want to because in that moment she trusted him completely. Unimaginably turned on, craving his touch as if it was oxygen, Diana chose to let Magnus take the lead in ways he was no doubt experienced in.

He sat her down on the bed.

He then fell to his knees before her.

She gasped as his hands slowly moved to her ankles, lifting the skirt of her dress while at the same time he held her stare and licked his lips and let her see what he was going to do without having to say anything.

“Magnus...” She stammered, while spreading her legs as she knew he wanted; her thighs quivered, and she could feel the wetness between them.

“Trust me,” he said, her skirt now at her thighs. “If it is convenient for you.”

One hand moved up and pressed against her chest, forcing her onto her back. She gasped again as she lay down, her heart racing so that it hurt. Then her body began to shake as his kisses found the inside of her thighs, gentle and wet, rising higher... higher... her legs shook... her body began to writhe... she could feel how wet she had become... his tongue licked around her womanhood... she moaned... she gasped... and then she screamed.

His mouth wrapped itself around her lips and began to suck. His tongue pressed against the tip of her pleasure center. It was wet. It was messy. And dammit, it was good.

“Magnus!” she cried out as he continued to suck her. “Don’t... please... do not stop!”

“Do stop?” Magnus snapped his head up, his lips soaking wet, his eyes as hungry as ever as he drank her in.

“Wha --?” She gasped as she sat up and looked at him. “Why did you stop?”

“You asked it of me, no?”

“I did not! I said do not stop!”

“And who said that you can tell me what to do?”

She balked, thinking at first that he was being serious. “I... I am sorry. I did not mean... why are you smiling?”

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“Diana,” he purred as his fingers traced up her thighs. They sent prickles of pleasure across her skin, making her shake so that she nearly fell back once more. “You may try and tell me what to do, but you must know that when we are here, I am the one who is in control.”

“Is that right?” she asked coyly, sensing now what he was doing.

“It is...” His fingers slid inside of her and she groaned, body seized by pleasure. “And so long as I am, do not dare to try and tell me what I can and cannot do.”

“And if...” She moaned as his fingers played with her. “And if I do...”

“Then I might have to stand up and leave...” He half made as if to walk away.

“No!” she cried out, then gasped because his fingers pressed inside of her. “Please...”

“Beg me...” His fingers continued to work her.

“Please,” she begged him. “Do not... do not... do not go.”

“Do you wish for me to finish?”

“Yes...”

“Will it be convenient for you?”

“God...” She fell back as waves of pleasure rolled through her. “So convenient.

Please!”

“As you wish.” And then he dove his head back between her thighs.

From that moment on, he said nothing, keeping his lips on her, keeping his tongue busy, sucking and licking as her breathing rose in intensity and her body began to shake. It was unlike anything she had ever felt, any sensation she knew existed. Untold pleasure rippled down her body and washed through her so that it felt like she was on fire.

It did not take long, either.

Before she knew it, she felt... it was hard to describe. A flower blooming? A fire growing? Her insides contracting and then expanding at the same time so that her entire body felt as if it was about to burst.

“Magnus... what... what... what is.... oh, God!” She screamed again. Loudly. Eyes closed. Body spasming. Diana screamed until her throat was hoarse and then she screamed some more.

And all the while, Magnus continued to devour her. This, she thought to herself, is quite the apology indeed.

\* \* \*

“... my mother is not as bad as you might think,” Diana said honestly.

“You do not know what I think,” Magnus laughed.

“I know what most people do,” Diana pointed out. “So, it is safe to assume you are the same.” She raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to argue. When he did not, she

continued. “It has not been easy on her, having to raise so many daughters – you know what is expected, and the stress that causes.”

“Only too well,” Magnus chuckled.

“She just wants what is best,” Diana sighed. “And truly, we may fight at times... and more often than that,” she giggled. “But I do love her, and I hope she knows it.”

“Have you told her?” Magnus asked.

Diana frowned. “No... I do not think I ever have.”

“You best do so tomorrow then,” he said. “I am certain she will appreciate it. And if at the same time you wish to put in a good word for me...” He shrugged casually. “I will not mind that either.”

She laughed and slapped him playfully on the chest. He grinned at the gesture and then scooped his arm in under her. She allowed herself to be pulled in beside him, snuggling in close in a way that just an hour ago would have been unthinkable.

How quickly things change. Not that I am complaining.

It had been a strange afternoon, of that there was no doubt. When Magnus had come to the room to find Diana writing her letter to her mother and cousin, she had been certain that a fight was coming. Most strangely, he had apologized instead, had admitted fault, and most importantly had asked for a second chance.



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Their marriage of convenience had gotten off to a rotten start but thanks to that singular conversation, Diana had found new hopes for it in ways that she had never imagined. What would it mean for them in the future? She still could not say. She was not even certain what she wanted. But she and the duke were being honest for the first time and that, she decided, was a good enough start.

And besides, if there was more of this afternoon in store for her...I suppose I could very much get used to it.

“What of you?” Diana asked.

“What of me?”

She rolled her eyes. “I realize that I know little of your upbringing... or much about you at all.”

Magnus shifted uncomfortably. “That is because there is not much to tell. Truly, a very boring tale.”

“Oh... well... I rather enjoy boring tales.”

“I doubt you would like this one.” Again, he shifted uncomfortably, a clear sign that this was a topic he did not wish to discuss.

Ordinarily, Diana would not push. They had come so far this afternoon that there should not have been a need. They lay together in her bed, fully clothed but still wrapped in one another’s arms. The day was young, they had so much time and their

moods were piqued, why take the risk and insist that he open up?

But that was just Diana. Stubborn to a fault. Wanting to learn more about her husband. Again, neither seemed to fully understand what they expected from this marriage, and she just knew that learning more about her husband was the right place to start.

“Were you...” She hesitated. “Were you close with your father?”

Magnus stiffened. “Not particularly.”

“And your mother?”

She could feel him pulling away. “In a fashion.”

“You moved to the Americas when you were twenty, yes? I am curious, why the move? It is not every day that a duke in waiting gives up his title to travel as you did.”

He did not speak right away. Lying on his back, he stared at the ceiling, lost in a memory that she could see in his eyes brought him tremendous amounts of pain. And when she saw this in him, Diana wished she had followed her first instinct and said nothing. Still, she was learning about her husband, and this right here was a brand-new lesson.

“I think it is time we seize the day, don’t you?” Magnus pulled his arm out from under her. “Lest the staff begin to worry.”

“Magnus...” She sat up as he stood from the bed. “I am sorry. I did not mean to push.”

“Push?” He frowned at her as if he had no idea what she was talking about. “You did not such thing. I just think we best show our faces. We do not want rumor to spread,” he then added with a wink.

He was hiding something. Or running from it. Despite how far they had come, and how open she had been with him, he was clearly not ready to share with her secrets from his past. Was it because he did not trust her? Was it because he did not think she was worthy of knowing? Or was there another reason, a darker reason that she couldn’t guess at because he refused to share? If only she knew.

“I best see to the girls,” Magnus said as he strode across the room, leaving her on the bed. “Perhaps it is best if you...” He reached the door, turned back and smiled. “A bath. And that’s not to say you are dirty,” he added quickly. “Just a little sweaty. Although I take some blame for that.”

Her smile was soft. “I think you are right. Will I see you later?”

“I do not see why not.” He smiled once more and stepped through the door, closing it behind him.

Diana remained on the bed, staring at the closed door, feeling a strange mix of emotions that moved between joy because she had finally connected with her husband to despair because despite all that had happened she still felt as if there was a gulf separating them and until that gulf closed then this marriage, whatever it might be, could not progress beyond where it was.

A marriage of convenience still. Albeit, with some much-needed spice. And it was about damn time.

ChapterFourteen

“You do not have to be here, if you do not want,” Diana said to Magnus as the two stood on the front drive of the manor in wait. “I know you are busy.”

“I want to be here,” Magnus said, a small lie, but one that was believable enough. “It is important that your mother see us together. If I did not greet her at the very least, how would that look?”

“As if you are avoiding her,” Diana said. “Which might be the smarter action.” She winked. “You would not be the first to do so.”

Magnus chuckled. “Oh, she is not that bad.”

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“She is fine,” Diana sighed in agreement. “And I am certain that given the circumstances, she will endeavor to be on her best behavior.”

“As we spoke about, I will greet them properly and then leave the three of you to catch up. Trust me, you do not want me lurking about like a bad odor.”

“You do not have to go,” Diana pressed gently. “I mean... it would not be so bad if you spent the day. But only if you wish it,” she then added quickly.

Magnus eyed his wife curiously, sensing very much what it was she was getting at, not sure how he felt about the matter. “Do you wish for me to spend the day?”

“Only if you do.”

Magnus knew exactly what she wanted him to say. He could see it in her eyes. A silent plea to take that next step and spend the day with her family, a perfect opportunity to get to know one another better in ways they’d not yet had the chance to do.

And he almost agreed. Dammit, a part of him wanted to, just as much. But Magnus was many things, and opening himself to the proclivities and expectations that married life seemed to demand regarding his personal life was not one of them.

“I think it is best if I leave the three of you,” Magnus said, offering a smile as a conciliation. “I do have a deluge of work to attend, and I am afraid I would not be great company because of it – my mind would be elsewhere all day. You understand?”

She pursed her lips together. Behind her eyes, Magnus saw that desire for her to argue and say exactly what was on her mind. And she just might have too, was it not for the fact that just now the carriage was pulling up before them, forcing back her attention and saving Magnus from the argument.

Talk about perfect timing. It would not do to argue right now, as we all know where that is likely to lead...

“As you wish,” was all she offered, her attention now fully turned to the carriage just in time for the passenger doors to swing open.

The first to appear in the doorway was Diana’s cousin, Miss Evelyn Goldsmith. A year older than Diana, she somehow managed to look younger; a little naiver and immature. Undoubtedly pretty with her dark features and aquiline face, she was taller too, skinnier, not at all Magnus’ type – she might have been once, but he was now firmly a man who enjoyed curves, which his current wife had in spades.

“Diana!” Miss Evelyn Goldsmith cried out and scrambled down from the carriage.

“Evelyn!” Diana rushed to greet her.

Magnus stayed back, once again glad for the distraction their guests brought. He felt guilty for the fact that he planned on abandoning them, and he knew it was the wrong thing to do. Sadly, Magnus was still in two minds about this marriage and was yet to fully come to terms with what he wanted.

Yesterday was as unexpected as it was transcendent. Finally, he and Diana had managed a real conversation, putting their usual hostilities aside as they came to understand that both were confused about what this marriage of convenience was supposed to mean and what they expected from it. That, he felt, was a huge step forward.

And what happened next, the kiss that led to more. Also unexpected but even now, a full day later, he still felt himself stiffen just to remember the taste of Diana on his lips and the feel of her body writhing as his tongue and mouth devoured her womanhood. Diana wanted him as much as he wanted her, and he knew now that he was in no way taking advantage of her when he had kissed her those previous times. Another huge step forward.

Of course, that was where the good times ended and where the troubles began.

Theodore had been right in more ways than one. A marriage was not simple, and one could not approach it hidden behind a mask. Yesterday, as they lay together, Diana had begun to ask questions that Magnus did not wish to answer – he hated speaking of his past, for the shame it brought him, and the embarrassment, was not something he wished to relive with anyone. If he had his way, he would never speak of it again. Alas, it was not so simple as that. Not even close.

A marriage required compromise. It required honesty. It required both parties giving as well as receiving. If Magnus wished for this marriage to progress, he was going to have to open to his wife in ways he swore he never would.

But could he do it? Was it worth it? He wished he knew.

“Mother!” Diana cried out as Lady Langham appeared in the doorway.

Even growing up as the son of a duke, and close to a grandmother who often acted like a queen, it was impossible to deny how regal the viscountess was to behold. There was an elegance to her. A sense of authority that she clearly worked hard to pronounce and was largely successful at. She did not smile for her daughter. She did not become undone. A simple nod of acknowledgment was all she gave, and then she waited for the coachman to rush around the carriage and help her down.

“Daughter,” Magnus heard her say in greeting. “Thank you for inviting us to – owe!” she cried as Diana threw her arms around her mother.

From behind, Miss Evelyn Goldsmith laughed at her aunt who was trying her best to stay composed under her daughter’s enthusiastic hug. Magnus wondered if she always behaved this way, so proper and withdrawn. But then he noticed how the viscountess was watching him, and he figured that as was always the case, she was putting on airs to impress him.

He straightened up and approached the happy family.

“Lady Langham,” he crooned as he came in close. She offered a curt smile and held out her hand, which he took and gave a kiss. “It is an honor to have you as a guest today.”

“I should hope so.”

“And Miss Goldsmith.” He turned and took Diana’s cousin’s hand, giving the back of it the same treatment as he had her aunt’s. “Might I say, you look ravishing.”

Miss Goldsmith’s eyes flashed a sense of wickedness that would rival her cousins. “I am glad you think so, Your Grace. And thank you so much for inviting us to your home.”



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“Think nothing of it,” he said. “Although most of the thanks should go to my dear wife. This was all her doing.”

“Oh?” the viscountess turned to her daughter. “You did not go behind your husband’s back, did you?”

“I see you know your daughter well,” he chuckled.

“Diana...” her mother groaned.

“Oh, it is fine, mother.” She waved her mother down. “And he is mostly joking,” she then added with a smirk in his direction. “We are both equally glad you could join us.”

“We almost asked if we might bring a third,” the viscountess then said with a smile directed at Miss Goldsmith. “But the last-minute nature of your invitation forbade it.”

“A third? Who?” Diana asked, looking at her cousin.

Miss Goldsmith pushed her lips together as if annoyed and turned away. “Oh, it is nothing...”

“It is not nothing,” Lady Langham said. “Much has happened these past few days, Diana. Namely, your cousin is in the midst of a courtship.”

“What!” Diana cried out, looking as excited as she was disbelieving. “Who? Evelyn, why did you not tell me!”

“I said, it is nothing...”

“It is not nothing,” the viscountess said. “Lord Herrod has been nothing but a gentleman toward Evelyn these past few days and I know that if he had the time, he would have been thrilled to --”

“Lord Herrod!” Diana cried again. “Evelyn, tell me this is a jest! Surely...”

“It is not jest,” her mother snapped. “It is very much real, and you should be supportive. I would expect nothing less from you, Diana.”

Diana was looking at her cousin with confusion. Her cousin was looking away as if embarrassed. And Magnus watched them both, sensing there was more here than what he was understanding but not willing to ask questions. After all, wasn’t the entire point that he was trying to avoid becoming too familiar?

“We may discuss it in more detail later,” Lady Langham sighed. “For now, Diana, are you going to invite us inside or have us stand out here all day in the heat?”

“Oh!” Diana gave her head a shake, eyed her cousin one more time, then put on a smile and exhaled as if to expunge the previous conversation from memory. “Of course. Mother, Evelyn...” She frowned again at her cousin, another shake of the head. “If you might join me inside, we have drinks and refreshments ready. And then, perhaps a tour.”

“Your Grace, will you not be joining us?” the viscountess asked.

“I wish I could,” Magnus said magnanimously.... even if he caught a somewhat rueful glance from Diana as he told the lie. “But duty calls, and it cannot be avoided. I wished to make sure I was here to greet you, but hosting duties fall on Diana’s shoulder’s today.”

“Oh no.”

“It is a cruel world,” Magnus agreed with a sigh. “And I promise that the next time, I will be sure to have my calendar cleared.”

Although Lady Langham was clearly surprised, she did not make a fuss, likely wishing to show that she was more than aware of how busy a duke’s schedule could be, so much so that she even expected it. Miss Goldsmith remained silent also, but that seemed more on account of this sudden courtship than anything.

So it was that Magnus took a step back and watched his wife take her mother and cousin inside. He had expected her to bid him farewell, but she resolutely ignored him as she took her mother’s arm. Was it on account of anger at his avoidance of her? Or was she simply distracted? He had no idea.

As he watched them go, Magnus sighed to himself, feeling his stomach knot with guilt because he knew he was doing the wrong thing, while also knowing that he would do nothing to change it – he wished that he could, but still he was unsure of what he wanted.

A marriage of convenience was a wonderful idea on paper but in practice it was beset by real world difficulties that would, in time, need to be addressed. For now, as Magnus had done so often in the past, he would simply avoid them by running in the opposite direction.

## ChapterFifteen

“And what of an heir?” Diana’s mother asked her, pivoting into the question from nowhere, as her mother so often did.

“Wh -- what?” Diana stammered, her saucer of tea halfway toward her mouth, nearly

spilling down her front in shock from the question.

“An heir, dear,” her mother said simply, taking a small sip from her own saucer, no sense that she said anything untoward or strange. “Have you and His Grace discussed such things?”

“Mother... that is not... I do not think that... this is not the time or place for --”

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“Do not give me any of that nonsense,” her mother cut over her. “The two of you are married, yes? So do not pretend that the topic of children is uncalled for. It is only right that you and His Grace begin the process – for it is not such an easy thing as you might think. Not everyone falls pregnant right away, so delaying it is foolish.”

Diana felt her cheeks flush. “We have Magnus’ nieces to contend with, for the moment. And I promised him that I would help raise them.”

“But not as your own,” her mother insisted rightly. “Honestly, Diana. Do you mean to sit there and tell me that you and His Grace have not once discussed the need to produce an heir? I find that impossible to believe!”

If you knew anything about mine and Magnus’ relationship, you would eat your own words, mother. Not only is it possible, but the likelihood of us discussing it at all is as unrealistic as Evelyn suddenly sprouting wings and flying.

That the topic had never even occurred to Diana spoke to the strangeness that now surrounded her relationship with her husband. Until yesterday, her sole focus had been concerned with the possibility that her husband hated her and what she might do to survive such a tumultuous relationship as that. Obviously, she now knew without a shadow of a doubt that he did not hate her...yesterday proved that. Not that this made things any simpler.

Magnus was a closed book. Even prodding him ever so gently about his past yesterday had caused him to leap to his feet and flee the room as if it was on fire. Diana could not imagine how he might react if she dared to ask him about children.

More to that point, she did not know how she felt about the matter either. Logically, she knew that she should want them, and where she was growing to love Josephine and Adeline well enough, they were not her own children, and they never would be. She was more of an aunt to them than a real mother, and that was how it should be.

Did that mean that she and the duke should have a child of their own? And would he even want such a thing?

The question aroused confusion inside of Diana and she came to decide that for now, it made little real difference. This marriage... it was still in its infancy, and she guessed that until her husband was able to speak to her about anything beyond the surface level, it would remain as such.

Did she want children? What she wanted was a husband who spoke to her as husbands were meant to do.

“Promise me you will speak to him,” her mother pressed. “Please, Diana. I know it is not any of my business, but it is important. Speak to your husband,” she pressed again, as if it was the easiest of things. “You might be surprised at what he says.”

Surprised at what he says? I would be surprised if he did not turn tale and flee.

Try as she might, Diana could not shake her mother’s question from her head. And where the need for an heir was an important conversation to have, still she reasoned that before she broached that topic with Magnus, she needed to improve the tenants of their relationship significantly.

As to how she planned on doing that? It was the following morning when an idea struck her.

The day was Saturday, and she and Magnus and Josephine and Adeline were

breaking their fast together for the first time. The presence of the girls provided a comfort to the setting, as they were able to keep the conversation simple and without cause for alarm.

“I do not want to spend all day indoors learning,” Josephine opined as she poked at her plate of food. “It is sunny! I want to go outside.”

“Me too!” Adeline joined in. “Diana -- Lady Albury,” she corrected. “Can we? Can we, please?”

It was telling that she and Josephine looked to Diana for confirmation, clearly understanding that of she and Magnus, Diana was the one most likely to allow it. Diana caught Magnus eyeing her, no doubt wondering at what she would do.

If she was trying to impress Magnus, she might have curbed this idea and suggested that they do as they ought and spend the day with Miss Brooks. If she was trying to further win the girls to her side, she might have encouraged their disobedience – what was more, she was just a little curious to see if Magnus had come around to her way of thinking, willing to give her a chance at her own style of mothering, as he had promised.

In this, Diana realized there was a way to do both.

She clicked her tongue. “You really should spend the day on your studies...” She saw their faces drop, and she saw Magnus smile. “However,” she then said quickly. “I do not see why you can’t do both.”

The girls frowned.

“Diana...” Magnus began gently. “Is it such a good idea to disrupt their studies so regularly? Perhaps tomorrow they can play outside?”

“I plan on disrupting nothing,” she said as she looked at Magnus, raising her eyebrows in a way that was meant to say, ‘trust me.’

He frowned. “And how do you plan on not doing that?”

She held up a finger. “I will tell you only if you agree to join us. What do you say, girls?” She looked at them both and pumped her eyebrows. “Should your uncle join us?”

“Diana...” Magnus began again.

“Trust me,” she said quickly, turning on him again. She softened her expression, even pouting. “I know what I am doing.”

It said a lot about how far the two had come these past two days that she knew immediately that Magnus was going to relent. That he wanted to trust her. Ironically, they had not come far enough for her own liking. But then again, that was the entire point.

It was thus that ten minutes later the four of them found themselves standing in the middle of the garden. Diana chose the spot specifically, a patch of grass that stretched ten feet in each direction. On one side were hedges. On the other was a row of small trees. There were also benches and shrubs and even a fountain if one was to go far enough... if they got that far.



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“Listen up because I am only going to explain the rules one time,” Diana announced. The game itself was made up, but she pretended that it was one she knew well. “Girls, stand here, thank you.” She indicated to a spot in the center of the grass. “And Magnus, you can stand here...” She then guided him to a spot right by the girls.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asked her.

She grinned but said nothing. Rather, she walked ahead and stood before the three of them, hands on her hips.

“The game is hide and seek, but with a twist. As you can see, there are plenty of spots available for hiding...” She swept her arms over the scene, indicating the various places. “The challenge is reaching one of these spots faster than those you are pitted against.”

“How do we do that?” Josephine asked immediately, her eyes already scanning for a good spot to hide.

“By answering questions, of course,” Diana said. “I will ask each of you a question in turn – a quiz. If you answer correctly, you may take one step forward. If you answer incorrectly, you stay put. Once I can no longer see you, you are allowed to run and find a spot to hide anywhere outside – but if I see you running, I can call out and you must come back to the start. So, you must be sneaky.” She pumped her eyebrows at the two girls.

“I don’t understand,” Adeline said with her face scrunched. “Why the questions? Why can we not simply hide?”

“The idea is to get a head start,” Diana answered. “If say you answer all your questions correctly, and Josephine misses a few, it will give you several minutes to hide. Oh, and the moment the last of you escapes my view, I am allowed to seek. So, you do not want to be last either.”

“Ohhhhhh,” Josephine nodded her understanding. “Yes! Yes, I see.” She then braced herself, face turning determined.

“What sort of questions?” Adeline asked excitedly.

“Hmm...” Diana tapped her chin in thought. “Adeline, what is four plus four?”

Adeline’s eyes turned wide. “Eight!” she screamed.

Diana chuckled. “Very good. Take a step forward – but before you do, plan where you wish to disappear. The shortest route to something to hide behind.”

Adeline did just that. She looked about, locked her eyes onto a shrub ten feet away, and took a step forward.

“Josephine,” Diana then said. “Spell the word... orange.”

Josephine grinned. “O-r-a-n-g-e.”

“Very good,” Diana clapped. “Take a step.”

Josephine took a step in the opposite direction to her sister, aiming for a row of trees.

“Now, Magnus...” Diana turned on him, her grin cocky and playful at the same time. “How old are you?”

He frowned. "Really? That is your question?"

"Unless you cannot answer it...?" She shrugged and the girls giggled.

"I am thirty and three," he sighed.

"Well done," she said with exaggeration. "Although I had no idea you were so old." Again, the girls giggled. "Come now, a step forward."

He took a small step forward.

Again, she asked the two girls their questions, easy ones, but still with a slight degree of difficulty so that it was not so obvious what she was doing. They both answered their questions correctly, which brought her back to Magnus.

"Dear husband," she began. "How old were you when you travelled to the Americas?"

It was only then that he seemed to realize what she was doing. His face dropped and then hardened. He looked at her warningly, a hint of panic behind his eyes.

"Uncle!" Adeline cried. "Answer her!"

"I was..." His jaw clenched. "I was twenty."

"Well done," she said and clapped. "Take a step."

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He glared at her as he did so and she held that glare, letting him know she was not going to back down. Not with this.

Again, she moved onto the two girls. Their questions were geography based, and both answered correctly. That brought her to Magnus, once more.

“Magnus...” She clicked her tongue and tapped her chin. “What is your earliest memory?”

Magnus’ glare was fury. Jaw clenched, leg shaking, Diana was quite sure it was only the presence of his daughters that kept his temper in check. “I am not sure.”

“You are not sure?” Diana pretended to act confused. “Come now, surely you have an answer.”

“I do not,” he said stiffly.

She shook her head and went back to the girls. Again, they both answered their questions correctly. Only three in and Josephine was already nearing the edges of the grassy patch, having taken larger steps than her sister could.

