



# The Duke and the Temporary Bride

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "For just two months you belong to me."

Waking up next to the worst rake of the ton Selina has no recollection of the previous night. Now, she's forced to marry a rogue. Until he runs away...and his beastly brother claims her instead.

Duke Benedict will allow no one to ruin his family's reputation. Not his brother and especially not his alluring new bride. So he makes her an offer: they will be husband and wife for two months only.

Because even a day longer will drive Benedict mad with desire...and he just might devour her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 100

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*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:38 am*

## Chapter One

“Oh... God...”

My head. What have I done?

Miss Selina Gouldsmith, daughter of the Dowager Viscountess Langham, had never felt such nausea. Her stomach churned—that feeling that there was a storm raging through her guts and trying to escape from her mouth. Her head throbbed. Perhaps a little man had crawled into her ear last night and was now beating her skull with a mallet? And even with her eyes closed as they were, she could feel the room spinning around her.

“What on earth...” she groaned as she forced her eyes open.

The early morning sun seared her eyeballs, and she gasped, throwing up her arm to shield them. Mouth as dry as a desert tundra, she attempted to swallow, but her tongue was thick and heavy and coarse. Slowly, her head now spinning—bearable, compared to the headache—she pushed herself up in a desperate effort to get her bearings.

The first thing she noticed was that the room she had slept in was not her own. She recognized it as one of the spare rooms in her home. Strange that she had slept here rather than returning to her quarters.

The second thing she noticed was that she was dressed, thankfully, in a nightgown. The thin garment clung to her sweaty body, which was strange, as she was shaking as

if cold.

And the third thing she noticed?—

“Oh!” She sprung suddenly from the bed in a panic, landing on the timber floor with a heavy thump.

She was not alone in the room.

Lying in bed beside her, out cold and wrapped in the same blanket that Selina had just been sleeping beneath, was a man!

“Urgh...” A groan escaped his not-asleep body. “What in the name of all things...”

Selina jumped to her feet in a state of panic. Her hangover had her moving slower than she might have liked, and