“Husband.” Diana was back on her husband. She met his steeled gaze, her stomach fluttering because that stare didn’t so much as frighten her as it did excite her. She knew she was walking on thin ice, but she also knew she had little choice but to do so. “What is the last thing you remember saying to your mother?”

His eyes lit up and he very nearly turned and walked away. He did not, again because

his two nieces were watching him. She could see him sweating visibly, still glaring at her, temper rising...

“Uncle!” Josephine cried. “Answer her!”

He took a breath, jaw still clenched as he spoke. “I told her...” Another deep breath. “I told her that... that... that I wanted to play outside. She would not let me.”

It was such a simple answer, but it struck Diana in a way she had not expected. His mother had died when he was a boy, clearly. Her death must have also been sudden. And from the pained look in Magnus’ eyes, the memory of her still stung.

Suddenly, this little idea of Diana’s didn’t seem nearly so clever.

“Diana!” Josephine cried. “My turn!”

“Wh -- oh. Yes. Sorry.” She tried for an apologetic look at Magnus, but there was none returned, such was his annoyance. Quickly, she asked the two girls a new question, one to do with history. Josephine got her question right and the moment that she did, she stepped behind a tree and was off. Adeline was correct also, but she was still one step away from cover.

“Uncle’s turn!” Adeline said excitedly, wishing to get to her own turn so she could hide. “Look how far back he is!” she giggled.

Diana hesitated, not sure at all what to ask now. Not wanting to push too hard. Not wanting to upset the duke. Learning more about him was all well and good but in her eagerness to do so, she had not considered why he was so closed off. One question answered and she was beginning to understand that reason.

“Ah... what is your favorite fruit?” she asked him lamely.

“Apples,” he said stiffly and took a step forward. This one brought him closer to her, less than a foot away. She felt the sudden need to step back and create some distance, but his eyes locked onto her own and she could not break free.

“Adeline... who is the King?”

“George!” she cried out and then darted behind the nearest hedges, giggling hysterically, the sound fading as she rushed through the garden and found someplace better to hide.

The moment she was gone, Magnus turned and stormed away.

“Magnus!” Diana cried out and ran after him. “Wait! I’m sorry --”

“Are you?” he spun back around, still furious. Diana came to a grinding halt, as if the wrath that spewed from him created an invisible wall. “Or are you just worried that your little game didn’t go quite as planned?”

“I...” The words caught in her throat. “I... I did not think about... I did not realize that... that... I just wanted to learn more about you. That is all.”

“I am aware of what you were trying to do, Diana,” he snarled. “I am not an idiot. But did you stop to think that maybe there is a reason I do not like talking about it? Did that even occur to you?”

She winced. “No... I did not consider that.”

He shook his head. “And to make things worse, you used the girls against me. You knew with them present, I would have no choice but to answer. It was a dirty trick.”

That stung as if he had driven a knife through her chest. She leaned back, turning

away from shame and embarrassment. “I was only trying to get to know you better. That is all I want.”

“Why? Why is it so important that you ask me these questions?”

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To that, she frowned. “Because... because we are married. We should know these things about one another. That is what a marriage is.”

“That is what most marriages are. I thought I made it perfectly clear that this is not most marriages.”

“Clear?” Diana looked at him with confusion and a touch of frustration. The shame she had felt was fading, replaced now with anger because this was an argument they’d had already. “Nothing about this is clear. Nothing. And to pretend otherwise is not only foolish but ignorant.”

“Careful, Diana. I do not appreciate being insulted in my own home.”

“Our home, you mean.” She stormed toward him, putting herself right in his face. “This is my home now, just as much as it is your own. We are married. I understand that you might not wish to tell me everything about your past, but you must understand that if this marriage is to progress, even a little, you must tell me something.”

“And who said I wish for it to progress?”

“You did!” she cried. “You did! The other day. Was that not the entire point? When you came to me, I thought that --” She bit her tongue, feeling herself getting a little too worked up. So much so that if she let herself keep going, things would be said that she could not take back. She took a deep breath and tried again. “I was not trying to trick you. I was certainly not trying to upset you. But Magnus...” She attempted to soften her expression and her tone. “Surely, you must understand where I am coming



from? Why I am so desperate to find out anything about you? Anything at all. Like you, I do not know what I want from this marriage. But unlike you, I am at least willing to try and figure through what I do want. And I can't do that if you insist on keeping me in the dark."

Typically, Diana expected a firebrand response. Defensive. Aggressive. The usual, for Magnus and herself.

But his face softened. His head tilted as he looked at her with an expression she recognized; one that made her heart race and her chest flush. And then, a smile. "You really are pretty when you're upset, you know?"

"Wh -- what?"

"I said --"

"I heard you."

His smile grew and he reached for her hand, taking it. She tried to pull back, but he held on. "You are right, Diana. As remiss as I am to admit it, nothing you have accused me of right now is wrong."

"It's not..." She was suddenly very aware of her hand in his. How warm it was. How comforting. There was a strength in his grip, a sense of power that made her feel protected.

"And I want to do better. Like you, I do not know what this marriage is or what it might be. I do know, however, that if I do not at least try, it will die on the vine and that will be entirely my fault. I cannot promise that I will suddenly open my heart to you..." He chuckled and shook his head. "But I promise that if you are patient, well..." He shrugged.

She met his eyes, seeing in them that he was speaking the truth. Ironically, he was being honest with her in the exact way that she wanted. “That is all I ask.”

“And as to your little game just now...” He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Very naughty.”

She grinned. “I thought that was what you liked about me?”

His eyes flicked over her in hunger. “I think you know what I like about you...”

A pulse ran up her arm from where he held her hand. They were standing less than a foot apart, so close that if she closed her eyes she could feel the warmth of his breath. He stood over her, nearly blocking out the sun, wrapping her in his presence in a way that made her feel trapped... but in a way that she loved.

No need to say what was on his mind. No need to say what was suddenly on her own. He stepped in closer, his body now pressed against her, his spare hand taking her by the waist.

“The... the children...” She didn’t move to pull back because she did not want to.

“They are hiding, yes?” he breathed, his grip on her waist tightening.

“They are.”

“It is a shame they are such good hiders...” He leaned in, whispering into her ear; the hairs on her neck stood up as his breath traced her skin. “We may not find them for hours.”

“Hours?”

“Hours...”

He released her hand and cupped her under the chin. He moved her head, her lips, his own finding the side of her neck. He kissed her then and there, gently, nibbling as he then licked up her skin and moved to her lips. She took a sharp breath, catching it in her throat because suddenly her mouth became very busy.

Their fourth kiss. Their most passionate one yet. One that spoke of more than mere desire and want. One that felt personal in ways the others hadn't because this one meant something. Attraction, yes. Arousal, of course. But also, an understanding that finally the two were on the same path.

Diana's hands were on Magnus' waist. His were on her face. He pressed his tongue between her lips, coaxing her mouth to open to him, letting him taste her, consume her. He pulled her in and held her close, breathing her in as she melted into him.

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The problem, however, became apparent almost immediately.

They were outside. Exposed. The sun was shining overhead. Surely, that should have given them cause to stop this at once. It was not as if they were in any sort of rush?

And perhaps under different circumstances they would have considered this. Alas, even if Magnus had suggested it, Diana felt herself so overwhelmed by her state of arousal that the world could have ended around them and she still would have insisted they not stop.

Magnus pulled away but did not let go. She gasped and tried to follow his lips; eyes closed because she did not want the moment to end.

“No,” he said. “Not here.”

“But...”

She opened her eyes and saw the wicked grin on his face. Then, he took her hand and silently he led her across the patch of grass toward the row of hedges. She knew what he was thinking, and her heart beat heavy with fear and excitement. The danger inherent in what he wanted. The thrill of it, also.

“Not dissimilar to where we first met,” Magnus joked as he led her around the round of hedges and pressed her back against them.

“Shall I attack you again?” she joked.

He grabbed her hands and held them to the side. "If you can." She pretended to try and bit him. He snapped back. And then, they were locked in a passionate kiss once more.

Diana was still new to this, but she felt herself growing more confident by the second. As the duke kissed her, memories of their last entanglement flashed through her mind. On the bed, her legs spread, his head between her thighs. Oh, how she wanted it again. Just the thought had her legs shaking...

And yet, she also knew that this time, perhaps it was on her to return the favor. She did not know what that meant, exactly. Stranger still, her mouth salivated at the thought. As if her hand was being guided by an innate desire, she moved it from Magnus' hips to the front of his pants, which she was delighted to find were very stiff.

"Diana..." He gasped and pulled away.

She flashed her eyes at him. "Do you... is this... may I?"

He frowned. "Are you asking?"

"Unless you are telling me to?"

She could see in his eyes that he wanted it. A thrill flashed behind them. A smile rose up his lips. His mouth found her lips again, but his hands went to the front of his trousers. She could not see what he was doing, but she heard him undo them and she heard them dropping to the floor. Then, his hand took her right hand and guided it down...

... what it found was thick and hard and pulsing. She wrapped her hand around it and the duke's body stiffened and he groaned. He pulled his mouth away, eyes closed,

jaw clenched, soft moans escaping his lips as she gently squeezed.

“Like... like this?” she asked as she began to move her wrists.

“Just like that... oh... God...” His head fell onto her shoulder and he just about collapsed. “Do not... do not stop.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” she purred as she continued to stroke his member.

Diana enjoyed it more than she thought she would. Not just the feel of his manhood in her hand. Not just the way it made his body shake. But the power she got from it. The control she had over her husband in that moment. She moved her wrist faster, her grip tightening, relishing how his entire body spasmed.

“Diana,” he groaned. “Right there... right... oh... right...”

“Your Grace!” a voice cried suddenly from the other side of the hedges.

Diana froze. As did the duke.

“Your Grace!” it was the voice of one of the staff, sounding panicked.

“Do not move,” Magnus commanded in a whisper. Diana still held him in her hand, he was still pressed against her, and oh how she wanted to finish him, even if it meant getting caught.

“Your Grace!” the voice cried. “Please! Your Grace! It’s your grandmother, Your Grace! The Dowager Duchess! She is here, Your Grace! She has just arrived!”

The duke turned soft in Diana’s hand. And Diana too, all sense of arousal left her as if it had never been. She looked at the duke, saw the panic in his eyes, and despite

herself, she began to laugh.

“What?” he said. “This is not funny!”

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She could not stop herself from grinning. “On the contrary, Your Grace. It is rather hilarious. Now, you best put your pants back on before you grandmother sees. How embarrassing that will be otherwise.”

### ChapterSixteen

Magnus shifted uncomfortably under the reproachful gaze of his grandmother. In most instances, the two got on famously, and she was perhaps the most important person in his life. But under the current circumstances, it felt as if she knew what it was that she had just interrupted.

The urge to adjust himself was near uncontrollable, and it was all Magnus could do to keep his hands folded firmly on his lap.

“This is a most unexpected surprise, grandmother,” Magnus said in an effort to dispel the discomfort that he was feeling.

“Hopefully a pleasant one,” she responded. “I trust I am not interrupting anything.” She looked between Magnus and Diana, the slightest smirk on her lips surely coincidental and nothing more.

Magnus shared a quick glance with his wife. She was blushing furiously, unable to meet his grandmother’s eyes. He felt sorry for her. The suddenness of this visit. How unprepared she was for it. The harshness of his grandmother when she was in one of her moods.

Poor Diana, I wish I could have better prepared her, because if I know my



grandmother like I do, she doesn't stand a chance.

"Not at all," Magnus said. "We were playing a game with the children. Nothing that cannot wait."

"A game?" his grandmother asked. "What of their studies?"

"It was a bit of both," Diana spoke up finally. "The day is too lovely to waste, so I thought we might spend it outdoors together." To that, Magnus' grandmother raised an eyebrow and Diana faulted. "Ah... studying still, of course. But with a little bit of fun."

"I was not aware that studying was meant to be fun."

"Grandmother..." Magnus sighed.

"No, no," his grandmother dismissed. "Please, do tell. What was this game that you were all playing? I would love to hear it. How things have changed since my day."

Magnus shared a quick look with Diana again. He knew his grandmother well enough to know that she was not nearly as scary as she was trying to present herself. Likely, this was nothing more than a test... although to what end, he couldn't imagine.

"Oh, you wouldn't be interested," Diana said, waving her down. Magnus' eyes turned wide, certain his grandmother would not appreciate the gesture. "It involves running and hiding and laughter. Truly, I was surprised enough that Magnus was keen – you know how he is. I can't imagine that you would care for such things."

Magnus' mouth dropped to the floor. He sputtered stupidly, caught between trying to defend his grandmother, caught between trying to defend his wife, and caught between standing down and letting the two at it because he was certain this was about

to descend into a match of the titans.

Most shockingly, it became no such thing.

“Careful with this one, Magnus,” she tittered and wagged her finger at Diana. “A rose is a beautiful thing, but they come with thorns.” She tittered further. “And a sharp tongue, to boot.” She smiled at Diana. “I see you’ve managed to assert yourself as the master of this household without delay. And in record time.”

Diana shrugged. “It was no big thing. Magnus has quite the bark, but his bite is a pitiful thing.”

Magnus’ grandmother laughed again and shook her head in amusement. “That it is. That it is.”

“Now just a minute,” Magnus said to assert his authority because he could sense himself being ganged up on. He might not have understood how it had happened, but that didn’t mean he was going to allow it. “I do not know what this is, but I would ask that I not be treated like a dolt in my own home. Is that understood?”

He raised an eyebrow at both women, hoping that would put the matter to be. Unsurprisingly, they shared an amused look between themselves, giggling silently like a couple of schoolgirls.

To this, Magnus stared in bewilderment. Unsure exactly what to make of this little alliance. As far as he was aware, this was the first proper time that the two were meeting, yet they spoke like old friends. What was more, it was a friendship seemingly borne from putting down Magnus because, as he had learned many times, when it came to powerful women, nobody was safe. Himself, especially.

They met his grandmother in the sitting room, where she had greeted them without

standing, happy to remain by the window as she soaked in the early morning sun. Tea was sent for, yet to arrive, while excuses had been made as to the reason for their lateness.

As to Josephine and Adeline? They were still hiding, likely unaware of their great-grandmother's visit. But Miss Brooks had been sent to find them, for which Magnus was wholly apologetic.

“I suppose you are wondering then why I have paid this most untimely visit.”

“Not untimely at all,” Magnus hurried, hoping to assert himself back into the conversation without mockery. “You know that you are always welcome here, Grandmother.”

She rolled her eyes. “My backside is for sitting, not for kissing, Magnus. So please, treat it thusly.”

His face dropped, and then his lip curled. “Now, really...”

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“My reason is twofold. First and foremost, I wished to see how this marriage was getting along. I know it has been less than a week, but in my personal experience, the first week is oft the most important. It is when reality sets in and the previously happy couple are forced to reckon with the reality that they will be spending their lives together. Sometimes, it’s during that first week when the fantasies about how one might kill the other while making it look like an accident begin to become commonplace.”

“Grandmother!”

“Just joking,” she waved him down and then winked at Diana, who giggled. “But really, pray do tell. How is everything? I have my own opinions, of course, based on what I am seeing...” She raised an eyebrow and looked between the two. “But I am willing to be proven wrong.”

Magnus and Diana were sharing the same couch, sitting beside one another but not holding hands or even touching. Although, to be fair, that was more on account of the awkwardness coming from what they had just been doing, and a desire not to promulgate Magnus’ arousal.

But as she spoke, Magnus automatically reached for Diana’s hand. She took it and the two shared a smile, one which didn’t feel forced, because it wasn’t. If the question had been asked even an hour ago, who knew what answer they might have given. Now, however...

“Everything is going splendidly,” Magnus said.

“Wonderfully, would have been my wording,” Diana added, her smile growing as she looked at Magnus again. “But splendidly will do.”

Of course, that was only a half-truth, but Magnus felt it was one that was justified. Where their marriage was far from perfect, and neither seemed to know what they expected or wanted in the long run, they were at the very least on the same page finally about this, and willing to try and make this marriage of convenience work.

Diana was the most open, without a doubt. And Magnus, still struggling to overcome his desire for secrecy and his loathing for speaking about his past... well, he was going to try his best. And that was a victory, anyway one looked at it.

“Good,” his grandmother said with a satisfied nod. “From my eyes, things look...” She shrugged. “Honestly, who can even say? The fact that the two of you were hiding in the bushes when I arrived, however, is a pretty darn good sign if I must say so.” She smirked proudly, and Diana and Magnus blushed furiously.

Ah... well, this is officially the most awkward moment of my life.

“As to the second reason that I came to see you.” His grandmother folded her arms and turned serious again. “I wish to know if you plan on attending the Truscott Ball this coming Friday.”

The question caught Magnus by surprise. “The Truscott Ball?”

“Hosted at Lord Truscott’s estate,” his grandmother explained as if that was the cause of confusion. “It is the first major event held since your wedding and I believe that the two of you ought to attend – it is expected, in fact. And if you are not seen...” She looked knowingly at Magnus. “It will raise questions.”

“And I care what other people think?” Magnus dismissed.

“You should.”

“I was not even aware of it,” Diana spoke up and looked at Magnus. “Were you?”

Magnus shrugged. “I had heard something to that effect, but I hadn’t taken much notice.” The truth was, Magnus did know of the upcoming ball and had already decided that he would not be going. He had always hated balls and galas and the idea of attending and being watched and judged by every man and his dog was enough to curl his lip. Which he did do, for his grandmother’s sake.

“Oh...” Diana blinked, frowning also. “I... it might not be such a bad thing to attend? It might even be fun.”

“Fun?” Magnus scoffed. “Believe me when I tell you, it will be anything but fun.” He could see this wasn’t the answer his wife wished for, and he knew that to go with her would signal what he had just promised, that he would try harder. And he would do. Only, not with this.

“Do not take it personally, dear,” his grandmother interjected. “Magnus has never been one for socialites. However, just because he does not wish to go, does not mean you ought to remain home.”

“Really?” Diana sat herself up.

“What was that?” Magnus said.

“You are a duchess now,” his grandmother explained. “Certain things are expected of you, chief among them is representation. If Magnus wishes to remain home and sulk --”

“I am not sulking.”

“-- it behooves you to attend. At the very least you will be able to dissuade the unfounded rumors that are sure to flow if neither of you are there.”

“And it will not be considered odd?” Diana asked, and Magnus could hear the curiosity in her voice. The excitement also. “If I was to attend on my own?”

“Not at all,” his grandmother said.

Magnus could see what was happening. His grandmother liked to play the simpleton, but she was so keenly aware that their marriage wasn't nearly as wonderful as they had both claimed. By driving this wedge between them, she hoped to force his hand, pushing him to attend, strengthening their marriage from afar because his grandmother loved to play politics.

But he would not budge. Magnus did not appreciate being manipulated like this, and dammit if he wasn't a little angry now at being treated this way in his own home.

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“I think I will go,” Diana said predictably. She then looked at Magnus, raising an eyebrow. “That is, of course, if my husband does not object?”

“Not even a little,” he said stiffly.

“Wonderful,” his grandmother said, looking mighty pleased with herself. “I was hoping you would say as much, for now my plans tomorrow will not go to waste.”

“Plans tomorrow?” Magnus’ stomach twisted, sensing a new scheme.

“Shopping, dear,” his grandmother said with a satisfied smile and a triumphant look in her eyes. “If Her Grace is to attend the Truscott Ball, her first outing as a duchess, she ought to look her best. And I intend to ensure the fact. Your Grace...” She shifted forward in her chair, looking directly at Diana and cutting Magnus out entirely. “Will you join me on a trip into London tomorrow so we might purchase a new gown for the evening.”

“I would love that,” Diana said with a little too much excitement. “Of course...” She then looked at Magnus, a smirk because she knew the answer to her coming question. “If my husband does not mind?”

Magnus suppressed a groan. Diana going to the ball without him was one thing, but spending a day alone with his grandmother was another entirely. He knew his grandmother well enough to know that this was about more than shopping, that she wanted to size Diana up and see what she was made of. Further to that point, she would want to ensure that Diana properly knew the man whom she had married.



It would be a day of gossip and personal revelations and all of Magnus' efforts to conceal his past would be for nothing. Maybe it would have been best if he'd just agreed to going to this ball in the first place?

"I welcome it," he said with a forced smile. "It will be good for the two of you to better know one another."

"I could not agree more," his grandmother said.

## ChapterSeventeen

The Dowager Duchess collected Diana the following morning, as promised. It took them over an hour to travel into the city, a ride that was pleasant while also unremarkable. They kept the conversation civil and surface level, filtering between musings on the weather and books they had read and random bits of gossip from about the town.

One notable exception to this was the Dowager Duchess' insistence that Diana address her by her first name, which in Diana's eyes was a huge deal.

"We are family now, dear," she said. "Calling me anything other than Ophelia is just so impersonal, wouldn't you agree?"

"I could not have said it better myself..." She hesitated. "Ophelia." It sounded strange to say but the satisfied smile that Ophelia offered in return solidified the experience as the right one.

It wasn't until they arrived at the seamstress and Diana began to sample various cotton and silk swatches that the conversation turned toward what Diana had been expecting and dreading in equal measure. She was under no false illusions as to why Ophelia was so insistent on the two spending the day together, and the proof of this

finally became realized.

“So, you and Magnus,” Ophelia began pleasantly. She was sitting on a stool in the store’s center, one used primarily for taking measurements when the time came. “Now that we are alone, tell me the truth of it. How goes the marriage?”

Even expecting it as she was, Diana was caught by surprise.

She pretended not to be, feigning an over-interest in a buttercream-colored silk that allowed her to keep her back to the dowager.

“It is as we said,” she explained vaguely. “The marriage has been pleasant.”

“I thought you described it as wonderful.”

Diana cursed herself silently, still focused on the swatch. “Yes, that too. It has not even been a full week yet, but so far, I dare say it is going as well as I could have hoped.”

Ophelia said nothing to that, and Diana breathed a sigh of relief as she continued about the store. With her light brown hair and deeper brown eyes and milky skin, green was a color that she wore well, so she found herself by a wall of various green colors and shades and materials. Growing up with four older sisters and a mother who believed that how one dressed was a statement of utmost importance, she was used to the process of selecting fabrics and having dresses made for her, but her concentration was preoccupied, and she found it impossible to focus.

“I take it that the two of you speak little then,” Ophelia said suddenly.

Diana turned about without thinking. “What do you mean?”

Ophelia smirked. “If you did, I doubt you would describe the marriage as wonderful. Unless you take pleasure in the misery trodden, like caring for a wounded pup.” She shrugged. “Some women do.”

“I...” Diana’s frown deepened. “I do not know about any of that.”

“Ah...” Ophelia’s eyes flashed understanding. “Then it is the other side of the coin. My grandson has chosen to give you nothing, creating a facade of ease which you have happily bought into.” She cocked an eyebrow at Diana. “Unless I am missing something.”

Diana felt her face turn red because Ophelia had hit the nail right on the head. She spun back, pretending to find interest in a forest-green silk. “It is as I said... we are... we are perfectly happy.”

Ophelia giggled. “I know my grandson, Diana. Better than you, I would wager. And while I love the man to death and would kill for him was I put up to, I am only too aware of how closed off he can be. Why else do you think he has remained single all this time?”

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Diana could see where this was going. Oh, how she could. The question was, did she wish for it?

Indeed, so far in this marriage, Magnus had been as closed off as a locked chest, and just as difficult to open. Diana knew next to nothing about the man's past, who he was, what he wanted. And the few times she had tried to breach these guarded secrets, he had firmly pushed her away.

But he had also promised to try harder. He had admitted fault, a huge step forward which Diana was eager to exploit. A few more days and she was certain she would be able to coax out some answers from him, pry him apart at the edges, make him understand that she was not his enemy, and sharing was not only healthy but necessary.

However... she then remembered where she was and the reason for it. The upcoming ball, one which Magnus would not be attending. If he truly meant to try harder, why had he denounced the possibility of joining her? Was he all talk and no action? Had he tricked her once again?

Her ears began to burn and her curiosity began to tingle...

"I don't not wish to gossip about my husband," she said in half-defense.

"Nor do I," Ophelia agreed. "But there are some things a wife should know about her husband. Not to use against him, of course. That is not why I ask these things. I only want the best for the two of you, and I believe that you are the same." She paused and Diana turned around, saw Ophelia eyeing her, and nodded. "If you wish for this

marriage to work, these first few weeks are imperative. How can you grow close if he keeps you at arm's length?"

It was as if she was reading Diana's mind.

The swatches of fabric forgotten, Diana found herself crossing the store to where Ophelia sat. She wore a resigned expression, as if she had no desire to speak of what she was about to.

"Is there anything imperative that I must know?" Diana asked. "For... for the sake of our marriage."

"You are no doubt wondering why Magnus is so hard on the girls – why he is so strict when it comes to their upbringing? An uncle who wishes the best for his nieces is one thing, but my guess is that he treats their raising as a mandate, of sorts."

"He is rather firm with them," Diana agreed. "And the truth is, when he asked for my hand in marriage, they were his primary concern."

"How much do you know of his brother?" Ophelia asked.

"Not as much as I would like," Diana admitted. "I know that he died not long ago, but apart from that..."

"I am afraid it goes back much further than that," Ophelia sighed with regret. "It might surprise you to hear, but when Magnus was born, he was a weak, sickly thing. Stricken by an ailment which even to this day I do not know the name, such that the first ten years of his life saw him confined entirely to his bed."

"Oh my."

“He grew out of the ailment, clearly,” Ophelia continued. “And by the time he reached his teens he was as strong and robust as you now know him to be. Alas, those early years never quite left him, the scars they have left riddled his confidence so much that they will be there forever. Couple this with a mother who died of the pox when he was but eight and a father who was an abusive alcoholic and I doubt there are many who had a harder upbringing than he did.”

“And his brother?” Diana asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“He was perfectly healthy, and he worshipped Magnus. Their father, however...” She shook her head. “The influence he left meant that Magnus never wished to be a duke, although I believe deep down he didn’t think himself strong enough. It was for that reason that when he was older enough, he left for the Americas. He claimed it was to prove himself capable and worthy, but I knew...” Another shake of the head. “I knew the idea of becoming a duke, being saddled with the responsibility that led his father to the drink, terrified him.”

“Victor became the duke instead?” The pieces started to fall into place for Diana, but still, she could not see the bigger picture.

“Regrettably so,” Ophelia said. “As with their father, Victor took to drinking, a little too well.” She pursed her lips. “The years hit him harder than they should have, he became terribly sick, and that was when I reached out to Magnus to return. Which he did do, but by then it was too late. The damage was done and within a year of his return, Victor died.”

“Oh no...”

“Magnus blames himself for Victor’s death,” she said. “He blames his past. He blames that he ran. He blames that he didn’t do enough when he returned. He considered the entirety of it to be his fault, as if he was too weak to stop it. For that

reason, he has taken the raising of Josephine and Adeline as a personal challenge, as if doing right by them will somehow absolve him of this guilt.”

“Surely, he must know it is not his fault?” Diana said. “If anything, it is his father’s. Although even then I hesitate...” She clicked her tongue. “In my experience, some tragedies are simply unavoidable.”

“Oh, I agree. My point in telling you all of this is that Magnus is special. Hard at times. Closed-off, as you no doubt understand. But he does not do it out of spite or disinterest, and I ask that the next time you find him pulling away...” She smiled softly. “Know that the very fact he has not turned tail and ran entirely is because he does care for you. I know that he does.”

The tale was heart wrenching but in that final plea, Diana felt herself grow warm. Knowing what she now knew of Magnus, the fact that he was willing at all to try and open to her spoke volumes about how he must feel.

She did feel a tad guilty, however. First, for pushing him as she had. Second, for this conversation right now. It was a betrayal, she realized, going behind his back and learning what, in hindsight, was his secret to share. She shuddered to think what he would say if he found out, and she resolved to not use it against him.

“Thank you,” she said to Ophelia. “All of this is...” She exhaled and offered a grateful smile. “It is revealing, but the sense it makes explains quite a bit.”

“I am glad,” Ophelia said. “I only want the best for the two of you. A marriage that will last a lifetime and hopefully will produce a few little offspring of your own.”

“Yes, well... hopefully.” Diana’s chest tightened. The second time now the mention of heirs had been brought to her. It still felt too soon to discuss such a thing with Magnus, but now that she understood what she was dealing with, perhaps it wasn’t so

far away as she thought?”



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“Now...” Ophelia clapped her hands together. “Enough melodrama for the day, don’t you think? I saw you looking at wall of green. See anything you like?”

“Oh, yes...” Diana turned back. “Only about a dozen.”

Ophelia laughed. “Let us call for some help and see which one’s fit best. The gown you must wear to the Truscott Ball needs to turn heads and drop jaws. And most of all, it needs to make my grandson understand how lucky he is.”

“But he will not be joining me,” Diana said.

To that, Ophelia smiled coyly. “He says he will not, but we shall see. As I said, I know my grandson. Even better than he knows himself.”

### ChapterEighteen

Diana arrived home later than she had intended. The sun had set a good hour earlier, she was physically exhausted from a full day spent with Ophelia, and she limped inside the manor, her purchased wares in a box tucked under her arm, half-hoping to make it to her bedroom without being noticed because she was just about ready to collapse.

I need a warm bed and a soft pillow, my only fear being that my legs might give out before I am granted both.

The manor was silent as she slunk inside. The lights had been extinguished, save for those leading up the staircase which she planned to follow.

And she did too, taking it one step at a time, wishing not to make a noise. Her mind still raced with all she had learned today of her husband, but she endeavored that for now, she would keep what she knew to herself., hoping that when the time came, Magnus would tell her himself.

It was as she crept down the hallway that she spied a light coming from around the corner, toward the end, past her room. She frowned at the sight of it, recognizing it to be Magnus' study. A smile crept across her lips as she pictured him hard at work, and she thought it best to leave him to it. Although...

Would it be so bad if I saw him? Even just for a moment. I know it has only been a day, but I find myself missing my husband. What a thought!

As if it was subconscious, she passed her room and made her way toward the study instead. The doorway was open, and she was careful to remain silent as she peeked her head inside.

Typically, Magnus was at his workbench, head bent over, unaware of her snooping. The single lantern on the edge of the desk provided light, and she could have stood there all night watching him. The way the shadows fell across his face made his features even sharper than usual, adding to his rugged facade, pronouncing the dark and menacing exterior that he worked so hard to promulgate.

There was also something different about him. Not the mean, closed off, often temperamental, and quick to anger duke she had always thought of him as. There was a sadness to him now, a softer side, one that seemed to beg for her comfort.

She smiled and was about to turn and leave him when she noticed in the corner of the room, asleep on the settee, were Josephine and Adeline. They were curled together, having clearly asked to sit with their uncle while he worked, despite how boring it was.

This made her smile further. She liked to think that part of it was her doing, but no doubt the two girls were growing closer to their uncle than they had been. Not as scared of him. Not as wary. And he too, letting them grow closer in a way that suggested one big happy family.

“Diana?” Magnus spoke suddenly.

Diana started and snapped her head back around to find Magnus watching her. “Oh... Magnus... I did not...” She blushed furiously as if she had been caught doing something wrong.

“I did not hear you come home.”

“I did not wish to disturb you.”

“And you didn’t,” he assured her as he rose from his chair behind the desk. “Although lurking in the doorway watching me does make me wonder what your intent may have been.”

She rolled her eyes. “Just passing through.”

“Is your bedroom not before my study?” he frowned but the smile in his eyes told her he knew that she had come to check on him. “How curious.”

“Would you believe that I got lost?”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Diana!” Josephine cried out, having woken from their bantering. “You’re home.”

“Look who it is,” Diana said with a huge smile. “The two terrors. What are you both

doing here?”

Adeline yawned and stretched herself out beside her sister.

“We were helping uncle,” Josephine said.

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“Is that right?” She looked at Magnus who laughed and shook his head. “It looks to me like you were sleeping.”

“They were waiting for you to arrive home.” Magnus stepped around the table. “Convinced that you might have bought them a gift...” He eyed the box under Diana’s arm. “Although I told them not to get their hopes up.”

“Did you?” Josephine asked, trying and failing to temper her excitement.

“A gift!” Adeline cried out.

“Girls...” Magnus swept toward Diana and then, most shockingly, leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes widened at the gesture, and even Magnus pulled back suddenly, seemingly surprised by his own actions. “I told you, we will go shopping next week.” He turned away from Diana as if embarrassed. “Diana was shopping for herself.”

“Actually...” Diana pumped her eyebrows at the two girls and lifted the box from under her arms. Ophelia had suggested buying both girls a gown of their own, and Diana had jumped at the chance. “I might have gotten them something.”

“You did!” they cried together and jumped down from the settee.

Diana dropped to her knees and opened the box, pulling out two colorful gowns; one pink, one yellow. “I do hope that they fit.”

“Pink!” Josephine exclaimed and took the dress. “Oh, I love it!”

“As do I!” Adeline agreed when she took her own.

“Girls, what do you say?” Magnus prompted.

“Thank you!”

“Thank you!”

“It is not a problem,” Diana assured them. “But before you thank me anymore, you best make sure they fit. And if not, we can take them back and have them – wowoa!” she cried out as the two girls rushed past her and from the room, no doubt sprinting to their own rooms to try on the dresses. “I guess we will find out soon enough.”

“You spoil them,” Magnus chuckled.

“Your grandmother does, actually.” She winked. “But don’t tell them that.”

Magnus chuckled further, and then his eyes drifted to the box. There was a third dress inside, one which Diana had hoped to keep hidden. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, moving to cover it.

“It’s not nothing.” Magnus was quick, snatching the box away.

“Hey!”

“And what is this?” He pulled the third dress out. It was a silky piece, cream colored, and no bigger than one of Magnus’ shirts. “This doesn’t look like a gown to me.”

She snatched it back. “The gown is being fitted to be dropped off during the week. This is...” Diana tried to look at Magnus but could not bring herself to do it. She had

hoped to reveal this dress in her own time, perhaps when the mood was right. This, however, felt like an ambush. “This is for you.”

“I do not think it will fit.”

“No, not in that sense...” Her entire body turned red, and she could see Magnus grinning because he knew very well what it was. “It is a nightgown. And if you are lucky, perhaps one day I will wear it for you.”

“A nightgown...” Magnus’ grin widened. “Diana, are you trying to seduce me?”

“Trying?” she cocked an eyebrow at him.

The tension was beginning to melt. That was what Diana noticed most of all. The last few times that they had been in a situation like this one, it was all she could do not to shake from the nerves, her entire body rebelling against her because the anticipation was more than she could bear.

And while all of that was still there, it felt more natural now. She looked up at the duke, met his dark green eyes, held them without blinking so he could see exactly what she was thinking.

The darkness of the room only added to the moment. That single lantern. The two of them, very much alone. Magnus stepped in closer, his hand moving to her spare one, taking it and holding it as he continued to meet her eyes. He too had changed in the way he approached her, no longer unsure, excited now, confident because they both knew what the other wanted. At least where their more amorous desires were concerned.

“And what must I do?” he asked. “To convince you to gift me that nightgown?”

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Her eyes flicked to his lips. “You can start by telling me how pretty I look. I know I do not, but a lady still appreciates hearing it.”

“You look ravishing,” he said, his voice a deep growl. “I ate but an hour ago and yet I find myself hungry again.”

“Hungry? Whatever for?”

His eyes flashed that hunger, and he leaned in to kiss her --

“It fits!” a voice cried from down the hallway, followed by loud footsteps. “It fits!”

“Mine too!” another joined in.

A second later and the two girls were back in the room, having hastily squeezed themselves into their gowns. They were not laced up correctly. And both wore them over their shifts. But the dresses did indeed fit them, albeit with a little bit of creativity required to squeeze them in.

“And don’t you both look a treat,” Diana said, gushing appropriately.

“Young women indeed,” Magnus agreed with a smile that looked genuine. “I can’t believe how old you both look.”

“Really!” Josephine beamed and held her arms out to show off the dress.

“Your father would be so proud,” Magnus said.



That single sentiment hit Diana in ways she had not imagined. She felt it in her chest. In her throat. In her eyes, which brimmed with tears. She looked at Magnus, the tears now beginning to stream gently, to see him smiling at his two nieces with what could only be described as love.

He was not a monster. He was certainly not cold or callous or mean. He was a man who had suffered so much and was desperate to make amends for mistakes that were not even his own. Everything he did was for these two girls, for his brother also, for everyone other than himself. And as Diana watched him admire his nieces, she began to feel something deep inside which was alien to her, but she recognized instantly.

As strange as it was to think, although she supposed it was the most normal sensation in the world, Diana was beginning to fall in love with her husband. And I couldn't be happier for it.

## Chapter Nineteen

Magnus woke covered in a cold sweat that he could feel seeping through the sheets. His body ran hot, shaking uncontrollably, and his chest hurt from how ragged his breathing was.

Blast! Not again...

It was a nightmare that had woken him. His second one this week. As was always the case, he could not remember them fully, a fact that he was glad for. But he could feel them, buried deep inside his subconscious, the fear that they provoked like a specter perched upon his shoulder, watching him always, refusing to leave him so he might never feel truly safe.

He hated that he was plagued by these nightmares. That even now, a man of thirty and three, there were times still when he worried going to bed as if he could sense the

nights they would come for him. Worse too that there was nothing he could do to stop them.

Lying on his back, staring at the dark ceiling, he shifted uncomfortably, unable to settle himself back down. His heart still raced. His breathing still ragged. And there was something else... a feeling on the back of his neck... that sense that he was not alone --

A creak from across the room had him sitting up suddenly.

The room was too dark to properly make out, but he noticed immediately that his door was open and through the shadows, behind his dresser, he saw movement.

“Hello...?” he said with hesitation, for a moment wondering if he was still trapped in his nightmare. “Who goes there? Show yourself!”

His eyes adjusted to the darkness just in time to see a body skulk from behind the dresser and into the room. The moment he saw who it was, he sagged in his bed, caught between relief and anger, while unsure how exactly he should react.

“Diana,” he sighed. “What on earth are you doing in here?”

“I am so sorry,” she said quickly, standing back and nearer the dresser. “I did not mean it. I...” She was shaking, no doubt expecting anger. “I was awake, and I heard... I heard noises coming from your room. I was worried.”

“Noises?”

“You were talking to yourself,” she said warily. “You sounded...” She paused again and through the darkness he could see just how worried she was. “You sounded afraid. I did not hear what you said,” she said quickly. “Only that something was

wrong.”

Magnus winced, embarrassment flooding him. He could only imagine what he had said during his nightmare, knowing full well it was nothing he wanted repeated back to him. Knowing also it was nothing he wished for his wife to hear.

“I’ll go,” Diana said, and started to leave.

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He almost let her, too. Hating that she had seen him in this state. Hating that she likely thought of him now as a weak and pitiful thing. Best that he let her go and then forget this sordid venture ever occurred.

Only, it was as she turned away that Magnus was struck by something else... a feeling he'd never had before... a desire, he knew, to reach out and explain himself. He tried to reason that he had to justify what she had seen, as if that might make it better somehow. Although he also suspected there was more to it than that.

Was he not the one who had told her that he would try harder? Did he not owe her that, at least? And after snubbing her where the Truscott Ball was concerned, perhaps this here was a means to set themselves back on an even setting.

“Wait,” he said softly, half hoping she might not hear. “Do not go.”

She stopped short and turned around, but she did not speak. Nor did she go to him.

“What you heard just now...” He hesitated, his heart still thumping painfully, now for a different reason. “It is not what you think.”

“I do not presume to know what I heard.”

He chuckled at that, appreciating that she was at least trying not to judge him.

Magnus thus shuffled up in bed so that he was sitting. If he had his head about him, he might have felt more self-conscious about the fact that he wore no pants, only a nightshirt, soaked through with sweat. But that was the least of his concerns.

“I...” He stopped when he saw her still standing halfway across the room. “You can come closer, if you wish. I will not bite.”

Through the darkness, he saw her smile and roll her eyes. “Well, only if you promise not to.” She approached the bed cautiously, lingered by the end, and then lay down by where his feet were tucked under the blankets.

“I suppose telling you that what you just heard was a nightmare, won’t come as some shocking revelation, will it?” he chuckled bitterly.

“I guessed as much.”

“I cannot explain them,” he admitted. Even in the darkness, barely able to see her face, he could not look at her directly. And it did not help that her scent was intoxicating, reminding him fully of who he was speaking with. “But I have experienced them ever since I was a young lad.”

“Oh, that is...” She paused. “And you have them often?”

“Twice a week,” he said. “Although it has felt like they have been more lately. Ever since Victor passed.”

“Is there a connection?”

“Likely,” he sighed. “My hope is that in time they will rescind. Likely, I am just feeling guilt over his death, is all. Really, it is nothing to concern yourself with.”

He could see her nod her understanding. “That is good. I am glad to hear it.” Another pause and he hoped that would be the end of the matter. He had not told her the full truth, but it was a good start. “I am curious, however...” she then began.

He suppressed a groan. “Concerning?”

“You said you have been having them since you were a lad. So how can they be connected to your brother? It just seems unlikely, is all.”

He smiled and shook his head, unsurprised really that she caught onto the lie. That was her way, he was beginning to realize. Most women would have been glad to have been given an out, leaving quickly because who would want to be put in a situation like this? Diana, apparently.

“I --” Magnus caught his tongue, only too aware of where the two sat. He knew what his nightmares concerned. He knew why he had them. But did he wish for Diana to know? Yes, she wanted him to be more honest with her. And he wanted that too. But this... this was more than mere honesty. This was revealing a part of himself that he hated, and now he understood that as much as he hated it, he hated even more to think how she would react. “I am not weak...” he said pitifully.

“I do not think you are,” she said quickly. “How can you say that?”

“What grown man has nightmares?”

“One who has good reason,” she said and then she shuffled further up the bed. “It is not a weakness, Magnus. In fact, to have nightmares such as you do, I can only imagine that you have suffered. One might even say to survive something like that, whatever it is, is the opposite of weakness.”

His brow creased and he tried to see through the darkness, to read her face and see her meaning in her eyes. The words she spoke hit home and were exactly what he needed to hear. Why, it was almost as if she knew.

What has my grandmother been telling her?

That thought almost emboldened him, as if it took away the burden of revealing his past because there was a good chance that Diana knew more than he realized. With that in mind, Magnus began to speak.

“I don’t know if you know this, but as a child, I was very sick.” He waited for her to say something, but she remained silent. He could feel her watching him, however. “For the first ten years of my life, I didn’t once leave my bed. Physically, I couldn’t. Most thought I was going to die.”

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“That’s awful,” she said in a whisper.

“You have no idea,” he agreed solemnly. “You can’t imagine what it’s like to feel so weak. So... so powerless. I wouldn’t wish it upon anybody.”

“And these nightmares?” she pressed gently, shuffling closer still so that she was right beside him. Then, she reached out and rested a hand on his leg. His leg was beneath the blankets still but the feel of her hand imbued strength in him that he didn’t realize he needed. “They are related?”

“I never remember them fully,” he explained, doing his best not to think of them. “But I know how they make me feel. Trapped. Alone. Back in that bed again, unable to escape or do anything. Forced to watch as those I love...” He swallowed and realized he was shaking. “I cannot help them, not matter how hard I try.”

“Magnus...”

“Other times, it is my nieces who are in that bed, pleading with me to help them. But I can do nothing but watch. The feeling that leaves me with...” A shake of the head, and he tried to look at Diana but could not bring himself to. “I can only imagine that you heard me pleading.”

“I do not know what I heard.”

He scoffed. “Do not lie.”

She hesitated. “You were asking for help. But it did not sound as if it was for you, but



for another. And truly, Magnus, to me, that is not a weakness but a strength.” Her grip on his leg tightened. “That even in your weakest moments, all you care about is the safety of those you love. It is nothing to be ashamed of.”

He snorted and shook his head. “You do not need to placate me.”

“I assure you that I am not. Just telling you how I feel. And Magnus...” Through the darkness he finally looked up, meeting her big brown eyes. He could see how concerned she was for him, and how worried. And something else... an emotion that was hard to recognize in the darkness but that he could feel. What is that? “Thank you.”

“Thank you? What for?”

“For sharing,” she said earnestly. “Truly, I know how hard that was, but I am so glad you did. That is all I ever asked.”

Magnus found his hand resting on top of her own. A beat passed between them. A shared moment that recognized how impactful this right now was. And despite how foolish Magnus felt, how embarrassed, he was also relieved and finally he was beginning to understand the value found in sharing.

It was then that he noticed something else.

“Diana...” His eyes adjusted further, and he realized what she was wearing. A cream-colored nightgown, barely catching the little light, but still somehow shimmering. “Is that...”

“Oh...” She half pulled back. “It is nothing.”

“The nightgown you bought. You’re wearing it.”

“I...” She looked away. “Just making sure it fits.”

He put the pieces together quickly. “I did not wake you, did I? And you did not come to my room because you heard me?”

It was Diana’s turn now to shake from nerves. “I... I was just trying it on. That much is true. But when I saw how good it looks, I thought... well... I thought you might wish to see.” She snapped her head up and forced herself to look right at him.

Oh, how he wished there was more light, for no doubt she looked beyond comprehension in that gown. Her curves struggling to be contained. Her light skin flowing from the material as if they were one. And the feel of it...

Without realizing what he was doing, Magnus reached out, taking a piece of the silk between his fingers. Then, silently, he opened his hand and wrapped his palm around her bosom. She stiffened as he groped her, and she moaned as he found her nipple and pinched it.

They were so close. Less than a foot apart. Diana shuffled in even closer, her breath warm on his face. Magnus leaned in but did not try and kiss her. Rather, he let his hands take over.

They rubbed up her exposed thighs. Soft at first, a light touch over her skin which sent her legs to quiver. Further still, to her waist now, he lifted the nightgown, his hands stroking up her soft body until they found her breasts. She leaned in as he wrapped his hands around them, but he did not kiss her. His fingers pinched her nipples, his breath caressed her neck, and his member sprung to attention right by where her hand still rested on his leg.

It shifted the blankets, and she noticed right away.

“Magnus...” she breathed as he continued to fondle her. “It is my thinking that... seeing as you have been woken the way you have, that you might struggle to get back to sleep.”

“Is that right?” he purred, his lips nuzzled into her neck, breathing on her but still refusing to touch with his lips or tongue.

“And I...” She hesitated. “I would like to help you relax, if you would want it?”

Magnus’ manhood literally pulsed because he could sense what was on her mind. “And how would you do that?”

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“The other day in the garden...” She leaned back and reached for the hem of her nightgown, raising it over her head and tossing it to the floor. Even in the darkness, Magnus could see her glorious, full breasts fall free for the first time. As large as he had ever seen, nipples swollen, perky and perfect. “I was rather upset that I did not get to finish what I started.”

“Oh?”

“There is just one problem...” Her hand reached down, and she pulled back the blanket, releasing his member finally.

“And what is that?” Magnus leaned back, gaping at her nakedness, not caring how smitten he looked. It was her eyes, he watched, the way they stared so intently at his erect manhood.

“I am afraid that I am quite inexperienced in...” She giggled softly. “In that. I was wondering if you would teach me?”

“Teach you?”

“Tell me,” she said firmly. “How to...” She tore her eyes from his member and looked right at him, licking her lips. “Tell me how.”

Magnus couldn't remember a time he had ever been so turned on. His member throbbed painfully. Blood rushed through him so that he was sweating once more. Even his legs shook. Not inexperienced in these matters at all, this was something new entirely.

Nonetheless, he took charge, feeling a need to assert himself once more. He had been honest just now in a way that he felt challenged his masculinity, and this right here was a chance to get it back.

“As you wish...”

Magnus shuffled back and spread his legs so that he was sitting. Then he reached forward and took Diana by the hand, guiding her forward so that she was kneeling before him. His member was right in her face but before he got to that...

“Come here.” Magnus rested a finger under her chin and kissed her on the lips, an action which sent a pulse through them both, reminding the two what it was they had and why nights like this were so important.

And then, Magnus helped guide his wife in the art of oral sex.

He took her hand and wrapped it around the base of his member. “Just like that,” he instructed, his voice soft. “That’s right...” He then moaned as her grip tightened. “Not too tight... yes...” He groaned further. “And move your wrist like – urgh.”

“Like this?” she asked, looking right at him as she began to stroke his length.

He nodded, taking a deep breath.

For a few moments, he let her work him, the whole while looking into her eyes as she looked into his. It might have been her first real time, but that did not show. As she stroked up and down his erect cock, his entire body spasmed.

“Now...” He reached down and rested a hand on the side of her face. Then, he ran a thumb over her lips, and she opened her mouth and began to suck on it. “Do you wish for more?”

She nodded, still sucking his thumb, still looking into his eyes.

“Good girl,” he purred. He pulled his thumb out and rested his hand on the back of her neck. “Open your mouth for me,” he told her, which she did. Next, he guided her head forward, her lips apart, his member sticking up hard and full, the head disappearing into her mouth. “Urgh...” He sucked through his teeth. “Like that... your tongue, use it on me – yes,” he said, body stiffening as her tongue began to massage his head. “And your lips, wrap them around like... Oh, God...” She did it without him having to explain.

Magnus found himself falling back, prostrate on his bed, happy to leave Diana to her work. Work which she took to with a sense of enjoyment and passion and desire that more than made up for her lack of experience.

Her tongue was magical, the way it licked over the tip of his penis. Her lips were sensual, the way they wrapped around his head and sucked. Her hand was devilish, always stroking, never stopping. And best of all, it was wet and sloppy and damn near perfect.

Magnus’ hand found the top of her head as she bobbed up and down. He gripped her by the hair, holding on as she continued to pleasure him. She showed no signs of stopping. No signs that she wanted to. As she made perfectly clear, this was about him, and dammit wasn’t he perfectly fine with that.

It was no surprise then that when it happened, it happened suddenly.

Magnus felt it in his legs. Then his testicles. His right leg began to shake, and he sat up. “Diana...”

She opened her eyes at him but did not stop.

“I’m... do you know what... do not stop...”

She started sucking harder. Faster. Magnus closed his eyes. He gritted his teeth. He grabbed her by the head with both hands. And then, he exploded in her mouth.

And still, Diana did not stop. Not until every last drop was gone. Not until Magnus was back on the bed, puffing and panting. Not until he had to tear her free, otherwise she might never stop.

When she was done, she climbed up the bed next to him, snuggling into his arms, resting her head on his chest. The two had never spent the night together but in this, Magnus figured it was time for that to change. At least for tonight.

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What would happen tomorrow, he could not say. But he could not have been gladder for how tonight had went and surely that said everything.

### ChapterTwenty

“You look... breathtaking.” Only a few words were said, but they were more than enough.

Diana tried her best not to blush furiously at the compliment, and the way that her husband was looking at her. Surely, she was beyond such things by now? After all they had been through and all they had done, his reaction should not have only been expected, but welcome.

Even still, she felt her cheeks turn furiously red and she was forced to look away, focusing her attention back on the mirror as if to double check her outfit for herself.

“Somebody is shy,” Magnus chuckled. She saw him in the reflection, moving across the room and toward her.

“I certainly am not.”

“So, I didn’t see you blushing just now?”

“It is called make-up,” she dismissed, her cheeks turning an even further shade of red.

“Despite what you may think, I do not always look like this.”

“Now that, I find hard to believe.”



She rolled her eyes at him in the reflection, but she wore a smile which she hoped he saw too, so he would know how much his words meant to her. A little over the top, sure, but that didn't take away how wonderful they felt. Wonderful... just like this marriage.

Who could have guessed we'd come so far in such a short amount of time? And who could have guessed that everything would be so... so perfect? A word I hesitate to use, even if it feels so right.

It was beginning to feel like nothing could go wrong.

Even tonight, which had all the potential for unwanted drama and frustrations, had gotten off to a tremendous start. Although Magnus had not confirmed it during the day, Diana had suspected that, come this evening, he would join her at the Truscott Ball. After all, it was just two nights ago that they had spent the night together, still only cuddling, but that did not take away from the importance of the moment.

And since then, they had been near inseparable. Breaking their fast together each morning. Sharing supper of an evening. The girls too, always involved, while Magnus seemed delighted to see how well they were all getting along.

Things were progressing at a steady pace. Diana hadn't tried to push Magnus any further on his personal life either. He had been open and honest with her once already, it had made a huge difference, and she knew that come time he would tell her more.

Needless to say, she wasn't at all surprised to find him standing in the doorway of her room, dressed for the ball, acting as if he had always intended on joining her. And she might have said something too, but then he started to fawn over her and, well, Diana was happy to let his appreciation run its course.

“How long until we leave?” she asked, making a final check of her hair.

“The carriage is ready and waiting,” he said from behind her. Close now, he moved his hands to her hips and his lips went to her neck --

She slapped his hands away. “Not now.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you know how long it took me to get ready?”

“Oh, so that is what you meant when you said you do not always look like this?”

She rolled her eyes at him.

The dress was a two-toned number; the corset being a deep green, the skirt a lighter shade, and with golden stitched hems. A floral pattern swirled its way up one side, while the sleeves were long, but the neckline and shoulders were low. In that way it was both modest and revealing, covering just enough, whilst some skin was still showing and her curves protruded in ways that had Magnus salivating.

Standing behind her but to the side, Diana smirked to see that he had chosen an outfit to match. Mostly black, his cummerbund was a dark emerald green and the buttons were golden much like the stitching of her dress. When they entered together, as indeed they would, all eyes would be on them, and everyone would know that this marriage was above reproach.

“Shall we?” Diana turned about.

“I think it is time.” Magnus cocked his arm and she linked hers with it. Then, she leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips. “Careful,” he said. “Do you have any idea how long it took me to get ready.”

“Oh, do you not always look like that?”

Together they laughed and made their way downstairs, sure to say goodnight to Josephine and Adeline on the way.

It was twenty minutes later when they arrived at Truscott Estate, one of the last to do so, based on the rows of carriages already parked about the grounds. Their carriage pulled up at the front entrance, Magnus climbed down and then helped her by lifting her about the waist. They linked arms again, wore smiles that were very much real, and as husband and wife, Duke and Duchess, they made their very first appearance in the ton.

All eyes were on them as they entered the Ball Room.

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Diana found herself beyond relieved that Magnus had agreed to join her this evening, for she could not imagine having to go through this herself. The whispers, the snarky comments that would have followed, the rumors that would have swelled.

Rather, the feeling of being watched in this current context was not only elating but powerful. There was a sense of command that came with it. She was a duchess, on the arm of a duke, the two most important people in this room by far, and she could feel it. Those that watched weren't doing so in judgement, but in jealousy and awe. The whispers she heard were encouraging. The eyes that followed buoyed her. A magnanimous smile on her lips, she held her husband closer, and the two seemed to float as the crowd parted for them.

"I think she likes it," Magnus whispered out the corner of his lips.

"Just playing my role," she shot back. "And try not to slouch. People are watching."

He shook his head but continued to smile as they waded further through the busy Ball Room. Colorful frocks everywhere they looked. Servants carrying trays of drinks. Music playing softly, ringing from above. Dancing. Laughter. Movement in all directions. It was like so many balls and galas she had been to before, but it was also so very different.

"I should warn you," Magnus said as they continued to walk to nowhere in particular. "To brace yourself."

"What for?"

The answer came seconds later.

Once the initial shock of seeing Diana and Magnus together settled among the crowd, like birds chasing seed, the lords and ladies who surrounded them flocked in close and attached themselves in a bid to be the first to greet them.

“Your Grace! Your Grace!” they cried out. “Lovely to see you.”

“You look dashing, Your Grace!”

“What a stunning dress!”

“I see married life suits you!”

“Find me later, we must talk!”

“Not so fast, five minutes of your time, Your Grace.”

“Your hair, Your Grace! You simply must give me your secrets!”

They came from everywhere. Quick and attacking. Mostly, Diana couldn’t tell who was speaking, and she simply smiled and nodded and tried to keep up. Magnus stayed by her, of course, his sturdy and strong presence acting as protection. And it was he who weathered most of the assault.

How long it went on for, she could not say. Finally, after too many minutes, the throng of interlopers began to thin, and she found herself and Magnus speaking to an uppity lord whom she did not know or care to. But over his shoulder, not so far away, she caught sight of perhaps the only person her she wished to see. Evelyn.

“Magnus...” She unlinked her arm. “I’ll be right back?”

“Hmm?” Magnus checked to see what she meant, caught sight of Evelyn, and nodded. “I’ll come find you.”

She was quick to duck around the uppity lord when she made eye contact with Evelyn who saw her coming but didn’t look in the least bit excited to see her. This caused a moment of confusion and Diana almost stopped her approach, and then she saw the reason.

When she did, she wished she had stopped.

“Your Grace,” Lord Herrod smiled in greeting as he stepped around Evelyn. His hand had been on her waist, but he dropped it so that he could reach for Diana’s hand. “Positively splendid to see you again.”

“Lord Herrod...” Diana balked, caught in two minds. One was to turn and run, the other was to say something snarky. But the sight of him so suddenly caught her by complete surprise, which was why she did nothing to stop him giving the back of her hand a wet kiss.

“Oh, do not look so surprised,” Lord Herrod chuckled. “Evelyn tells me that she was good enough to inform you of our courtship.” He stepped back to Evelyn, his hand again finding her waist. “And that you gave us your blessing.”

“She did?” Diana looked at Evelyn for answers, but Evelyn feigned sheepishness, casting her gaze elsewhere.

“Not that we needed it,” Lord Herrod continued. “Married to His Grace, as you are. You have certainly come up in the world, have you not?”

He was just as Diana remembered him. Charming? Perhaps. Cheerful? A little too much. There was a fakeness around the way he behaved, a clear effort to his

saccharine temperament that suggested behind closed doors he was nothing like the man she was seeing.

“Yes, well...” She looked past Lord Herrod, trying to catch Evelyn’s eye. “Evelyn, you look lovely tonight.”

“Doesn’t she,” Lord Herrod picked up, not giving Evelyn a chance to speak. “A pearl beyond price and somehow I was lucky enough to capture her.”

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“Capture or trap?” Diana said before she could stop herself.

Lord Herrod beamed. “I told you when we first met that I always get what I want, did I not?” He stepped in closer to Evelyn, holding her as if worried she might flee. “In this instance, once I heard of your engagement, my attention turned to your cousin, and I could not be gladder for it.” He looked at Evelyn, seeming not to notice how uncomfortable she was. “Fate works in mysterious ways, but I find where my life is concerned, it always works out for the best. Wouldn’t you agree, Evelyn?”

“Y -- yes,” she said softly.

Something was clearly wrong. Of that, Diana had no doubt. Even if she did not know Evelyn the way she did, to look at her, one would think that Lord Herrod was blackmailing her into being with him. Diana did not believe for a second that this was a mutual arrangement, which made her wonder how it had happened. Further to that point, why Evelyn of all people had agreed.

Her cousin wasn’t one for marriage or love. She was closer to a spinster than anything, a fact which Diana had never begrudged her as she was happy and that was all which mattered. All that was to say, it only made this that much more concerning.

“So, tell me,” Diana started pleasantly, still trying to catch her cousin’s eye. “How did this little union come about? I would love to hear the tale.”

“I bet you would,” Lord Herrod chuckled. “Let me just say that Cupid was waiting in the wings. Love at first sight, for how it felt. Isn’t that right, Evelyn?”



“Yes,” Evelyn said softly. She then glanced at Diana quickly, an obvious cry for help.

Diana knew that she should have kept her thoughts to herself. That this was not her business. And that if it was, this was not the time. But she loved her cousin, she would do anything for her. Also, hating Lord Herrod as she did, meant that she cared little for how the man might react.

“Evelyn, is everything --”

“Diana!” Diana’s mother appeared as if from thin air. “There you are, dear.” She stepped into Diana and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “I have been looking all over for you.”

“Hello, Mother...”

“Ah, Lord Herrod.” Her mother turned and purred, offering a hand for the earl to kiss, which he did thusly. “And Evelyn. Oh, what a pairing the two of you make. I was just saying now, agreed by all, that the two of you together...” She exhaled and smiled. “A match made in heaven.”

“I could not agree more,” Lord Herrod said.

Ah, now I understand...

Her mother was to blame for this pairing. Of course she was. Having lost Diana to Magnus, she must have scrambled and pulled some strings to convince Lord Herrod to take a look at Evelyn instead. Or maybe Lord Herrod was easier to convince than that? Evelyn was a beauty, so there was no reason he would not be.

The confusion still lay in Evelyn, and why she was going along with this in the first place. How had her mother convinced her? Or forced her, more like.

“And your first ball together,” her mother continued to gush over the two. “The first of many.”

“I do hope so.”

“Evelyn, why the long face? Perhaps a dance – yes,” she said and then stepped forward as if she meant to direct them to the dance floor. “Lord Herrod, Evelyn is quite the dancer, you know?”

“Is she now?”

“She is. Evelyn? Tell him?” Her mother widened her eyes at Evelyn.

“I...” Evelyn forced a smile. “I am, Lord Herrod. And if you wish it, we may dance.”

“I shall take you up on that,” Lord Herrod said. “But first, I must visit the washroom. Lady Langham, if you might keep an eye on Evelyn for me...” He winked at her playfully. “I do not want anyone else trying to steal her.”

“Oh, stop it,” Diana’s mother cackled.

“I shall be back in a moment,” Lord Herrod said. “And then, that dance.” He smiled at Evelyn, and she forced a smaller one back. This seemed to please him, allowing Lord Herrod to let her go finally and then vanish in the crowd.

The moment they were alone, Diana’s mother turned on Evelyn.

“What is the matter with you, girl?” she hissed. “The least you can do is not act as if you are at a funeral!”

Evelyn winced. “Sorry. I did not mean... I am just tired.”

“Pish-posh, tired. I know this might not be how you envisioned your life turning out, but it is the best you could hope for. And after all I have done...” Her mother shook her head. “I expect you to be on you best behavior, Evelyn. Is that understood?”

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“Yes,” Evelyn said meekly. “And I am sorry.”

“Mother,” Diana spoke up. “I am sorry, but has it occurred to you that Evelyn does not wish to be courted by Lord Herrod?”

“Excuse me?” her mother turned on her.

“Do not act so surprised,” Diana continued. “I have seen them together for less than five minutes and it is as clear as day that Evelyn is not happy.”

“Is that so?”

“Tell her, Evelyn?” Diana looked to her cousin for support, expecting her to speak up finally. Before she got the chance, her mother cut in.

“Diana, I appreciate that you are concerned for your cousin’s welfare, but have you stopped to consider the very real fact that this is none of your business.”

Diana leaned back, shocked. “What?”

“You heard me well enough,” her mother said. “You might not have wished to marry Lord Herrod – you made that perfectly clear. By the grace of God only, you were able to find a better option. Your cousin does not have that luxury.”

“Yes, but still, that does not mean she needs to be forced --”

“Nobody is forcing anything,” her mother spoke over her. “And I do wish that for

once in your life you would mind your own business.”

“And I wish that you would not speak to my wife like that.” Stepping in beside her, Magnus appeared. A hand on her waist, he stood tall and proud and powerful. It was enough to see Diana’s mother shift back as if the sun had been shone in her eyes.

“Your Grace, I was just saying --”

“I heard well enough,” Magnus continued, his tone warning. “Yes, Diana may be your daughter, but she is my wife, and I suggest the next time you plan on speaking to her in that manner, ask if it is a tone befitting of a duchess.” He looked down at Diana’s mother, who suddenly looked lost for words. “And then simply don’t.”

Diana was rendered momentarily speechless. Never in all her life had she seen someone stand up to her mother like that. And never in all her life had she imagined it to be so successful.

And it wasn’t just that he was standing up to her mother, but that he was standing up for her. He had no idea what the conversation concerned. For all he knew, Diana had started it. But he stepped in nonetheless, putting himself firmly in her corner, acting as any husband ought to. Truly, Diana didn’t think she had ever found the man so attractive as right then.

“Good,” he said with a firm nod. Then he offered Evelyn a smile. “And Miss Goldsmith, how are you this evening?”

“I am...” She smiled politely. “Very well, Your Grace.”

“And I love to hear it. Now, I do not wish to interrupt but I am afraid I need to steal my lovely wife from you both. Diana...” He looked down at her. “Would you care for a dance?”

To that, Diana had just the one thing to say. “Try and stop me.”

## ChapterTwenty-One

“Ishould have known,” Magnus chuckled as the two began to waltz together across the dance floor.

“Known what?” Diana asked.

He grinned. “That dancing was yet another talent that you possessed. I might need to take lessons.”

Diana blushed furiously at the compliment, which might have seemed strange as it was nothing over the top, certainly not when compared to some of the other compliments he had paid her recently. But then she knew that the reason she was blushing was only half-to-do with his kind words, and mostly to do with how she was starting to feel concerning her husband. A man whom she now knew herself to be in love with.

“I’m not so sure lessons will help,” she said sheepishly, forcing herself to meet his eyes, not caring one little bit how red her cheeks had grown.

“How do you mean?”

“When it comes to dancing, some of us simply have it, and others do not.” She raised an eyebrow at him as he guided her across the floor. “And you, husband, sadly, do not.”

He chuckled at the cheek. “Careful now, people are watching. You do not wish to anger me, do you?”

“I had no idea you were so sensitive where your dancing prowess was concerned. Or lack thereof.”

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He laughed again. “Do you wish to lead? It is not as easy as it looks.”

“No, no,” she said. “I know how much you like to...” She widened her eyes suggestively. “Lead.”

“That I do,” he grinned. “That I do.”

Diana held his eyes as he continued to lead her across the floor. She gave herself over, joking of course about his dancing skills, even impressed by how smoothly and effortlessly he guided her. In that way, it felt as if they were one, not two separate bodies dancing, but a perfect pairing sharing this space with themselves only.

A dozen other couples moved around them, but Diana had eyes for her husband only.

These last few days, Diana had felt herself falling for her husband. The other night especially, seeing how vulnerable he could be, was enough to confirm that this right here was a man whom she could fall in love with. Could being the operative word.

Seeing him stand up to her mother just now, the way he strode in from nowhere and protected her from the woman’s wrath without question, was the final straw. It proved that he was more than words, that he cared deeply for her, that this marriage had transcended its original mandate and transgressed into a true union of man and wife.

I am in love with my husband. What a glorious thing to be.

“Thank you, by the way,” Diana said, still staring into Magnus’ eyes.



“For?” he frowned.

“Just now,” she said. “Standing up to my mother as you did. That was... it was perfect.”

His smile was warm and embracing. “No one is to ever speak to you like that, Diana. Is that understood? I don’t care if the King of England tries to put you down. If I am with you, you will always be safe.”

And she believed him. Oh, how she did.

As they danced, Diana looked beyond the circle to the crowd of onlookers. Among them, she caught her mother and Evelyn watching them. Evelyn still looked forlorn, and that was a problem that she would need to deal with later. Something was wrong there, and she would not stand by and simply let her cousin be manipulated for reasons she could for now only guess at.

She caught her mother’s eye next, and most surprisingly, she did not look upset. Rather, she appeared proud, delighted by what she was seeing. And why wouldn’t she be? Her daughter, married to a duke, seemingly in love. It was every mother’s dream.

It made Diana think back to their conversation from a few days' past. A topic which Diana hadn’t thought much of but now, under the new circumstances, felt not only topical but paramount in importance. She and the duke had come so far lately. They had done so much. But there was one thing they were yet to do...

Diana felt her cheeks turn even brighter red and her heart began to race. Her stomach too, fluttered so that she felt sick. She wanted to not think about it, knowing at the same time if there was ever a night, a moment, to breech it, this was it.

And so, she took a deep breath, steadied herself, and met her husband’s eyes once

more.

“M -- Mangus,” she stammered and then swallowed. “I have been thinking.”

“Oh?”

“About us.”

She felt him stiffen and he missed his step. But it was a small thing and soon he recovered. “Regarding?”

“I know it has only been a short time, but I feel that I am making great progress with you nieces. And I want you to know how deeply I care for them – as if they were my own. And that will not change. No matter what happens.”

He frowned. “And what might happen?”

“But they are not my own, nor are they yours.” She felt herself begin to sweat, the nerves peaking. “And it has occurred to me that... that... we have done so much together, lately, and I have enjoyed every minute of it. Still...” Her tongue began to swell inside her mouth. Why is this so hard! “There is one thing we have not done...”

His frown deepened and then his eyes turned wide. Again, he missed his step, this time slower to recover. Diana did not hurry him, not wishing to rush or pressure him. She wanted him to want this as much as she did.

“You are speaking of...” He began, trailing off suggestively.

“I believe you know exactly what I speak of.”

He swallowed and glanced about as if worried someone might hear. “You wish for

me to take you to bed.”

“To make me your wife,” she corrected. “And...” A smile, one that was soft and loving because that was what this conversation should be. “And to produce an heir. If this marriage is more than one of convenience, is that not the entire point? Unless...” She looked away. “Unless I have mistaken what this is.”

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He did not answer right away and because she was not looking at him, terror enveloped her. Her mind raced as she imagined the coldness in his eyes, the dispassion. Him stopping their dance, stepping away, telling her that she is getting ahead of herself, and that this was not part of the deal!

The silence grew and she forced herself to look at him. His expression was unreadable, which only made things worse.

“Admittedly, I had not considered it,” he said evenly.

“Which part?”

“The... the heir,” he said. “Of course I wish to take you to bed. To make you mine – what sane man wouldn’t,” he joked, although it sounded forced. “But an heir...”

“Is that not something you might want, one day?”

He considered her closely. As he did, the music began to slow, as did their movements. Soon, the two stood perfectly still, holding one another as they had been, eyes locked, breaths held, the world around them unimportant because this moment right here would come to define everything.

“I...” He licked his lips. “I do. Yes, I... I would very much like that.”

Diana beamed and if it was not for all the people watching, she would have kissed him. “Tonight?” she asked instead. “Shall we...” She looked away and then looked back. “If the mood takes you?”

He chuckled deeply, one hand now rising and resting on the side of her face. “The mood does take me, Diana. Where you are concerned, it always does.”

\* \* \*

They spoke of little on the ride home, for which Diana was grateful. Did Diana enjoy herself? Was her dress the hit that she had hoped? And Magnus’ insistence that she meet his best friend, Earl Northwood soon, because the two had similar personalities and Magnus was all but certain they would get along famously.

To Diana, it felt like conversation for the pure purpose of filling the silence, which told her that even Magnus was nervous about what they were heading home to do. Surely, not as nervous as she was?

If they were going to be purely sleeping together as man and wife, she would be nervous enough, for Diana was a virgin and despite how much she had experienced of late, sex was a whole new world to her, and she was infinitely aware of how little she knew of the matter. A novice, unlearned, likely to do something that would mortify her beyond comprehension. She just hoped that Magnus took the lead.

This was about more than sex. He had agreed that they should begin trying to produce an heir, an acknowledgment that this marriage was very much the real deal, and from tonight there would be no going back.

Not that Diana wished to go back, of course. It was just that... well... the permanence of it all was suddenly hitting as she had not expected. After tonight, nothing would be the same. All she could do was remind herself that this was what she wanted.

When they arrived home, Magnus was the first to climb from the carriage. Then, he silently took her hand and helped her down. From there, still in silence, they walked into the manor and up the stairs toward the bedroom. The hallway seemed longer than

usual, every step taken creaking the floorboards loudly. Diana began to sweat, began to shake, forcing herself into composure because she did not want to appear afraid.

Inside the room, Magnus lead Diana forwards before turning back and closing the door. The sound of it shutting had her jumping in fright.

“Careful,” Magnus said, his first words in minutes. “I do not want you tripping and hurting yourself.”

She tried for a smile. “I... I am fine.”

He frowned at the response. “I did not think you were not.”

“I...” Diana shook her head at herself and focused on her husband. He looked the same as he always did, the man who she had fallen in love with. Tall and imposing. Dark and rugged. But also compassionate, caring, not someone she needed to be scared around. She thought back to earlier with her mother, how he had saved her, and she met his eyes and reminded herself why she was the one who initiated this in the first place.

“Is everything alright?” he asked.

“Magnus, I have a small confession...” She spoke softly, surely such that the beating of her heart could be heard.

“Oh?”

“I am...” She grimaced. “I would be lying if I said I was not nervous.”

“I didn’t think that was possible for you.”

“Of course it is,” she snapped.

He chuckled. “There is nothing to be nervous about.”

“Easy for you to say,” she sighed. “I am sure you have bedded dozens of women.” His brow creased and her eyes widened. “I did not mean – I simply meant, this is not the same for you as it is for me. And I know it is foolish for me to act this way, that there is nothing to fear but... but... well, I am. And I cannot help that. And now I am rambling, and I cannot stop and if you wish to leave, I fully understand. In fact, I expect you to. Nor will I hold it against you.”

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As she rambled, Magnus crossed the room. And as she rambled, he reached her, taking her hand in both of his. The feel of his hands around her own was comfort and protection personified, and it did much to still her racing heart.

“Diana...” He held her eyes as he held her hands. “There is no need to panic.”

“I did not say I was --”

“Or worry.” His smile was soft; the light in the fireplace cast his face in shadow, but his eyes burned with compassion. “I am here for you. You must know that. And I will do everything I can to make this as comfortable for you as possible.”

“Re -- really?”

His smile grew. “And I think you will surprise yourself.”

“How so?”

“It is not as complicated as you think. And I often find that if my partner is confident and I am willing, then it is a perfectly natural thing. Like breathing.”

She snorted. “I doubt that very much --”

Magnus stepped into her and kissed her on the lips before she had a chance to finish her thought. The effect was immediate, calming her while at the same time lighting that fire of excitement that raged whenever she felt his touch. The kiss was gentle at first, designed to ease her into the situation, and before Diana knew it, she had



forgotten her worries because this did indeed feel natural.

The kiss increased in passion then. His hands took the side of her face, holding it close as his tongue pried apart her mouth and began to explore her. She moaned as he bit her lips, and she moaned again as he pulled back and began to kiss up her neck.

On instinct, her hands moved to his jacket, and she helped him remove it. Then came his waistcoat and his shirt. She did not think. She did not consider if it was right or not. As his kissed her on the mouth and neck and face and everywhere he could, the desire that rose inside of her demanded her actions and she heeded their call.

Soon, he was leading her toward the bed. And soon he was helping her from her dress. It was complicated, and they were forced to break apart. He stood behind her, undoing the laces, kissing her neck and then her shoulders as the dress fell from her frame. And then he stayed behind her, his hands wrapping her breasts and squeezing them as he sucked her neck and pressed himself against her buttocks.

“We are going to be gentle this first time,” Magnus whispered into her ear; his breath was warm, and it made her hair stand up on end. “And if at any time you need me to stop, you need only to ask.”

“I trust you,” she said, knowing it to be true.

Magnus turned her back around. Before kissing her again, he looked down at her. His green eyes, in the darkness, drank her in hungrily. But it was more than that. It was done to let her know that he could see her there, that he recognized her for what she was, that this went beyond pure love making.

A single finger found its ways under her chin. He smiled as she leaned into him. They began to kiss again, more fiery than before, more passionate. This time too, she knew it would not stop.

Magnus stepped into her and lay her down on the bed. She scrambled back but his arm was under her, lifting her in the air and carrying her until she lay with her head on the pillows. Diana was naked, she had not even realized that she was, but he was on her, spreading her legs with his own, kissing her all the while, his hands moving down her thighs and stroking her skin softly.

She expected him to enter her then and there, but he did no such thing.

Rather, he kissed down her chest. Soft, wet kisses. Each sent a prickle across her chest and body. Further down he moved, toward her navel, onto her thighs where he licked and sucked gently. His fingers traced her lips, testing her wetness as her legs began to shake. Then the tips of his fingers found her womanhood, stroking softly over her bud like a flower he was trying to make bloom. She gasped and tried to sit up, but he pushed her back down.

“Trust me,” he said, looking up at her just the once before then diving between her thighs.

“Oh... Oh... Mag – yes!”

It was even better than the last time. She was expecting it, was why. The way he licked and sucked. The way he built momentum to the rhythm of her breathing. His fingers inside of her, pressing against her walls, all the while that tongue of his dancing between her lips as he brought her closer and closer to explosion.

Her body writhed and she never wanted it to end. Her body spasmed and she tried to keep it under control. Her body jolted and she cried out, legs snapping together around Magnus’ head. This was it... it was happening again...

“Magnus... I am... I’m about to... please, do not stop --”

And that was when Magnus stopped.

“What are you doing?!” She sat up, breathless, staring at him in shock, unable to believe that he would do this. “Why did you stop?”

“Stop?” He frowned playfully. “Diana, I am only just getting started.”

He climbed from the bed and shuffled from his pants. As he did, his manhood sprang free, gloriously erect. She eyed it with hunger, lips salivating, wanting it in her mouth as if her life depended on it. About to climb to her knees and do just that, Magnus was back on the bed, straddling her, his lips finding her mouth and kissing her.

He forced her back down as his knees spread her legs apart. Then his hands moved under her knees, bending her legs up just a little. He pulled back, kissing her neck and then breasts.

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“Are you ready?” he asked her as he readied himself between her thighs.

“I...” Strangely, she was not as nervous as she thought. For all the worry she had felt, Magnus had been correct. There was something natural about this that she had not expected. Something right. No idea what she was doing, she felt that did not matter one little bit. The only thing she knew was how much she wanted it. “I am,” she said, meeting his eyes, her smile seductive and filled with want. “I am ready.”

Magnus returned the smile as he lifted her legs and slowly, carefully, pulled her toward him.

She gasped when she felt his manhood pressed against her lips. And she moaned, sucking through her teeth when she felt him enter her. It was a sensation she could not describe, somehow painful but also teeming with pleasure. Deeper and deeper she felt him enter her, stretching her walls, pushing through her, opening her as the two became one.

“Oh... Oh... Oh...” She fell back, eyes closed, allowing Magnus to have her fully.

“Is that... how does that feel?” he asked.

“Perfect.”

And then, they began.

It started off slowly. Long, careful, steady thrusts. Kissing her the whole while, keeping those lips and mind busy, Magnus moved his hips back and forth, pulling

himself all the way out and then driving himself back in. He groaned with each thrust, and she moaned in turn.

Then it became faster. Harder. Not aggressive. But as she opened further to him, as she became more comfortable, she began to move her hips along with him, welcoming the haste and the force, wishing for him to push himself in deeper.

“More...” she begged him. “Harder...”

“Like this?” Magus growled, doing as she commanded.

“Yes!”

How long it lasted? She could not say. The noises she made? She was a little embarrassed to consider. But for what felt like hours, although it was likely only minutes, she and Magnus made passionate love for the first time as husband and wife. He kissed her on the lips. He sucked on her breasts. He pulled on her hair, licked her ear and neck, buried his head in her chest.

And she grabbed a hold of whatever she could. His hair. Head. Back. Nails across his skin as the pleasure mounted. Legs splayed in the air as she took him all. Soon, that welcome sensation began to build inside of her. Soon, she was all but ready to explode.

“Magnus...”

“Me too,” he said, head now buried in her chest. “I am nearly... almost...” His thrusts became shorter, faster, harder. He pulled her into him, holding her pelvis as close as he could, biting in her neck as he let forth a mighty roar. “Argh!” he cried out and she felt him fill her with his seed.

She arched her back and welcomed it. She wrapped her hands around his butt and kept him pressed into her until she felt him turn soft inside of her. And only once he was done, no longer shaking and spasming, did she let go.

“Oh my... oh my God...” She was out of breath. Body covered in sweat. Her chest actually hurt as if her heart might explode. “Magnus that was... that was... I can’t even say it.”

He said nothing.

At first, she thought he was simply out of breath, and she did not begrudge him that. But as he lay down beside her, not pulling her into him as she expected, the silence built, and Diana realized something was wrong. He was stiff beside her, cold, disinterested it felt like.

“Magnus...” She dared to look at him, wincing because he wore a look of coldness on his face as he stared at the ceiling.

“Is everything... is something the matter?”

“Everything is fine,” he said sharply. A beat as he considered and then, just to make matters even more confusing, he sat up and climbed from the bed.

“Where are you going?” she moved to follow him,

“To check on the girls,” he said without looking back. He grabbed for his pants on the way, shuffling into them as he walked. “Do not fear, I will be right back.”

She smiled, even if her heart cracked because somehow she just knew he was lying. “I will be right here.”

He reached the door and turned back. She brightened; certain he was about to put her fears to rest. He stood there a moment looking at her, admiring her was how she wanted to see it. Say something. Anything! But the look on his face was confused, unsure, as if he did not recognize the woman lying in his bed.

And then, he turned around and left the room, closing the door behind him. As was expected, even if it made no sense that Diana could figure out, he did not return that night. Which allowed Diana to cry herself to sleep without fear of being seen.

Chapter Twenty-Two

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:16 am*

Magnus was not a coward and for that reason he would not avoid his wife this morning. He might have liked to. After the previous evening, seeing her again was the last thing he wished to do. But this was his home, he was the master of it, and he would not skulk about with his tail between his legs like some whipped puppy.

Thus, he joined this wife to break his fast as was expected. There was no good excuse not to, and every reason that he should. Even if now things felt different. Even if now they were confused in ways that they shouldn't be, he wasn't at all surprised.

"Good morning," he said simply as he strode into the breakfast room. Diana sat in her usual place at the table, while Josephine and Adeline sat to her left and across from her. "How is everyone feeling today?"

He wasn't sure what reaction he was expecting from his wife, but all things considered, what she gave him was as good as he could have hoped for. She looked up when he spoke, did not smile or appear to even see him, then went back to her plate of food.

Magnus grimaced at the cold reception, but he powered through the awkwardness as he made for his own seat at the head of the table. When he sat down, Diana did not look up or even acknowledge him. She continued to focus on her plate of food, expressionless, a coldness seeping from her pores which was entirely justified.

"I slept well, in case anyone was wondering." Magnus chose to pretend that all was well, while sure to not act too cheerful because he did not want to lure his wife into a sense of false expectation. "Girls? How did we sleep?" A quick glance at his wife, but still she gave him nothing.



What did you really expect? After how you treated her last night. The fact she isn't attacking you with that knife should be hailed as a victory.

Even having spent a whole night thinking about it, Magnus could still not fully explain his actions last night. Nor could he explain how he was feeling this morning – the reason he did not take his wife by the hand, drag her away, and apologize profusely for being a downright fool who had made a mistake but would not make it again. That was because he could not say for sure if he would make it again.

Everything had been going so well too. Dare he say, perfectly.

For him, the moment of completeness came when he saw the viscountess badgering his wife and without delay, he stepped in to defend her honor. He saw how much it meant to Diana, and that made him swell because he felt in that moment that he and she finally had something real.

And then it all came crashing down.

It wasn't the sex that did it. Rather, it was the implication. Her mentioning of an heir. The realization that from here on out there would be no going back. That he would not only be a husband but a father, a carer, someone who would be relied on from this day onwards.

The nightmares that he had swirled through his subconscious. The feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, those which he had been running from his entire life. Suddenly, he felt unworthy, as if he had somehow tricked Diana into sleeping with him. He had never thought of himself as husband material. He certainly wasn't father material. But once they did the deed, it was as if he had no choice.

And so, he did as he has always done, he ran.

“Diana was saying we could play outside again,” Josephine said eagerly. “May we, Uncle? Pleeeeease!”

“Did she now?” he tried to catch Diana’s eye, and still she did not look at him.

“She did!” little Adeline squealed.

“Oh, I do not see why not,” he pretended to sigh. “On one condition. That I may join you.”

“Really?!”

“Of course,” he said simply, not looking at his wife this time, feigning ignorance of her mood as if she might suddenly decide that she was the one acting strangely.

Did Magnus even want her to acknowledge what had happened last night? As he spoke the words that he knew she would want to hear, his stomach twisted itself into knots because they felt wrong to say. He had left her last night for a good reason, a reason he had not come to terms with, and continuing in this manner of loving family and dutiful husband grated his senses and made him feel like a fraud.

He knew what he needed to do. He just didn’t know if he could do it.

Nonetheless, despite his feelings of conflict, when the four of them were done breaking their fast, Magnus joined his nieces and Diana outside, determine to push through the feelings of doubt that plagued him, certain that if he spent more time with them all, if he reminded himself of why he had fallen for Diana in the first place, he would realize how foolish he was being.

If only it was that simple.

First of all, Diana was clearly furious with him, and there was nothing in the way that she behaved that morning to suggest things were going to change. She avoided him as if he was the plague, refusing to say so much as a word, even when he spoke to her directly. The girls ran about chasing one another, Diana acted as a monster as she followed them, and Magnus could not find the enthusiasm to try and involve himself as he knew he should.

All he needed to do was apologize. Magnus knew that. But again, it felt as if she would know that he was saying the words without meaning them and as silly as it sounded, he felt he owed her more than that.

The second problem was that Diana and his feelings for her weren't the cause of this calamity. He had real feelings for her. Dammit, Magnus was on the precipice of admitting that he loved her. And that was the problem.

For all of his life, he had been on his own, and there was good reason for that. His childhood and those memories which haunted him. Feelings of weakness and powerlessness, never feeling good enough for another, unable to protect those he loved because he couldn't protect himself. He was not worthy and as he watched Diana chase the girls, laughing and shouting with joy with them, he knew that to try and force this or pretend it was not an issue would only hurt Diana more than he already had.

"Oh, I have just remembered something," he said suddenly, an idea coming to mind. "Girls, Diana..." He called out, edging to where they chased one another around the oak tree. "I hate to leave the three of you, but I am afraid I must."

"Where are you going?" Josephine asked.

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He looked at Diana, hoping she would ask the same question. But she crossed her arms and looked away and his heart sank.

“Your great-grandmother's,” he said. “There is something I’ve been meaning to speak with her on, and I completely forgot that I promised I would see her today. Diana...” He looked at her hopefully. “Will you be fine with the girls for the rest of the day?”

If it was not for the two girls watching her, he knew she would have said nothing. Indeed, she very much might have liked to.

“It is fine,” she said simply. “Go.”

The way she said ‘Go,’ was like an arrow shooting right into his heart. He winced and curled back, a forced smile so the girls would not see, and he turned and waded back across the garden.

As he reached the edges, he dared a final glance at his wife. He watched her chase the girls, he smiled as he did, knowing that he did indeed love her and that he wanted to build a life with her. He just didn’t know if he could.

Out of options, needing answers, there was one person in this world who he knew could give them. And so, he left his manor, climbed atop his horse, and set it in that direction.

With any luck, come nightfall, all this would be nothing more than a bad memory.

\* \* \*

It shouldn't have surprised Magnus that his grandmother seemed to expect him when he arrived randomly upon her doorstep. She didn't ask what he was doing. She didn't ask if everything was alright, or if something was wrong. Rather, she invited him to join her in the sitting room, where a saucer of tea had already been served.

"Tea?" she asked as she sat down.

"I'm good, thank you."

"Somehow, I doubt that." She indicated to one of the servants, who was quick to pour two cups. "And believe me when I tell you, there is little that tea cannot solve. Now, Magnus, do not make me ask you again." She raised an eyebrow at him, one that warranted no argument.

He sighed and picked up the cup, taking a sip. As expected, it did not solve all his woes.

"There, how was it?"

"Bitter," he said, putting the saucer down.

She chuckled. "I suppose it is not for everyone." She took a small sip and smacked her lips. "I do worry, however, if tea cannot cure what ails you, then something must surely be wrong."

"I am surprised you do not already know the answer,"

"I have my suspicions," she said. "But I do not like to pry."

He snorted. "Grandmother, lies do not become us."

“And what does that mean?”

“Do you mean to tell me that you and my wife didn’t have a wonderful little chat last week, concerning my... well, my entire past?”

“Oh, that.” Her eyes flashed mischief. “I might have mentioned a tidbit of our family history. But nothing concerning, I assure you.”

He groaned. “I suspected as much.”

“Is that why you’re here? To thank me?”

“Thank you!”

“Oh, please.” She took another sip and put the saucer down. Then she fixed him with a no-nonsense expression. “I may have missed the Truscott Ball last evening, but I have ears everywhere, Magnus. Ears that listened, eyes that saw, and mouths which told of a happy couple that to the perception of theton, were in the throes of what could only be described as a budding romance and a happy marriage. Tell me I am wrong.”

“Spying on me, I see.”

She winked. “And everyone else, while I am at it.”

Magnus hadn’t known for fact that his grandmother had told Diana about his past, but he had suspected it. And where it might have angered him, surely a few weeks ago it would have enraged him, he was wont to admit that this time it was perhaps the correct course of action. He could certainly never have opened himself up and told Diana what he knew she wished to hear, so why not hear it from another? Further to that point, for a time at least, it had produced the required results, bringing him and

Diana closer together.

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Now, ironically enough, that was also the problem.

“For once, the rumors are correct,” he sighed. “Diana and I... we have never been happier.”

His grandmother smiled. “I suspected as much.”

“And therein lies the problem. You might have noticed that I am not beaming as if the sun shone from my rearend? Surely, you wonder why that is.”

She shrugged. “Not particularly. In fact, I am surprised it took you this long to come see me. After I heard tell of how happy the two of you were together last night, I half expected you to come knocking at my door any time after midnight. You are tardy, Magnus.”

His face dropped. “What does that mean? You expected it? Expected what?!”

“The reason you are here.”

“You do not know why I am here!”

She looked at him flatly. “Do not insult my intelligence, boy. How well do I know you?”

“Well enough to know that calling me boy is something you should avoid.”

She waved him down. “Might I warrant a guess as to why you are here? Or do you



plan on beating your chest for a while longer?”

“Go on then.” He curled his lip. “Have at it.”

His grandmother picked up her cup and had another sip. And then another. Then she placed the saucer back down and folded her hands on her knees, studying Magnus for a moment. All done, of course, for dramatic effect.

“For the first time in your life, Magnus, you are happy – and do not say otherwise. You are happy and that thought terrifies you. It terrifies you so much that the mere concept of exploring this happiness, of daring to let yourself be taken by it, has you wanting to turn tail and flee lest you prove once and for all that you are just like everybody else, your life is no more miserable or downtrodden, and all these years you have spent feeling sorry for yourself will thus have been for nothing.” She cocked an eyebrow and smirked. “There. How did I do?”

Magnus’ face dropped. “That is... you could not be more... it is a nice guess, but far from --”

“I am not going to warrant a guess at what the sudden cause of this panic was,” she spoke over him, a smile behind her eyes as if she knew the answer. “But I would say it occurred to you last night that you are beginning to fall for your wife. Hmm?” She looked at him and he grimaced. She nodded and continued. “You realized suddenly that this marriage is very much real, and you fear that you are not ready – that you are not man enough for such a thing.”

“I never said I wasn’t man enough...” he mumbled with embarrassment.

She sighed and looked at him softly. “You are not your past, Magnus. As I have told you so many times, your childhood was horrid, and I wish to God that it did not happen as it did. Sadly, there is no changing the past, that is impossible. At most, we

can put it behind us and --”

“But how can I do such a thing?” he cut her off, desperation in his voice. “It is easy to say but harder to do. What if I am not ready?”

She rolled her eyes. “The fact that you are here right now is proof that you are.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means you not turning your eye to your problems, as you have so often done in the past. No man is truly ready for marriage.” She snorted. “I don’t think a man exists that is. Most, however, are too stubborn to admit it, refusing to back down as if they need to prove themselves. The very idea that they might struggle is beyond their thinking and they would happily burn their marriage to the ground then stop and think.”

“And if they have already burned it to the ground?”

“I doubt it is that bad.”

“It is worse.”

His grandmother shuffled forward and rested a frail hand on his knee. “Your brother’s death was not your fault.”

“Grandmother...”

“Your father’s death was not your fault. Even running to the Americas as you did, it was not your fault – nor was it a bad thing to do. It proved that you have what it takes to be more than what your father wished for you, that you are your own man, and that nobody, anywhere, can tell you what to do. Is that not enough to prove how far you

have come since boyhood?”

“Apparently not.”

“May I ask you a question, Magnus? And please, do an old chook like me the service of not lying.”

“Ask away,” he sighed.

“Do you love your wife?” She looked at him simply.

Magnus leaned back. “I... I mean... she is very pretty and --”

“Do you love your wife?” she repeated.

Magnus wasn't sure why he hesitated, for he knew the answer the second she asked the question. It had been hovering in his subconscious for days, fighting to get out, right there and ready for the taking, all he needed was the courage to snatch it and say it true.

He ran last night, not because he did not love Diana, but because he did. And he was here right now for the same reason.

“I do,” he said, feeling the words swell inside of him as if they had lit a fire. “I do love her.”

“And does she love you?”

He laughed bitterly. “Until last night, I think she just might have.”

“Then she still does,” his grandmother says. “Love does not leave us so quickly, and if she loves you as you love her, then I dare say, all this panic you are feeling is for nought.”

“But what if I cannot protect her? What if I fail? What if... what if I have been right about myself all along?” He felt the words crush him...

His grandmother continued to smile. “Then you are not the Duke of Albury who I have known for some thirty-three years. You are certainly not the Magnus whom I love. And you are not the man your brother admired from the first time he opened his eyes to the last time he closed them. And if that is the case...” She pulled her hand back. “You best leave, because I do not drink tea with strangers.”

Magnus laughed at that, unable to help himself. Her words buoyed him, revealing a truth he always knew but needed to hear spoken.

He felt like a fool. An idiot. A true dolt, for the way he had acted. A fear that was unnecessary. Panic, brought on by a lie. He loved Diana and that was all which mattered and now it was time to prove it.

“I need to go,” he said, standing up.

“I suspected as much.”

“Grandmother...” He shook his head and smiled. “Thank you for the tea.”

“I told you that tea solves everything. Now...” She waved her hand. “Go. And do not come back.”

And that was exactly what Magnus did. He fled his grandmother’s manor, jumped atop his horse, and rode at pace back toward his own home. All the while, his mind was fixed firmly on Diana and what he would say when he saw her. And all the while, his mind was fixed on what she would say when she heard his words.

The only fear he held now was that he might be too late. But no, surely not. This was

love, and love did not die so easily.

### ChapterTwenty-Three

It was almost as soon as Magnus left her that a courier arrived at the estate with an urgent message for Diana. She was still playing outside with the girls when, so she was not aware of its arrival until one of the household staff hurried through the back garden to find her. By that point the courier was gone, leaving behind a single letter.

“Did he say who it was from?” Diana asked, taking the letter from the member of staff. She did not know his name, but he was young and out of breath from having rushed to find her.

“No, Your Grace. In fact, when I asked who had sent him, he outright refused to tell me.”

Diana frowned as she eyed the letter in her hand. “How strange.”

Chalk it up to yet another oddity occurring in Diana’s life across the last twenty-four hours. She was still reeling from what had transpired the previous evening, still suffering from what she could only assume to be a broken heart – she had never had one before, so she wasn’t aware of the effects or how it should feel.

Painful, that is how. Like my chest has been hacked apart, my ribs torn asunder, and my heart snatched free and then stepped on and left in the dirt. A broken heart? More like a destroyed one.

She still could not believe what had happened. Further to that point, she still could not believe how the duke had behaved since. Last night, she had done her best to convince herself that come this morning, Magnus would arrive at his senses and apologize for having left her alone after bedding her -- treating her like a common

whore was how it felt.

Sadly, perhaps most predictably, he chose to pretend that nothing was the matter! As if the two would carry on and Diana might forget how he had left her. As if all was normal and she was the fool for expecting anything close to an apology or explanation.

It was not normal. It was a travesty the likes of which Diana could not have imagined because it was just so strange. She knew that Magnus was closed off emotionally, but they had come so far, and finally he was starting to see her in ways he never had before. Love... she had felt it blossoming between them.

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Now he was gone, and for that reason Diana did not even consider waiting until he arrived back from wherever he had gone off to before opening the letter. As far as she was concerned, he could never come back, and she would be happier for it.

As to the letter...

Diana opened it, thinking little of the strange circumstances. Then she scanned the letter once, her eyes turned wide, and her heart began to race as her face paled. She read it again, just to double check. And then a third time because surely this was some sort of sick joke.

“He refused to tell you who had sent him?” she asked.

“Yes, Your Grace. He outright refused.”

Dearest Diana,

It brings me no pleasure to do this, but I am afraid that I must insist on having you come meet with me without delay. An hour from this letter’s arrival will do, giving you plenty of time to make the short journey. My only request is that you come alone, and without informing your husband. Make an excuse, whatever is required, but do not tell him where you are going or why.

Alas, I wish I could trust you, but we are not quite there yet. Thus, if you ignore this generous request, I will be left with no choice but to harm Josephine and Adeline. I do not wish it, and I know you do not wish this either, so please, adhere to my request and all will be well.



As to where we shall meet, the address is below. Come alone, and quickly. I truly cannot wait to see you.

“Is something the matter, Your Grace?” the member of staff asked.

For the fourth time, Diana read the letter. This had to be a joke. A sick game, to what end she could not imagine. The letter was written like a love note, only with not-so-thinly veiled threats that she simply could not ignore.

Still unsure, she fumbled through the envelope and found the address that the letter referred to. It was park not too far from here, on the outskirts of London but still relatively isolated. What on earth is going on?

If this had arrived just one day earlier, Diana was certain she would have told Magnus, regardless of the letter's threat. But it was not one day earlier. Magnus wasn't here, she wasn't certain what their future held, and the letter had warned her against telling anybody under threats of violence toward the girls.

She thought quickly. A playful scream from nearby had her watching the girls play together, the smiles on their faces, how joyous they were. It made her heart soar as much as it did sink. As foolish as it was, and as dangerous, Diana knew that she had no choice but to comply. Such was the way of things.

“Have a carriage made ready this instant,” she commanded of the staff. “I will be with it shortly.”

“Your Grace,” the member of staff bowed. “And where shall I tell the driver to be taking you?”

Again, she found herself looking at the girls. Who would have guessed that two relative strangers as they were could affect her so much? Knowing now what she

would do for them. Willingly walking into a clear trap to keep them safe. Oh, how she wished Magnus was here. But then again, the fact that he was not was the problem.

“No where good,” she said, turning and striding toward the manor.

\* \* \*

The park which the letter had asked Diana to meet at was roughly the same size as the back garden at Magnus’ estate. It was, however, nowhere near as well curated. An open space of overgrown grass that gave way to mismatched trees and hedges, it looked long abandoned and all the more ominous for it.

She had the carriage pull up across the road. Mostly, there were empty plots of land – farms and pastures – in all directions, with a few notable farmhouses peppered across the horizon. For all intents and purposes it was isolated, and if something went awry there would be nobody to come and save her.

The coachman was an employee of Magnus’, she did not know his name, but she asked him to wait by the carriage because he was her only source of protection. He asked if she wished for accompaniment, but Diana sensed that whoever had asked to meet her would not appreciate such a thing.

“It will be fine,” she assured him as she surveyed the park from a distance. “However, if I am not back in ten minutes, do come and collect me.”

His face hardened but he knew better than to argue. A firm nod of the head and he climbed back atop the carriage.

With that taken care of, Diana had no choice but to do as the letter had instructed and meet the mystery sender. She walked carefully across the road and into the park, eyes

searching, breath staggered because she was understandably worried. Not scared. For now, there was no need to be. But she supposed that just depended on who she was here to meet.

The answer to that question came a second later.

He stepped out from behind a tree across the way. The shadows from the canopy masked his features at first, forcing Diana to squint to see who it was. Then he stepped forward and into the light and Diana gasped... quickly followed by a scowl.

“You!”

“Your Grace,” Lord Herrod purred as he swept toward her. “Might I say that you look as ravishing as the last time we spoke. Perhaps even more so, which just proves what I have always suspected.” His eyes flashed mischief. “That a beauty such as you are grows even more so by the day.”

“You!” she said again, taking a step back as he came closer. “What is the meaning of this? And how dare you threaten the children!”

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“Regrettable,” he sighed. “But necessary, under the circumstances. Alas, I did not think you would come otherwise. And now that you are here...” His smile grew. “My hope is that we can put that sordid business behind us.”

Lord Herrod came within five feet of Diana before stopping. A good thing too, for she might have slapped him if he got much closer. The shock of his being the one who had sent her that letter, paired with how detestable she found the man, caused quite a calamity of emotions to stir within her.

Indeed, the only thing keeping her from turning toward outright abuse was the very real fact that as much as she hated this man, she also sensed he was one to fear. Alone and out here. Nobody knowing she had come to meet him...

I best be careful not to say anything that might set him off. Even if I would very much like to.

“When my husband finds out --”

“Threats already?” Lord Herrod frowned; his expression still playful. “Your Grace, I am disappointed. Even hurt. You assume the worst and yet you have no idea what I have asked to meet with you today. Surely, the urgency and secrecy must suggest that I had good reason?”

Diana balked at that, for a moment wondering if in this instance, he was being sincere. “You should not have threatened the girls.”

“And for that, once again, I apologize. But I could not risk you telling His Grace of

this. It is imperative that he never find out.”

“Find out what – why am I here?”

His expression softened, a look of sincerity which Diana did not buy for a second. That was what she had always detested most about Lord Herrod, that everything he did seemed contrived and controlled, done so as to appear one way when she knew deep down that he was as wretched as they came.

“You are here, Your Grace, because I cannot stomach another day without telling you what I think you know we both feel. Lies do not become us, nor does being forced to live them. I have been at pains to deny how I have felt, but no longer will I suffer through such contrivances. And I know you are the same.”

“What... what are you going on about,” she said with bewilderment. “Speaking plainly or I shall leave.”

“You and I, of course,” he said, taking a step closer. And then another. “Being together. That is what this is about. It is time we plan our escape and --”

“What!” Diana cried out. “You and I? Lord Herrod...” She tried not to laugh, even though nothing funny was said. “Surely, this is a joke?”

“It is no joke, and do not sully this moment by suggesting as such. I am in love with you, Your Grace. And I know that we feel the same for me.”

“Lord Herrod...” Diana couldn’t believe what she was hearing! The ramblings of a lunatic, which might have been amusing if it wasn’t so dangerous. “I am with His Grace. We are man and wife. Whatever it is you think you feel, it is irrelevant.”

His eyes widened malevolently. “And so I thought too. But do you remember what I

first told you? What I made sure to repeat the last time we spoke.” He took another step toward her. “I always get what I want. And now, what I want, is you.”

Diana took a step back, the hairs on her neck standing up because she could sense that things were about to take a turn for the worst. “I... I appreciate the sentiment, sadly, there is nothing that can be done.”

“On the contrary,” he spoke quickly. “If you and His Grace were to annul your marriage, there is no reason that we cannot --”

“No!” she said before she could stop herself. A flash of anger behind Lord Herrod’s eyes and she forced calmness. “I mean... it is not possible, Lord Herrod. I do not wish to go into details, but an annulment would not be legal. I am...” She tried for a forgiving smile. “I am sorry.”

Lord Herrod shook his head, not at all put out. “Oh, do not let that worry you. I have a team of lawyers at my beck and call, and they assure me that regardless of what you and His Grace have done together, it is still a possibility.” He took two quick steps, putting himself less than three feet from her. “We will be together... Diana.” He purred her name, and it sent a shudder through her spine. “God himself cannot stop us.”

Lord Herrod had lost his mind. That was the only possible explanation. For that reason alone, Diana knew she couldn’t outright deny him, for who knew what the man was capable of.

“Lord Herrod...” Diana spoke slowly and carefully, one hand outstretched as if to calm him. “What of my cousin, Evelyn? The two of you --”

He snorted. “She is not a concern, Diana. A means to an end only, used so that I could get closer to you. I own her family, so you need not worry about how she might

react. In fact, I suspect that she will be happy for us.”

“But my husband --”

“Does not deserve you,” he cut through her, a tinge of anger to his voice. “Why do you not see that? And quite frankly, I am getting a little sick of these ridiculous protestations. We will be together, and I intend for it to be as soon as possible.”

She shook her head. “But... but I cannot simply – allow me to speak with Magnus first and make him see. Perhaps I can convince him to leave me? Surely, that will make things easier.”

“He is a proud man. I know the type,” he said with a smirk. “No, it must be you who asks for the annulment. Today.”

“Today?!”

“Oh yes, today. And where I did not want it to come to this...” He sighed as if with regret. “I must implore once again that you think of the safety of the girls. I would hate to think what might happen if they were... if they were not considered when you decide what to do.”

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“Is that a threat? You would threaten two innocent girls for this?”

“Simply an observation,” he assured her. “Please...” He took the final step toward her and snatched her hand, pulling it to his chest. Diana thought to wrench her hand free, but fear froze her. “Know that I only want what is best for you – for us. Know that I am doing this so that we both might be happy.”

He held her hand clutched to his chest. He looked into her eyes. There was clear derangement behind them, and she knew that no matter what she said, no matter what she did, he would not hear reason.

And it was because of this that Diana said the only thing that she could. “Alright... I will... when I am done here, I will go home and ask --”

“Demand.”

She swallowed. “Demand an annulment from Magnus.”

He breathed a sigh of relief but did not release her. “We will be happy, Diana. You will see. And in time, all this will be is an unfortunate memory. But one that has led to greater things.” A smile grew on his lips and his eyes flicked to her own. Her heart seized because she could see exactly what was on his mind. “And now that we have that sorted, what’s say that we seal this glorious arrangement with a kiss? Oh, how I have waited for such a thing.”

“Lord Herrod...” She leaned back. “It -- it would not be right.”



“Yet so right at the same time...” He kept a hold of her hand. He stepped in closer, lips puckered. And Diana knew that there was nothing she could do...

“Your Grace!” a voice cried from across the park. “Is everything alright?”

“What?” Lord Herrod’s head snapped up and his eyes narrowed. “Who is that – what is the meaning of this?” he snarled. “I told you to come alone!”

“Your Grace!” It was the coachman, blessedly checking on her. “Do you need assistance?”

“It is the coachman,” she said quickly. “That is all. He must have wondered where I had gotten off to.”

Lord Herrod’s jaw clenched and his grip on her hand tightened so that it hurt. “Unfortunate...” His glare was rueful, aimed at the coachman, but it only lasted a second before it softened. “But unavoidable. I should have guessed you would not have travelled without a retainer. I would not expect you to.”

“It is best that he not see,” Diana said quickly, blessedly pulling her hand free. “If Magnus finds out...”

“Yes...” Lord Herrod agreed, still watching the coachman. “You are correct. For now, let us seal this new arrangement with words only. There will be time later for...” He smiled at her, one so sickening it made her want to cry. “... all of that. And then some.”

“I should go...” She took a step back.

“I will be watching,” Lord Herrod assured her. “This evening, I shall have a man on the estate. And I fully expect to see you leave by the hour after sunset. Only then, will

I know that you have done as I asked.”

“A... a man? Who is --”

“Insurance,” he assured her with a soft purr. “And as insurance, I would hate to think what he might do if he does not see you leave. If you understand my meaning?”

Her chest tightened and all she wanted to do was cry. But she nodded and forced a smile, her mind on the girls and the fear she held for what this man might do if she didn’t agree. “Yes, that is... it shall be done.”

“I know it will be, Diana. And I need you to know that... that I love you.”

She could not say the words back. She offered him another smile, ensuring that he did not seem put out, angry or vengeful enough he might follow her, and then she turned and fled.

Not that running would make any difference. She was out of the frying pan but all she could do was run into the fire. Nowhere to go, nowhere that was safe. She wondered if she should just tell Magnus what had happened, that maybe he would be able to save her and the girls. But then she remembered last night, and earlier today, and she suspected darkly that he might even be thrilled.

There was nobody to turn to. Nobody to save her. Lord Herrod had her and she knew there was nothing that she could do. And for that reason, as the carriage was directed back toward the manor, Diana cried like she had never cried before.

Her life as she knew it was over.

ChapterTwenty-Four

The sun was setting behind Magnus as he pulled his horse up by the entrance to the manor, bleeding the sky red and pink, which he took as a good sign, for it matched the color of his beating heart and the blood which pumped through his veins. It gave him life, and this life gave him meaning, and this meaning was the love he now knew that he felt for his wife.

As Magnus climbed from the horse and strode up the steps to his home, he put aside the worry that had threatened to unseat him for much of the ride back from his grandmother's home. The fear that his actions last night and this morning might have ruined everything.

It was but a misstep only. And once I explain myself to Diana, opening my heart to her for perhaps the first real time, I know that she will understand. She loves me, I am sure of it. And I love her.

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So it was that he threw open the doors with a sense of purpose, striding into the foyer with intent, his aim to search high and low for his wife until he found her, forcing her then to listen to him, no matter her mood. As things turned out, he didn't have to look far.

She was standing in wait for him in the foyer's center. No smile on her face to see him coming. No scowl either, which might have been a relief was it not for the red stain in her eyes. There was pain in those eyes, a sense of misery that had Magnus slowing, the enthusiasm he felt sucked from him in an instant because something was clearly wrong.

"Diana..." He came to a stop a few feet from her; it was as if an invisible barrier had been erected between them. "What is --"

"Please," she said, her chin wobbling but her voice firm. "Do not speak. Just listen." She fixed her eyes on him, a warning to heed her words.

Magnus' brow creased with worry. The way her chin wobbled... how swollen her cheeks were... that she stood with her hands clutched to her chest as if holding her heart together...what on earth have I walked in to?

"Wh -- what happened between us last night, what you did..." She took a deep breath to calm herself and keep steady. "I have been thinking of it all day and I --"

"Diana, before you say anything else, you must know --"

"Please!" she exclaimed. "Do not --" She shut her eyes and took another breath. "Do

not say anything, Magnus. Please, I must say this.” Again, she looked at him in warning.

Magnus could sense it coming. That feeling deep inside of him, abject pain and misery and helplessness. The look in her eyes told him as much, but he heeded her words and nodded once.

“I have had all day to think about it and I have decided that... that...” Her chin was wobbling furiously so that she could barely talk. “That it was for the best.”

Magnus leaned back as if struck. “Wh... what? How can you --”

“It hurt, what you did,” she continued, speaking over him. The way she spoke, it was as if he was not there; looking past him, saying words she needed to say, regardless of his reaction. “It hurt in ways that I didn’t think were possible, only now I realize them to be inevitable. I thought you had changed. I thought...” She faulted, taking another breath. “I thought that you could change. I know now that I was expecting too much – that I was asking too much of you.”

“No, Diana, you were not.” He took a step toward her, and she took a quick one back. “I have changed. What happened last night... it was a mistake. I know it now. I know I did the wrong thing, but it was only because I was scared.”

“And what of next time?” she shot back. Not angry. Resigned, was how Magnus read it. As if she had expected the answer. “And the time after that? It is an easy thing to admit fault after the fact, to promise change. But for some, change is not possible.”

“It is.” He took another step toward her, and she took the same back, determined to keep the distance between them. “I can change. I have changed. Surely, you can see that?”

She shook her head. "You say the correct words, but your actions speak over them. Last night --"

"Was a mistake."

"The first of what will be many," she insisted. Her chin began to wobble again, tears now streaming down her cheeks. "How often can we have this same conversation? And how many times must I be fooled before I realize the truth?"

"The... the truth?"

"That you... that us..." She was breaking slowly before his eyes and all Magnus wanted to do was hold her, to keep her in a single piece. His arms around her, to his chest, whispering into her ear that he was there for her. But he knew that would not work, that she was resigned to these words she seemed determined to speak. "That we cannot work."

"No..."

"We tried, Magnus," she continued, forcing herself to stand up and look at him. Blood-stained eyes bore through his soul and Magnus could feel it piercing his heart. "We tried and we failed. There is no shame in that."

He shook his head. "I do not accept that. Today, I was speaking to my grandmother and --"

"And she told you what you needed to hear, no doubt. But the next time? And the time after that?"

"There won't be a next time!"

“There will be.” She sighed and looked away. The tears fell down her cheeks. “Unless I do the only thing that I can so as to ensure otherwise.”

Magnus was stunned. One hand reached out, the distance between them only a few feet but it felt like an ocean’s worth of space. Where was this coming from? How had it happened so quickly? Although, as he thought about it, was it really that surprising?

Since the moment that they married, Magnus had been closed off to Diana. She had tried to bring him in, to force him to be real with her, and he had denied her at every turn. One step forward, two back it had felt like. And the first-time that he had finally been real with her, that he had accepted his feelings, he had turned and ran.

Last night wasn’t an outlier. It was the expected result. One which Magnus now knew to be behind him, while also knowing that nothing he could say would convince Diana of this.

He had done this to himself.

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“What... what do you mean to do?” he asked her, his chin now wobbling. “Know that I will do anything that I must – whatever you ask of me. Please, Diana. Give me a second chance.”

“Not a second chance,” she said. “A hundredth, it feels like. And for that reason, I ask the only thing that I can – what I must. And not just for me, but the two of us.”

He did not speak. Brow furrowed. Face tight. Chin wobbling as the tears threatened to pour. He needed her to see how much this hurt, how wronged he felt. He needed her to understand that he had changed.

And maybe she did? Alas, she was through taking risks with him. She was through putting herself in harm’s way.

“I wish for an annulment.”

“No....” He took a step back as if she had stabbed him through the heart.

“The details of which will be organized by me. All you need do is sign the papers when they come.”

“Diana...” He tried to meet her eyes, but she refused to give them. He sensed that deep down she was hurting as much as he was. And that only made it all the worse.

“As for tonight, I shall be retiring to my mother’s home. I shall organize tomorrow for my things to be collected.”



“Please...” He forced himself to go to her, pushing through the invisible barrier until he was right before her. “Don’t do this. There is no need – I have changed. I... I... I love --”

“Do this for me, please,” she said. “Do not fight it.”

“Is this really what you want?” Magnus reached for her hand and took it. He held it to his chest. His body shook, as did Diana’s. But he met her eyes so she could see the pain; a pain that was matched in her eyes also. “Tell me this is what you want. Look at me and say it.”

“I want this,” she spoke through the tears. “And nothing you can say will change my mind.” She pulled her hand free and took a step back. And then another.

“Diana, wait...”

“No, Magnus. I am through waiting.” She put her head down and strode toward the door. He spun about to watch her go, knowing he should go after her, unable to move his feet because his body refused to listen. “And Magnus...” She reached the doorway and turned back.

“Yes?” He perked up, as if she might suddenly change her mind.

“The girls, give them my love. And please, please...” She sniffed and wiped her nose. “Look after them, for me. They need your love, all of it. Do not deny them.” A final look of sadness and Diana bowed her head and walked through the door and out of Magnus’ life.

As for Magnus? It might have been nice to say that he chased after her. That he grabbed a hold of her shoulders, looked into her eyes, and confessed finally that he loved her. That he fought for her! That he refused to take no for an answer. Alas, that

simply wasn't the case.

Feelings of helplessness that Magnus knew well descended over him. Feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, having zero agency was the stuff of nightmares, now turned to reality. He fell to his knees, the pain in his chest exploding out of his mouth like a torrent.

For the first time in his life, Magnus had let his guard down and found it in himself to love another. And for the first time in his life, he was experiencing the pain that so often came with that. Heartbreak. Heartbreak so wretched that from it, Magnus knew he would never be the same again.

## ChapterTwenty-Five

"Evelyn, will you please ask my daughter what she is still doing here?" Diana's mother said, looking down the table at Evelyn as she purposefully avoided so much as glancing at Diana.

"Mother," Diana sighed. "There is no need to --"

"Evelyn, will you please ask my daughter what she is still doing here?" her mother spoke over Diana.

Evelyn shook her head. "I suspect that she is here to break her fast, as we both are."

"Mother, can we please talk about this like --"

"Evelyn, will you please tell my daughter that she is not welcome to break her fast with us," her mother spoke over her again as she continued to look at Evelyn. "Only those who live here are welcome at this table, and the last time I checked, Diana has a home of her own."

“Aunt Teresa, is this really necessary?”

“A home which I toiled and broke my back to see her welcome into,” her mother continued hotly. “A home which any woman in her position would kill to be welcome – a home that I now see was above her, despite how much blood and sweat I poured into convincing certain dukes of the contrary.”

“You did no such thing,” Diana snapped, fed up with her mother’s behavior. “So do not pretend that you did. My marriage to His Grace was organized on his account, and had nothing to do with you, so please do not act otherwise.”

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Her mother's eyes widened in rage, and she very nearly turned to direct said rage onto Diana. But she stayed firm, keeping her gaze fixed firmly on Evelyn. "Evelyn, will you please tell my daughter that I do not appreciate being spoken down to in my own home, and that if she does not agree with what I have to say, she is welcome to leave. In fact, I would prefer that she did."

"Diana, did you catch all of that?" Evelyn sighed. "Or shall I repeat it."

Diana glared at her mother. "Oh, I caught it well enough."

Sometimes, I wonder which of us is the adult and which is the child? The way my mother is behaving, one would think she was fresh out of the womb, as immature as a babe able to do little more than cry to hear her point made.

Why Diana had expected anything different from her mother, she really had no idea.

At least, Diana decided, her mother had past the point of yelling directly at her, as she had spent most of the previous evening doing – and screaming, and shouting. Compared to that, this little demonstration she was putting on was a welcome change that was almost pleasant.

It was a shame that her mother was even more obtuse than Diana could be during her worst moments. Last night, when Diana had come home in tears, she had hoped to be greeted with a loving embrace and compassion. That her mother, seeing how utterly shattered she was, would take her in her arms and listen when Diana told her that the marriage was over and there was nothing to be done.

Laughable, Diana now knew. Her mother had been furious, unwilling to listen. Even hostile, such that if Diana had anywhere else to go, she just might have. Worse that she couldn't tell her mother the truth, for fear of what Lord Herrod would do if he found out. All Diana had been able to do was give vague excuses about the failed marriage, knowing full well it would not be enough.

She had hoped that a night to herself would provide her mother with perspective. Alas, her hostility might have dimmed but her tolerance for Diana's actions was as dismissive as ever.

"Evelyn, will you please ask my daughter what she is still doing here," her mother started up again. She sat at the head of the table, her chin pointed in the air as she spoke directly to Evelyn. "I am at a loss to understand why she thinks that she can waltz into this home after sabotaging a marriage that I worked so hard to --"

"Enough!" Diana erupted before she could help herself. On her feet, she was shaking with a rage that was a day in the making. "I understand Mother, that you are upset with me. Really, I do. And I understand that you cannot see how such a travesty as this has happened to you – because that is how you see it. Is it not? Who cares how I feel? It is you and you alone who you care for! Such that you would treat your youngest daughter in this manner, because you cannot for one second comprehend that I did what I did because I had no choice! I did not want it! I did not ask for it! But it has happened and acting this way, like a child, will not change anything!"

Her breathing was up. She could feel her face turned bright red. Eyes wide and wild, she bore them upon her mother, daring her to retaliate. Dammit, she wanted her to. Best that they have it out now and be done with it.

Her mother, however, looked upon her coldly. A curl to her lip, a warning glare to her eyes. The cold look held, and Diana braced herself, only for her mother to turn and address Evelyn once again.

“Evelyn, will you please tell my daughter that I am not to be spoken to like that in my own home. If she wishes to raise her voice, she has a home of her own in which she is free to do as she likes. Kindly tell her she may return there, if she so wishes.”

“Oh, for the sake of --!” Diana threw her hands in the air in frustration and stormed from the breakfast room. When she reached the door, she turned back and fixed her mother with a final dispassionate look. “I am hurting, Mother. Hurting more than I thought possible. When I came home as I did, my hope was that my mother would be there to support me – that she would understand what I was going through.” She locked her eyes onto her mother, silently praying that this might see the woman break finally. Rather, her mother continued to ignore her, which broke Diana down even further than she already had been. “I guess I was wrong...”

With that, she bowed her head and slunk from the breakfast room. No longer angry. No longer disappointed. Sadness was what overwhelmed her in that moment. A broken heart, no one to help mend it, crushing loneliness that she guessed would be with her for some time to come.

How had things ever come to this?

\* \* \*

There was a soft knock at the door which Diana didn't respond to. She was lying on her bed, staring at the ceiling, doing what she could not to cry as she imagined the walls crumbling, the ceiling collapsing, and how simple things might be if she was just buried where she lay.

“Diana...” Evelyn spoke softly from across the room. “Might we talk? If you are up for it?”

“My mother isn't with you, is she?” Diana asked, not bothering to look.

Evelyn chuckled. “Oh, no. After the way you spoke to her...” Another chuckle. “I don’t think she’d used to being attacked like that.”

“That was nothing,” Diana sighed. “I was holding back.”

“Do me a favor, will you?” Footsteps crossing the room. “Make sure I am there if the two of you go another round. I would very much like to see it.”

Despite how she was feeling, Diana laughed. “So long as you don’t mind being caught in the middle? I worry if it is to happen, the house might literally catch on fire.”

“Well, wouldn’t that be something to see.”

Diana sighed and sat herself up so she could better see Evelyn. The moment she did, an unexpected pang of guilt struck her. She loved her cousin and always had. Evelyn, forever playful and uncaring, liking to pretend that she cared not for romance or courtship or any of that nonsense, had been caught in the middle of this calamity for no reason that was her fault.

She watched her cousin for a moment, wondering how much she knew and how much pain she too was feeling. Diana was yet to tell her mother why she had ended the marriage so suddenly, and she wasn’t even certain that Evelyn knew what was coming.

“How are you feeling?” Diana asked cautiously.

Evelyn frowned. “Me? Compared to you, I imagine I could just about fly.”

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Her chest tightened as the guilt compounded. “Evelyn, there is something you need to know.” She felt herself begin to shake and couldn’t bring herself to look at her. “The reason that I have left His Grace, it is not a simple matter – at least not as I have made it seem to Mother.”

“I can’t imagine it would be.”

“I...” The words caught in her throat, and she swallowed as she forced herself to meet her cousin’s eyes. “I am to marry Lord Herrod instead.”

Evelyn frowned. “You are... excuse me?”

“It is not what it sounds like,” she then hurried. “And truly, it is not what I wish. I do not want to marry him. I would rather anything else. But I have no choice, forced into it so that if I did not agree those I love would suffer.” She winced. “Although in doing so, those I love are bound to suffer regardless. It is a wretched situation and all I can ask is that you forgive me. But if you cannot, I understand. Truly, I do not deserve your forgiveness.”

“Forgive you?” Evelyn frowned. “Why on earth would I need to forgive you.”

“Because you and Lord Herrod. You are... the two of you are courting, are you not? Clearly, he has not told you what he plans to do. Which is not surprising, for he is a monster that deserves a stake through the heart and --” She caught her tongue and took a breath. “No, I am through passing the blame. Your anger should be for me, and I take it willingly.”



“Diana...” Evelyn crept closer to the bed. “I do not know what has happened, but I do hope that you know my courtship with Lord Herrod...” She scoffed and curled her lip. “It was not one that I was particularly excited for. In fact, since the day that he began courting me, my life has been so miserable that I am honestly trying my best not to smile right now at what you say...” She smiled softly but then turned it into a frown. “Perhaps I will save it for later? I do not wish to gloat.”

“Truly?” Diana perked up hopefully. “You are not mad?”

“Mad?” Evelyn laughed. “How you could think that I would ever want to be with a man likethat. Urgh,” she sneered and then winced. “Sorry.”

“But... but... but then why? Why were the two of you together?”

Evelyn sighed and then came in closer to the bed, sitting down and taking Diana by the hand. “Why do you think? Your mother...” A shake of the head. “And my own parents, of course. My father borrowed quite a large sum from him, and where he did not force me to accept his courtship, the implication was plain. And with your mother whispering in my ear and forcing my hand, well...” A shrug. “I had little choice, really.”

“Oh, Evelyn...”

“The man is a pig,” she said firmly, nodding her head once. “And truly, I never got much sense that he even liked me. It was all very strange... made stranger now by this.” She looked worryingly at Diana. “Tell me what is going on, Diana. The last time I saw you and His Grace, I could not believe how happy you were. And I refuse to believe such happiness could end so quickly.”

“It is not a simple thing.” Diana looked away, the memory of it all crashing down on her like waves on the shore.

“Tell me,” Evelyn pressed on her, squeezing her hand. “At the very least, speaking it might make you feel better.”

“I doubt that.”

“It cannot hurt.”

She was right. All these feelings could not be kept bottled up and Diana felt that she needed to speak them. And knowing now that Evelyn hated the man she was set to wed as much as Diana did, well it might not change anything, but it might also make her feel slightly better.

So, with nothing else for it, she told Evelyn the full story. From start to finish. She and Magnus making love, his fleeing the room right after, the way he acted the next day, Lord Herrod’s blackmail, and Diana’s using of the previous events to convince her husband she wished to leave him.

As she spoke, Evelyn’s face turned from curious to concerned to disgusted to utterly tragic. Her chin began to wobble and by the time Diana was done, Evelyn was almost in tears.

“Oh, Diana!” She threw her arms around her, holding her close. “That is... it is worse than I thought!”

“Typically tragic, isn’t it,” Diana said bitterly, taking some sense of comfort in the way her cousin held her. “Worse that there is nothing I can do.”

“Can you not tell His Grace?” Evelyn asked. “Surely, if you were to explain to him what Lord Herrod has done?”

“Technically he has done nothing,” Diana said, for she had thought on this already.

Of course, she had. “Words only, which Lord Herrod would just deny. My fear is that even if I were to go to Magnus and tell him of Lord Herrod’s threat, that Lord Herrod – you did not see him that day, Evelyn. He was incensed. Mad! I fear that if he suspected at all that I would not do as he asked, then he would not hesitate to hurt the girls.”

“But His Grace, he can protect them.”

“For a time,” Diana agreed. “It is as I said, Lord Herrod has technically done nothing wrong, meaning that Magnus can do nothing more than warn him off. And once he does, there will be nothing to stop Lord Herrod from coming after the girls. It could be a week. A month. Even a year later. But the man is crazed, and I suspect that he would hurt them out of pure spite.”

“So, that is it, is it? He wins?” She shook her head. “I cannot accept that.”

“I have no choice...” Diana had thought long and hard about this, and she more than anyone did not wish to see Lord Herrod get what he wanted. Despite Magnus’ actions, she still loved him. Dammit, his pleas to her when she left still rung in her ears and made her want to wretch, such was the guilt she felt! But the girls... she could not put them in danger. Even if it meant she was forced to suffer for the rest of her life.

“Then what? What shall you do?”

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“As I am doing,” Diana said. “I suspect that in the next few days, Lord Herrod will come for me. And please, Evelyn...” She took her cousins hands and squeezed them as she looked pleadingly into her eyes. “Please, do not speak of what I told you. If Lord Herrod suspects I have told anyone, my mother especially...” She grimaced. “I will never forgive myself.”

Evelyn’s face was hardened and there was anger behind her eyes. The same stubbornness that Diana was known for, she feared for a moment that her cousin would not drop it. So, she continued to look pleadingly, begging her silently to do as asked.

“I do not like it,” Evelyn said finally. “But if it is as you wish... Oh, I just feel so horrible!”

“As do I,” Diana sighed. “As do I.”

### ChapterTwenty-Six

“Another.” Magnus held the empty tumbler out for Theodore to take.

Theodore hesitated, eyeing the tumbler with clear concern. “I’m not one to tell a grown man how much he should drink, Magnus. But don’t you think that you’ve had enough?”

“That first instinct, I think you should stick with it,” Magnus growled. “Or do I need to pour one myself.”

“I worry that you would not be able to,” Theodore said. “Hence my concern.”

“I did not invite you here tonight for sympathy.”

“Which I am not giving. I am simply trying to save you from wasting expensive whiskey because from where I am seated, you are entirely too sloshed to enjoy it. Perhaps a glass of water will do you best?”

“Fine.” Magnus glared at his best friend and then prepared himself to stand. “If you are going to be pedantic about it, I shall fetch the drink myself.” Easier said than done.

The two men were in the drawing room of Magnus’ manor, seated by the fire, soaking in the warmth of the cackling flames as they tested the limits on how much one man could drink before he passed out cold. So far, as had been proven well and truly, the answer was more than either could have expected.

The room swayed as Magnus forced himself to stand. His knees buckled but he stayed on his feet, ignoring how the room turned as he stumbled toward the bar where the third bottle of whiskey from the night’s endeavors sat open. There, he snatched at it, missing it by several inches.

“A sign if I have ever seen one,” Theodore said. “Magnus, please, a break at the very least. Five minutes and we can start again.”

“Quite!” Magnus barked as he finally grabbed at the bottle of whiskey. “Or I shall send you home.”

“You may ask but I will ignore the request,” Theodore said. “To leave you in this state would make me not a very good friend. At the very least I need to remain to make sure that when you do pass out, you do not swallow your own tongue.”

“I am not as bad as that.” Magnus poured the whiskey, missing his tumbler at first, until he eventually found it.

“You are worse.”

“Careful, friend.” Magnus put the bottle down, took a large mouthful, and then stumbled back to the couch by the fire. “There are few who would dare speak to me as you are. And for good reason.”

“Is it because you make such rotten company?”

Magnus reached the couch but did not sit. He stood over it, glaring at his friend as if he meant to attack him. “It is because the last man who did so now has considerably less teeth.”

Theodore blew through his lips. “Oh, will you sit down already. You are embarrassing yourself. Ordinarily, I do not mind, but this is becoming sad.”

“That’s it!” Magnus stumbled back, caught his footing, and then looked for a place to put down his tumbler. He rested it on the mantle by the fire before turning back to face his best friend. “Up. Now.”

Theodore frowned. “Excuse me.”

“You heard me!” Magnus brought his fists before his face. “I said get up.”

“Careful, Magnus. Words are one thing, but some actions cannot be taken back.”

Magnus laughed. “A lesson I have learned only too well. Now, are you getting up, or do I need to drag you up by the collar.” He sneered down at his best friend, caring now for how he was behaving. Truly, Magnus was beyond the point of caring about

anything.

The way he was behaving tonight was but a snapshot of how the last two days had unfolded. In fact, some might even say that he was appearing to be on the mend, because at least in this instance he wasn't locked up in his room, alone, refusing to speak to anyone, eat so much as a slither or food, or drink because his stomach had felt so wretched he wouldn't have been able to stand it.

Such was the way that Magnus' life had unfolded.

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Diana had left him, and it was all his fault. That was what pained him the most. Not just that he had lost the love of his life, but that he was the cause. He was the one who had lured her into a false sense of comfort. He was the one who had then broken that comfort and trust by running. And he was the one who had been too cowardly to apologize before it was too late.

He had spent the last two days replaying their final conversation over and over in his head. Wishing he had said more. Wishing he had fought for her. Wishing he had chased her, refused to let her leave, demanded that she give him a second chance.

Wishing these things was easy. Admitting the reality was that much more difficult. As Magnus had said, what had happened was his fault. Worse, Diana had been right. He hurt her once, likely he would hurt her twice, and leaving him was perhaps the smartest thing she could do.

He was a coward. Helpless and hopeless and powerless to change. For a while there, Diana had made him believe that things could be different, but no... there would be no changing. Such was the way of things.

“Well!” Magnus barked at his friend.

Theodore sighed. “Is this what you want?”

“Rarely do I get what I want,” Magnus laughed. “You should know that by now, man.”

“This isn’t you.”



“It is,” Magnus sighed. “If you’re lucky, this will be enough to convince you that I’m not worth the hassle. And after I knock you out, please do me a favor, will you?”

“Which is?”

“Leave and never come back. In that way, think of this as a kindness.”

Magnus wasn’t angry at his friend, and he sensed that Theodore knew that. But as said, this was a kindness, for how Magnus saw it. Those in his life who he grew close to tended to have bad things happen to them. Things that might have been avoided if they’d just kept Magnus from their lives.

He did not want to beat his best friend up, but he owed it to him. The coward’s way out.

“As you wish.” Theodore set down his own tumbler and stood up from the couch. He was nowhere near as drunk as Magnus and now that he was standing, Magnus had forgotten how beefy his friend was. Not fat, but thick and strong, with arms like tree trunks and fists like hams. “But I warned you.”

Magnus grinned. “As did I.”

“Excuse me?” a soft voice spoke from across the room. “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

Magnus spun about in confusion, not recognizing the voice as one of his staff. Through the haze, and the drunken stupor, he squinted until he was able to make out that of a female’s slender form lurking just inside the room.

“Who are you?” he barked.

“I am so sorry, but I was let inside by one of the staff,” she spoke, still hesitating to

enter further. “They told me you were here... and they warned me I might not be wanted.”

“Well, they were right,” he snapped.

“Magnus...” Theodore groaned. He dropped his fists and strode across the room. “I must apologize for my friend’s temper. He does not entertain often. For good reason.”

“It is quite alright. I should not have come without sending word.”

“Not at all, not at all,” Theodore assured her. “Say... have we met? You look awfully familiar.”

“No, I do not believe we have.”

Magnus squinted at the woman. There was something familiar about her. Blonde hair. A lithe frame. A long face with sharp features. He had seen her before...

“And what a shame that is,” Theodore chuckled. “How is it that His Grace, the least socially hospitable man in all of London, is blessed with guests such as yourself and the last person to come visit me was my neighbor, looking for his runaway dog.”

She giggled. “Oh... I am so sorry for that.”

“It is not your fault,” Theodore sighed. “Yet do me a favor, will you? The next time you are considering whether to visit His Grace or not, kindly stop by my home instead. I assure you, it will be a far warmer welcome than what you are receiving now.”

“That is...” She giggled again. “Very kind of you.”

Magnus stumbled forward, still looking at the woman as he tried to remember where he had seen her. A shame that Theodore was blocking her now, his attention firmly turned toward flirting with the poor thing.

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“Can I offer you a drink?” Theodore continued. “My drinking companion is a little worse for wear and I cannot help but think you will be infinitely better company.”

“I should not,” she said. “I do thank you, however.”

“Please, do not make me beg Miss – Oh! Where are my manors.” Theodore shook his head. “Madam, allow me to introduce myself. I am Lord Northwood.”

“It is nice to meet you.”

“And you are? Or do angels not have names?”

“Theodore,” Magnus sighed. “Will you leave the poor woman alone!”

“Just being friendly.”

“It is not bother, truly,” the strange woman said. “Although I was hoping to speak with His Grace, alone.”

“Do not break my heart,” Theodore said.

“Theodore!” Magnus barked as he stumbled across the room. “And you!” he then barked at the poor woman. “Your name. Out with it.”

“Oh!” she yelped. “Sorry, Your Grace. My name is Miss Evelyn Goldsmith, I am Diana’s cousin.”

The room turned suddenly, such was the effect of hearing his wife's name. Magnus stumbled and grabbed for something to hold onto, his savior being Theodore who was under his arm in a second.

"Your Grace!" Miss Goldsmith cried. "Is he sick?"

"In the head, yes?" Theodore joked. "But nothing contagious."

"Wh -- what do you want?" Magnus growled as he found his footing. "Why are you here?" The news could only be bad. Was she here to finalize the annulment? To collect Diana's things? To rub salt into the wound for reasons of her own amusement? What?! "Did Diana send you!"

"No, Your Grace," she squeaked. "She does not know I am here. She would be furious if she did."

"Why then? Out with it!"

She hesitated, brow scrunched, worry painted across her visage. Whatever this was, to come here and speak to Magnus was clearly causing her great concern.

"Well?" he pushed.

"It is Diana," she began carefully. "I... I worry for her. And I know that you do too."

He snorted. "Clearly, you do not know as much as you think."

"More than you, I am sure," she said sharply, which had Theodore chuckling. Magnus reared up angrily, but Miss Goldsmith stood her ground. "You may not know this, but the reason Diana asked for an annulment has nothing to do with how she feels for you. In fact, as far as I can gather, she still cares for you deeply."

Magnus balked. “Wh... what? No. Lies. You have come here to trick me.”

“I have not,” she said. “Diana did not want to annul her marriage with you. She was forced into it – blackmailed! She had no choice, for she feared for the safety of your nieces if she did not agree.”

“She feared for...” Magnus shook his head, wishing now he had not drunk so much. “What are you saying, woman? Speak plainly!”

“It is Lord Herrod, Your Grace. You will not have heard, as the plans are yet to be announced, but once the annulment is finalized, they are to be wed.”

“What?!”

“It was forced upon her,” Miss Goldsmith continued as Magnus grappled with information he did not understand. “He told her that if she did not agree to his terms, that he would hurt your nieces. He is deranged, she claims, and she feared for their lives.”

“She...” Magnus’ head began to clear. Or perhaps that was his heart soaring? “She did not want to annul our marriage?”

“No!” Miss Goldsmith cried. “Far from it. But your nieces, Your Grace. They were who she feared for.”

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Magnus had no idea what was going on. And he only half understood what Miss Goldsmith was saying. He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and then looked the woman in the eyes. “Tell me again, clearly. And from the beginning.”

Miss Goldsmith did just that, explaining with far more clarity what was going on exactly and why she was here. “... he has called her to his home tomorrow,” she explained, continuing the story as Magnus finally began to understand. “Where I believe they will meet with his lawyers to begin the process of annulment. He has her trapped, Your Grace, and she fears there is nothing she can do to escape.”

“Unbelievable!” Theodore cried. “And you, Miss Goldsmith. You are very brave for coming here.”

“Oh...” She blushed furiously. “Thank you.”

Magnus ignored his friend’s flirting. He ignored Miss Goldsmith’s pleading. His focus now was on Diana, his wife, the story told which dashed the funk that had hung over his head like smashing an egg against the wall.

He felt his heart begin to pound solidly in his chest. He felt his sense of worth, his courage, return in droves. All the doubt that had besieged him. The sense of hopelessness, weakness, helplessness that had beaten him down. It faded – no! He battered it away. Because through it all he focused on that which mattered, words which had him standing as if he meant to fly!

His wife, Diana, still cared for him. By all accounts, she might very well have loved him. And now, she needed his help.

Once, Magnus might have run when faced with a situation like this. But as Magnus had promised his wife not so long ago, he was capable of change. He had changed. Love had done that to him, and now he meant to save who was responsible. She whom he loved with all his heart.

It was time Magnus did as he should have days ago. It was time that Magnus fought for his wife, his happiness... for love.

“Tomorrow, you say?” he asked. On his feet, there was a growl in his voice, anger boiling away just below the surface.

“Yes, tomorrow morning,” she said. “She does not know I am here. Again, the children. If anything was to happen to them...”

“Do not worry for the girls,” Magnus said. A smile, only for a moment, at the thought of Diana had how much she was willing to sacrifice for his nieces. The smile then turned to a sneer like a wolf cornering its prey. “It is Lord Herrod whose safety is in question. At least it will be, by the time I am done with him.”

## ChapterTwenty-Seven

It was hard for Diana to fathom how quickly her life had changed.

Just three days ago, it seemed that her life existed as if torn from the pages of a romance novel. It was not without challenges, there were hardships involved, and dammit more than once she hadn't known if it could possibly work. But that was how the best romance stories always went, wasn't it? True love wasn't meant to be easy but when it was found, those hard times made the good that much more prophetic.

Now, it was no exaggeration to say that she had found herself in the middle of what could only be described as a horror story.



She sat in the back of the carriage as it approached Albury Estate, eyeing the large manor with a growing sense of foreboding that made her chest tighten. The day was sun-drenched and indeed a glorious thing to behold, but dark storm clouds sat on the horizon, and she was certain that before the day was done they would have blackened the sky and drowned the world as she knew it.

The manor was typical of modern-day estates, nothing particularly off-putting about it, but to her it looked like a castle in which a monster resided. And indeed, as the carriage turned down the drive and made its way steadily toward the front of the manor, she spied that monster in all his glory.

His smile was broad, teeth flashing in the light of the sun. But his nose was crooked, bent and ugly, and his posture rigged and stiff. He held his arms wide as the carriage came to a stop, his big eyes lighting up with triumph. So hard, he tried to appear magnanimous and caring, but Diana knew him for what he was.

He was her keeper. Her tormentor. Her captor. He was evil personified and there was nothing she could do to escape his clutches.

“Ah, my love,” he purred as the carriage doors opened and she stepped down. He rushed forward, taking her hand to help. “Could this day not have come any sooner. I do not know of you, but I did not sleep a wink last night.”

“Nor did I,” she said truthfully.

“I would hope not.” She was down from the carriage, but he refused to relinquish her hand. And as he spoke, he looked at her like a crazed lunatic, unable to believe his own luck – a prize won that he would rather die than let out of his sight. “And I predict that ahead of us are many more sleepless nights.”

Her stomach dropped and she felt might be sick. “Just promise me that...” She took a

breath and forced herself to meet his eyes. “Promise me that you will keep your word.”

“My word?” he frowned.

“The girls, Josephine and Adeline. You will not harm them.”

“Oh!” he laughed and shook his head. “Are you still on about that? Truly, I had forgotten. But yes, yes, they will not be harmed. That is assuming there are no more surprises,” he added with a wink.

“I am here, am I not?”

“That you are.” He licked his lips and took a step back, still holding her by the hand. “Now, let me get a look at you...” His eyes flashed hunger, similar to the way that Magnus once looked at her, only the reaction she felt in her soul was nowhere near as amorous. “My, oh my. You are...” He clicked his tongue. “A pearl without price. Yes, I cannot help but think that the two of us will be quite happy together.”

“As you say.”

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She would not pretend to love him. Heck, she would not pretend to even like him. She would stomach him, and even that would take every ounce of strength she possessed. Her life might be forfeit from here on out, but she would not do this man the courtesy of thinking that she felt anything for him whatsoever. She would rather die.

“You!” Lord Herrod barked suddenly at the coachman. “Do not go anywhere! I shall be requiring your services for the remainder of the day.”

“My lord?” the coachman said. “Lady Langham asked that I return as soon as --”

“I do not give a shit what she said,” he snapped. “We will be needing you to deliver us north. I own a cottage in Lanchester, and I plan on being there before sundown.”

The coachman looked like he wished to argue but clearly knew better of it. “Of course, my lord.”

“In fact...” He clicked his fingers at the coachman. “Help the staff with my trunks – and be quick about it! In the foyer, man! Go!” He clicked his fingers again and the coachman hurried to abide.

“Lanchester?” Diana asked. “Wh -- why are we going there?”

“Peace and quiet,” he purred as he reached out and stroked her face. Diana forced herself not to pull back. “My lawyers are busy drawing up the annulment papers – the legalities of the darn thing are taking longer than I would like. So, I figured we might scurry ourselves away for a few days until all is ready to be finalized.” He widened

his eyes with that same hungry look. “Get a head start on this marriage.”

Diana’s stomach squirmed and she tried, oh how she did, not to curl her lip in disgust. There could be no misunderstanding what he meant. Worse that there was nothing she could do.

So, this is it. Done. No chance at redemption. Once we climb in that carriage and leave here, the end will have finally come. And what a wretched ending it is.

It was times like this when Diana couldn’t help but wonder if maybe she had done the wrong thing. That if she had told Magnus what Lord Herrod had planned, might things have turned out differently?

All fancies, she knew. Yes, she had hoped that Magnus would come and rescue her too. She had prayed that he might still care for her, enough that he would move mountains to see her stay with him. But she also knew that to be folly. He had already been pulling away from her when she had sprung the annulment on him so suddenly, so why would he bother fighting for her? Why would he waste his time?

No, no, this was it. There would be no savior. No escape. Magnus was who he had always been, Diana did not dare think otherwise, and thus her one chance at happiness was as likely as... well, as that courier she now saw coming for them being a letter from Magnus, demanding that she be returned.

She almost smiled at that.

“Ugh, who could this be,” Lord Herrod groaned when he saw the same courier racing down the drive. “And the timing!” He shook his head and turned to Diana. “My little angel, why don’t you get yourself comfortable...” He indicated to the carriage. “I’ll deal with this, and by then the trunks will be packed, and we can be off.”

“As you wish...” She bowed her head and started toward the carriage, not bothering to see who the courier might be, not daring to hope.

“Yes, yes!” Lord Herrod waved the courier over. “Over here, man! What is it!” Diana reached the carriage and was about to climb in when she heard Lord Herrod cry out in shock. “You!”

“Diana!” a deep voice like thunder rumbling over a vast ocean swept through Diana, lifted her from her reverie, and had her nearly tripping over herself.

She turned around, the smile already on her lips, because she knew who it was, she simply wasn’t ready to believe it until she saw it with her own two eyes. But there could be no mistake.

Sitting atop his horse, bearing down on Lord Herrod like one of the Horseman of the Apocalypse, his face set to fury, his lips curled back over his sharp teeth, anger in his eyes like coals burning in the hottest of fires, was the one man she thought she’d never see again but now felt like weeping because to see him, to know that he still cared and that he had come for her, was more than her heart could bear.

It was Magnus, and he had come to rescue her.

## ChapterTwenty-Eight

Magnus was caught between two worlds.

On the one hand, he wished for nothing more than to go to his wife, throw her atop his horse, and whisk her away from here while promising he would never leave her side again. And she looked so beautiful too. Mere days had passed but it felt like years, such was the way her beauty struck him. Her dark features. Her round face. Those big, brown eyes that he could see were filled with love and hope and

happiness, telling him immediately that he had made the right decision in coming for her. His heart beat and it seemed to connect with hers, and for a brief moment he looked at her and she looked at him and whatever it was that they had fought about, the reasons that had brought her here, seemed completely insignificant. He was simply glad to have her in his world once more.

On the other hand, he very much wanted to climb down from his horse and punch Lord Herrod square in the face.

As luck had it, Lord Herrod made that decision for him.

“Your Grace!” he snarled. “I would ask what you are doing here, but I do not care! Be gone! You are trespassing!”

“Magnus!” Diana cried out. She stood by the carriage, having been about to climb inside, but she stepped back, the smile on her face brighter than the sun.

“Quiet!” Lord Herrod snapped at her. “And what did I tell you! Inside the carriage, now!”

“Do not dare speak to my wife like that,” Magnus warned him.

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“Your wife!” Lord Herrod cackled. “Not for long! She is mine! Or she will be, once we are away from here! Now, I am warning you for the last time, be gone!”

“No!” Diana cried out. She looked caught between thoughts; half-reaching for him as if to save her, half looking at Lord Herrod, terrified of what he might do.

“What did I say!” Lord Herrod stormed toward Diana and grabbed her by the arm. “Inside, now!”

And that was all Magnus needed to see.

Rage flared inside of him so hot he honestly worried his horse might catch alight. Done from the horse he jumped, striding quickly in the direction of Lord Herrod who was in the process of dragging his wife toward the carriage.

“Get in!” he snarled in her face.

“No! Please!”

“Unhand my wife!” Magnus demanded.

“As I said --” Lord Herrod turned back to spit contempt at Magnus, but he never had a chance to finish the thought.

Magnus did not hesitate. Without breaking stride, he curled his hand into a tight fist, brought back his arm, and then drove his knuckles clean into the uppity lord’s large nose with a tremendous thwack.

“Argh!” Lord Herrod cried out. He kept a hold of Diana’s arm as he stumbled, but another hard punch, again right in the nose, saw him release her as he fell back and landed in the dirt. “My nose! You broke my nose!”

“Be glad that is all I broke!”

“You will pay for this!”

Again, Magnus was caught in two minds. Diana stood there in a state of shock; eyes wide to see Magnus having punched Lord Herrod squarely as he had. And oh, how he wanted to go to her. To wrap her in his arms. To kiss her. To apologize and beg for forgiveness because this was all his fault.

On the other hand, Lord Herrod was deserving of more than a few simple punches, and how very much he wished to hammer that point home.

Lucky that again, Lord Herrod saved him having to choose.

“You’ve made a grave mistake,” her snarled from the ground as he scrambled to his knees. “Those little brats of yours! I warned you! I warned --”

“What did you say!” Magnus was on him. Miss Goldsmith had told him of the threat that Lord Herrod had levelled at Diana, but to hear it uttered from the man’s mouth, and so freely, was more than he could handle. He threatened their safety. He laughed in the face of Magnus’ brother in so doing. All Magnus had done for them, all he had promised, was laid bare and exposed and in that moment, he realized that he would very well kill Lord Herrod if he was left to it.

“I said – owe!”

Magnus grabbed the man by the back of the head and drove another fist into his face.



He felt bones break against his knuckles, but he did not release the man's head. Another punch, and another. He then drove his knee into the man's stomach, and before he knew it his hands were around his neck... squeezing... squeezing...

Lord Herrod's eyes turned wide, and his face went purple. He grabbed a hold of Magnus' arms, trying to pull them free. But it was no use, such was Magnus' rage that nothing in this world could stop him.

Well, almost nothing...

"Magnus..." A soft hand rested on his shoulder. "Magnus," the voice spoke again, a balm in his ear. "Leave him. He is not worth it."

Magnus came to suddenly, realizing what he was doing. He looked down at Lord Herrod, his face purple and swollen, the life draining from him. Then he looked at Diana, her expression soft and caring. She was not judging him. She was not scared for him. She simply wanted him to stop because it was over, they had won, and Lord Herrod could hurt them no longer.

He released Lord Herrod immediately. The man cried out and fell into the dirt.

Next, he turned so he was facing Diana. Now that it was just he and her, the adrenaline of the moment rescinding, he felt a momentary stab of panic. He had thought long and hard about what he was going to say when he arrived, the apology he needed to give, the love he had to appraise her with. But the words caught on his tongue...

"Magnus..." Diana licked her lips, looking away sheepishly. Her cheeks flushed red and she fidgeted furiously. "I... I need to apologize for what I said."

Magnus blinked. "Apologize?"

“I did not mean it,” she said, forcing herself now to look at him. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she might have been the most beautiful creature of all time, were it not for how upset she was. “Truly, I did not. I had no choice. Lord Herrod... he threatened the girls, and I would do anything for them. I should have told you. I wish that I had! And it was only after I said those things to you that I... that I... that I... what? Why are you smiling?”

Am I? Magnus hadn't even realized that he was.

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“Diana...” He shook his head as he stepped into her, his hand moving to her face. There, he rested his hand under her chin, making sure she would not look away. “There is nothing that you need to apologize to me for. Ever.”

“But --”

“I am the one who is sorry,” he said before she could speak. “That night when I left you, there is nothing I can say to justify it. Nothing. I was scared. I was terrified, truthfully, this foolish notion that I was not worthy of what I knew we had – of how I felt for you.”

“But --”

“I did as I always do when things became difficult, I ran.” His smile grew and it reached his eyes, growing further to see her do the same. “And the following morning, I had hoped that I could pretend it hadn’t happened. Why I hoped such a thing, I cannot say – I do not want to pretend it didn’t happen. It did, and for that I could not be happier, because it made me realize something.” He paused and raised an eyebrow.

“Wh -- what did it... what did you realize?” she asked him.

“The reason I was so scared.” He laughed and shook his head. “I love you, Diana. I loved you that night. I loved you the next day. I loved you after you left me. And I love you now. I love you as I know I always will. Some people can’t change. But some can. And me... I pray you believe that I am the latter.”

“You... you love me?”

“I do.”

Diana’s chin began to wobble, a familiar sign, only this time for unfamiliar reasons. The tears came next, thick and heavy, paired with noises escaping her mouth that were as horrid as they were beautiful.

She tried to look away with embarrassment, but he would not let her.

“I take it that this is not bad news?” Magnus laughed.

“What do you think!” she cried happily. “Oh, Magnus, I love you too!” She then threw herself at him, arms wrapping his neck, lips moving to his mouth, a kiss shared that was wet and sloppy and messy and perfect in every way because it said more than words ever could.

Magnus loved his wife, and he was no longer afraid to admit it.

Diana loved Magnus, and she knew that this time, admitting such a thing would not bring her pain.

The two kissed fully and passionately, all the worries that had beguiled them melting like tears in rain because what had come was in the past and both seemed to understand that what mattered was in the future.

“This isn’t over!” Lord Herrod snarled from the ground, hacking and coughing up blood. “If you think it is! Ha!”

Magnus turned back and sneered at the pitiful creature. “What should we do with him?”

He was saved from having to answer that question a moment later as through the front gates suddenly streamed eight men on horseback, seven of whom Magnus recognized to be the local watchmen. And leading the charge, a triumphant smile on his boyish face, was none other than Theodore.

“Just in time, I see!” he cried out as they rode in at pace. “Or did we miss the fun!”

“Theodore!” Magnus couldn’t believe it. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving you from doing something foolish,” he declared. He pulled the horse up by the carriage, spying Lord Herrod in the muck. “And not a moment too soon, by the look of things.”

“What is this!” Lord Herrod cried out. “Constables! I want this man arrested!”

In this, they chose to ignore Lord Herrod’s commands. The seven constables climbed down from their horses and quickly got about arresting Lord Herrod.”

“What is going on!” he cried out. “What is this! I am the victim! I am the victim!”

Theodore came in beside Magnus and Diana. “After seeing the look on your face last night, I figured that if you were left to it, you might do some not very smart things. So, I decided to be proactive. I hope I didn’t overstep.”

“Not at all,” Magnus laughed.

“Last night?” Diana looked between the men. “Wait a minute. There is one thing I do not understand. How on earth did you know? Clearly, you understand more than you are letting on. Who told!”

To this, Magnus and Theodore looked at one another and grinned.

“The answer to that,” Theodore said. “Is waiting for you at home. And might I say, she is going to be tickled pink to see that her little clandestine adventure worked out for the best.”

“She?” Diana frowned.

Magnus chuckled and then took her hand. “Speaking of, shall we be heading home? Wife.”

“Yes.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “I think we shall. Husband.”

And that was exactly what they did.

### ChapterTwenty-Nine

Diana and Magnus took the carriage home together, while Theodore chose to ride ahead on his lone horse. It was as they came closer to the manor that Diana saw Theodore ride ahead, disappearing over the horizon as if he had somewhere he needed to be.

“Where is he off to?” Diana asked.

Magnus frowned as he watched his friend vanish. “Where Theodore is concerned, who knows? I told you he was odd.”

Diana laughed snuggled in closer to Magnus, caring little for his eccentric friend. Still, she could not believe what had happened, and how it had happened. Still, she could not believe how everything had turned out and that from this point onwards, happiness was what awaited her. His arm was around her, holding her close, and never had she felt more comfortable. Life truly was perfect.

And it became even more so when they arrived at the gate of the estate, able now to see the front of the manor. In that moment, the question of Theodore's sudden exit was answered, for he stood outside the manor waiting for them, and with him were Evelyn, Josephine, and Adeline.

"Evelyn!" Diana gasped when she saw her. "So, that is how..."

Magnus shrugged and attempted to look coy. "I would have preferred the narrative that I was so overcome with feelings of sorrow that I endeavored to come after you and change your mind, regardless of circumstance..." He grimaced. "Alas, you cousin was the reason."

"She went to you?"

"Aye, she appeared in my home last night and told me everything. And although I am beyond grateful, I cannot help but feel a little sorry for her."

"Sorry for her?" Diana frowned, not understanding his meaning.

He nodded through the carriage window where Diana saw immediately what Magnus was speaking of. Evelyn stood behind the two girls, her hands on their shoulders to keep them from charging the carriage. But beside her was Theodore, and he spoke joyously to her, his expression animated. Evelyn rolled her eyes at something he said and shook her head, but she did not look at all put out by his clear interest. Not even a little bit.

My cousin the spinster, looking to have spun her final web. At least if Lord Northwood has anything to say about it.

The second that the carriage came to a stop, the girls sprung from Evelyn's grip and charged ahead, screaming their heads off in delight.



“Diana!” Josephine cried as Diana opened the carriage door.

“Diana! Diana! You’re back!” Adeline joined the chorus.

Diana beamed for them both, her heart swelling at the sight of their happy faces. They were not her own offspring, but in the moment, she did not care because it felt as if they were. In a small way, she felt a little guilty for having asked Magnus if he wanted to produce an heir with her, as if these two girls were not enough to satisfy for her need for a child. Yet at the same time, seeing how she felt for them, and how they felt for her, she also knew that the two were ready for that next step.

“Girls!” she said happily as she climbed down, taking them both in her arms in one big hug. “Did you miss me!”

“Where have you been!” Josephine huffed. “Father would not say.”

“Nowhere worth worrying about.” Diana crouched down to better look at them. “I am just glad I am back.”

“Me too!” Adeline agreed, refusing to let her go as if doing so might see her leave again.

“Girls, give her some room,” Magnus chuckled as he came in behind them. “And where is my hug?”

“We saw you this morning,” Josephine said.

“Which means I do not get a hug?”

The two girls scrunched their faces, but they relented and soon the four of them were holding one another in a giant embrace. A family is what they were, one that would

never be parted again.

It was as Diana stood that she saw Evelyn slowly edging toward her, Lord Northwood behind her as if for support. Evelyn wore a look of reservation, tinged with smugness, likely knowing she had done the right thing but still not sure if Diana would agree.

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“I suppose I have you to thank for this?” Diana said flatly, feigning annoyance.

Evelyn shrugged. “Well, I knew you would be too stubborn to do anything about it. And someone had to make sure you didn’t go ahead and ruin the best thing that has ever happened to you.”

“Evelyn...” Diana’s chin began to wobble. “I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

“Oh, I am sure you will think of something,” Evelyn grinned.

“We owe you more than you can imagine.” Magnus came in behind Diana, one hand rested firmly on her waist. Since they had left Lord Herrod’s, hardly a second had passed in which he was not holding her in some way. Not that Diana was complaining.

“What about me?” Lord Northwood chimed in.

Magnus snorted. “Lord Herrod should be the one thanking you. He might be dead, otherwise.”

“What does that mean?” Evelyn cried out, looking between the two men. “What on earth happened?”

“Perhaps I can fill in the blanks,” Lord Northwood said. “Besides, I can only imagine how tired the two of you are...” He raised a knowing eyebrow at Diana and Magnus. “Such that myself and Miss Goldsmith will gladly watch the children for the rest of the day. Give you two a chance to... to rest up...” His eyebrow raised further, and

Diana felt herself flush furiously at the implication.

“Perhaps you are correct,” Magnus agreed, his grip on Diana’s waist tightening. “Diana, what do you think? A short nap, perhaps? You must be exhausted.”

She turned to look at her husband, seeing in his eyes an expression that she knew as well as any other. One that existed in her dreams. One she had thought of every day since leaving him. One which made her stomach flutter and her heart race, and her body turn hot as her knees began to shake because it was a look that could mean only one thing.

“Ah, yes,” she agreed, meeting his eyes with a wicked grin. “A short nap, I think. Shall we...” She indicated toward the manor.

The girls complained to see the two go, but Evelyn and Lord Northwood were rather adept at keeping them back as Diana and Magnus made their way inside.

From there it was a short walk up the stairs, down the hallway, and into the master bedroom. Diana was the first through the door, prickles already breaking out across her body with the sense of anticipation. Love and romance were all well and good but right now, there was one thing on her mind, and it was perhaps the complete opposite of romance.

The door closed behind her and she spun about, fully intending to throw herself at her husband. But he stood back a small way, stopping her before she even had a chance to start.

“Diana,” he began. “Before we do anything else, I need for you to know something.”

“Oh...” She blinked, suddenly unsure, a little annoyed, for all she wanted was, well, her husband. “What is it?”

“I told you already that I love you, and that is as true then as it is now.” He nodded and swallowed. “But it is more than that, and I need you to know how sorry I am for what happened. How --”

“I told you, it is not something you need to apologize for.”

“I do,” he pressed on her. “For how I behaved the last time we were together. I was scared. I was unsure. I ran because I did not stop and think what these feelings mean. And I need you to know that although I have changed, there will be times where I might... where I might falter. Where I might question myself. But when this happens, you must know it will have nothing to do with you. You are the beacon that keeps me steady, that brings me home, the reason that I am standing here right now. I don’t always do the right thing....” He laughed nervously. “But for you, I will try. And where an heir is concerned --”

“I am going to stop you, please.” She held up a hand. “I appreciate what you have said. More than you can imagine. But Magnus...” She sighed. “I have not seen you in days, we are finally alone, and if you do not take me right now and throw me on that bed, then I am afraid I might have to do so myself.” She pumped her eyebrows at him, relishing the shocked and then amorous look that swept across his face. “And to be honest with you, I just can’t see that being anywhere near as fun. So...” She tilted her head and looked right at him. “Are we doing this or not?”

The compassionate, heartfelt expression melted from Magnus’ face in an instant, replaced by one that could only be compared to a predator in the wild who found himself lucky enough to stumble upon wounded prey.

He leapt for her. Hands, taking her by the face. Pulling her into him as his body pressed close. Head tilting, leaning in, lips finding her mouth and kissing her fully as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did?

His touch sent sparks erupting across Diana's entire body so that she very nearly collapsed. She might have, was he not holding her up. Kissing one another as if trying to devour the other, for a few long seconds that was all they did. Wet, sloppy kisses that went beyond mere attraction. Kisses that told of a deep desire – a need to be together. Tongues lapped and wrestled. Teeth nibbled and tore. Their breathing become one, as did the beating of the hearts and truly, Diana could have stayed that way and kissed him forever.

But then she found herself stepping backwards, pulling Magnus toward the bed.

Then she found herself on her back, writhing up the bed as Magnus climbed on top, mounting her as a lion might in the wild.

Then she found her hands around his pants, opening them with a sense of urgency that was matched by the way he tore open her dress at the front. This wasn't the tender love making as had been experienced the first time. This was a new beast; one Diana was very much excited to live in.

Diana's breasts broke from her dress and Magnus pulled them toward his mouth. His soft lips wrapped around her right nipple, suckling gently and she could feel herself harden. He then bit down, she yelped, he grinned and looked at her, moving then onto the left breast.

As he fondled her, Diana continued at his pants, wrenching them down so that his manhood sprung free and poked into her stomach. It was already hard, and she wrapped a hand around his, relishing the way his body turned stiff, and he groaned, pulling his lips free from her because he could not take it.

"Magnus," she breathed as his head buried into her neck. More kisses. Her hand continuing to stroke him.

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“Yes?” he moaned between those kisses.

“I want you inside of me.” She thought of his lips between her legs. She thought of her mouth around his member. She thought of all they could do and all they would do, in time. But under the current circumstances, there was just the one thing she wanted. Needed. That which she had thought she’d never have again. “Now.”

Magnus did not need telling twice.

It was different this time to the last. She was no longer the inexperienced girl she had been. She was no longer waiting for his command. As Magnus pulled back, Diana hoisted up the skirt of her own dress, spread her own legs, wrapped them around him without bothering to see what he was going to do.

Magnus’ eyes lit up eagerly, sensing the new power dynamic, not at all complaining as her thighs squeezed him and pulled her toward him.

“Someone is eager,” he chuckled as he found himself on his knees, getting ready to enter her.

“You have no idea...”

It started slowly as it did before. Magnus, gently pressing the end of his manhood between her thighs, into her, entering her carefully so as not to hurt her. Inch by inch, he pushed himself deeper, this time Diana welcoming him as she felt him fill her. She closed her eyes, clenched her jaw, breathed in deeply as he pushed himself all the way...

“Yes...” she moaned once she had him. “Now, Magnus... harder.”

Magnus began to thrust. Hard, deep, long, firm. He did not work up to it as last time. He did not try and move to her breathing. He ravished her, made her his, and she was only too happy to be treated like this.

Soon, Diana found herself wanting more. This wasn't going to be enough. She wasn't shy like last time. She wasn't nervous. Sensing the moment, Diana pulled herself back.

“Wh --” Magnus gasped.

“On your back, thank you,” Diana said. She raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to argue. “Is that a problem?”

To that, Magnus' response was to do exactly as asked.

Diana sat on her husband, guiding him inside of her, taking every inch of him until she was pressed firmly against his body. Then, not knowing what she was doing but somehow knowing it was right, she began to grind her hips, back and forth. She began to raise them, up and down. She moved to her own pleasure. She moved to her husband's. She gripped him by the chest and had her way with him however she felt.

That she was able to do this was a sign of how far the two had come.

They were no longer strangers. They were no longer unsure of what they were or what they wanted. What they wanted, Diana realized as she rode Magnus, wasn't about marriage or the future or what might be. What they wanted was, in many ways, the simplest of things. They wanted one another.

What would come would come. The difficulties they would face, the challenges, the



fights and arguments, the second guessing, the typical troubles married couples were known to experience. They could not avoid that, nor should they. Because none of it mattered, and none of it could break them, so long as they held true to the love that they both felt. That was why their marriage would work.

It had started as a marriage of convenience. It had transformed into a marriage of passion. And now it was a marriage of two souls destined to be together because apart they simply could not exist. That's what this marriage was.

And as Diana felt herself about to explode, as she felt her husband about to do the same, she met his eyes and held them, he did not blink, the determination she saw in them, the love, told her that he was on the same page as she. For that reason alone, she knew that happiness was what waited for her.

After all, wasn't that what marriage is all about?

Epilogue

SIX MONTHS LATER

"We are going to be late!" Diana cried from the foyer. "Magnus! Will you please hurry up!"

"I told you, I am coming!" his voice echoed from upstairs.

"Not fast enough," Diana said, but only loud enough so that Josephine and Adeline could hear her. They too stood waiting, and both erupted into a fit of giggles to hear their uncle mocked. "Honestly, what is he doing up there?" she said in a huff as Magnus still refused to show.

"Trying on another dress, most likely," Josephine joked.

Diana smirked. “So long as it is not one of my own. I don’t need him tearing it.”

It was a few minutes later when Magnus finally appeared at the top of the steps, dressed smartly, obviously not in a gown of any sort. “Ready,” he announced as he started down the staircase.

“Will you get a move on!” Diana snapped. “We were going to be late, but now we certainly are.”

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“Yes, yes,” Magnus agreed. “I am coming.”

Diana rolled her eyes and turned about. “I will meet you in the carriage. Girls.” She took both girls by the hands and they hurried from the manor.

“You should not be rushing in your state,” Magnus called after them, coming in quickly. “It cannot be good for the child.”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to take so long!” she called over her shoulder. Reaching the carriage, she began to help the two girls climb inside.

“Diana!” Magnus was at her, quick to lift Josephine from her arms and help her inside. Then, he did the same for Adeline. “What did I say about lifting heavy things?”

“Oh, I am perfectly capable.” She slapped his hand away as he tried to help her climb up next. “Really, everyone is so pedantic. I am fine.”

“Fine, yes,” Magnus agreed. “And terribly pregnant. Now, if you do not mind...” He raised a warning eyebrow at her, half-blocking the entrance to the carriage so she could not climb in without pushing him.

Diana sighed with exaggeration. “Well. Are you going to help me in or not?”

Magnus beamed. “I would love to.” He took her under the arm and helped her into the carriage, at which point Diana was quick to sit down because despite her protests, her back was hurting her and she desperately needed to take the weight off – not that

she would admit such a thing!

“There...” Magnus climbed in and sat himself beside her. “Now, how are you feeling?”

“I told you, I am fine.”

He looked at her and then raised his eyebrows at the girls. “Girls, what did we teach you about lying?”

“That it is wrong to do,” Adeline said as if reciting a verse.

“Good girl,” Magnus said.

By that point, Diana was glaring at her husband. Not that he seemed to mind. He shuffled in close to her, took her hand, and gave it a kiss. “By the way, have I told you yet how breathtaking you are? Utterly gorgeous.”

Diana tried to keep her gaze cold but could not help but smile. She looked away, rolling her eyes instead. “Oh, I do not. Not like this.”

“More stunning every day. Girls?”

“So pretty,” Josephine agreed.

“Pretty!” Adeline joined in.

Where Diana appreciated the compliments, she still could not agree with them. She had heard tell of how uncomfortable pregnancy was. They said it bloated you, that it was painful, that it was impossible to truly be comfortable and sweating was as inevitable as breathing. All truths she could say were accurate.

Not that she would take back the pregnancy. Oh no, certainly not. Six months in and with the end in sight, she didn't think that she had ever been so excited for something in her entire life.

What was more, strangely, while also somewhat predictable, Magnus seemed to be the same.

Indeed, once the carriage began to move, he rested a hand on her swollen belly, a smile on his lips, a shine to his eyes, and she just knew that he was picturing the birth of his first child and how it was sure to change their life for the better. Which was saying quite a bit, as their lives were already near perfect as it was.

It had been six months since Magnus had rescued her and in those six months, she and her love for him had grown seemingly every day. He was no longer as closed off emotionally as he used to be. He was no longer scared to speak his mind and what he was feeling. Such were the positive changes she had seen in her husband that in all that time not once had he had a single nightmare. That alone was telling, she thought.

The girls too, they had grown into themselves nicely. Neither was jealous at the notion that a baby would be joining their little family shortly, and both were excited for what that might mean.

Truly, once upon a time, Diana had used the word 'wonderful' to describe her marriage to Magnus. It had been exaggerated at the time, but now felt perfectly apt.

"I wonder how Theodore is feeling," Magnus mused as the trip got underway. "I bet the man is a mess."

"I was thinking the same about Evelyn," Diana giggled. "I never thought I'd see the day."

“I like to think that we had something to do with it,” Magnus said. “Obviously they met because of us, but I meant the example we have set.”

She snorted. “Are you trying to take credit for their relationship? That’s rich.”

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“Why not?” Magnus cried. “Seeing us together as they so often have, no doubt they wish they had this too.” He then shrugged. “It’s hard being this perfect, isn’t it. But somebody has to do it.”

She eyed him and shook her head, secretly agreeing with his outlandish claims. Where she and Magnus were indeed responsible for Evelyn and Theodore coming together, she too liked to think they took some inspiration from a marriage that was the living embodiment of perfect.

And with that thought, Diana leaned over and kissed her husband on the cheek. He smiled at the gesture, squeezing one hand in his while resting the other lovingly on her belly.

It promised to be a good day.

That was where they were headed now, to a chapel not far from the estate where Evelyn and Theodore were set to be bound in wholly matrimony for the rest of their lives. A romance that had felt odd at the time, a little random truth be told, but Diana now knew to be a match made in heaven because if anyone could handle Evelyn it was Theodore. And the same went for him!

It was to be a small ceremony and when they arrived, Diana was relieved to see that they were right on time. The carriage pulled up out the front of the chapel, allowing the four of them to climb down and take their places.

Magnus rushed off to find Theodore, for he would be standing with him at the altar. Diana, however, took the girls inside and found them their seats, as she was then due

to join Evelyn and wish her luck before things got underway.

Before she had the chance, however, her mother appeared before her.

“Diana,” she said politely. “You look lovely.”

“Mother,” Diana said with equal politeness. “I was hoping you would be here today.”

“Oh?”

“Come now,” Diana chuckled. “I know how much this means to you. After my sisters and then me, this right here is surely your crowning achievement?”

Her mother shook her head. “For once, I don’t think it is right for me to claim the honors of this particular union. I’m just happy that Evelyn found someone who cares for her.”

If her mother had said those words six months ago, Diana might not have believed her – her mother had never cared for such things. But these last six months had seen a change in the woman which Diana could not help but note. She had grown softer, it seemed. Not quite so antagonistic. Perhaps it was old age getting to her? Or perhaps it was a realization that her work was finally done, that she could relax, and that being on good terms with her daughters was more important than social contrivances and caring what others thought.

“I need to find Evelyn,” Diana said. “But...” She smiled, reached out, and touched her mother on the arm. “Will you be joining us after? For the breakfast?”

“I wasn’t sure if I was invited.”

“Mother...” Diana smiled. “Of course you are. After all you have done,” she added



with a wink.

Her mother shook her head but smiled too. "I would not miss it. Now go, no doubt Evelyn is in a panic." She looked past Diana at the two girls. "I will keep an eye on them. And I promise to be nice."

"You? Nice? Impossible," Diana teased.

She made sure to tell the girls to behave, and then she ducked through the chapel toward the back rooms where she found Evelyn tucked away, double checking her dress and hair and make-up before the ceremony was set to start.

"There you are!" Evelyn cried the second Diana stepped into the room. "Where have you been!"

Diana hurried across the room. "Sorry I am late, Magnus was --"

"My hair, how does it look! My dress, is it too frumpy? My make-up? Does it match!" She grabbed Diana by the arms and dragged her toward the mirror. "Everything needs to be perfect, Diana!"

"Evelyn, you really need to calm down --"

"How can I possibly be calm? What if I walk out there looking a fright and Lord Northwood takes one look at me and changes his mind? What then? What then!"

Diana looked flatly at her friend. "Do you really think that will happen?"

"It might!"

"Well, then I guess he isn't the one for you."

“Diana! Do not say such things!”

“I will say them.” She nodded rightly. “I will say them because I know there is no chance of that happening. The man loves you, Evelyn. Anyone with two eyes can see that. Why, you could walk out there dressed in a sack and he would be smitten. You know it as well as I do.”

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Evelyn pushed her lips together, her cheeks flushing pink. “He does love me, doesn’t it?”

“Although I can’t imagine why.”

“Oh!” She wrapped her arm around Diana and pulled her next to the mirror so that they were both facing it. “Who would have thought? Me. Here! I don’t think I have ever been so happy.”

“Trust me when I say that this is only the beginning,” Diana laughed.

It was easy from that point on. Evelyn looked perfect and with her nerves calming, it was simply a matter of waiting until she was called into the chapel. When she was, Diana gave her a kiss on the cheek, told her to enjoy the moment because it would only happen once, and then rushed to join the girls and her mother.

From there she watched the ceremony play out in predictable fashion. Evelyn, appearing at the end of the aisle, glowing. Theodore, gushing at her beauty, tears welling in his eyes because he was even happier than she was. Nothing was amiss. There were no last-minute surprises. It went as well as it could, a further sign that this marriage was for keeps.

And as the vows were read and the two were joined together as man and wife, Diana met her husband’s eyes and matched the love felt in the room in that gaze. He returned it in kind, radiating his love for her as if they were the ones under the altar.

But they were beyond that now. Their marriage of convenience was a thing of the

past, now one of utter love and happiness, a future they both looked forward to and could not wait to experience. With their friends. With their family. With one another. Diana had never been so happy.

The End?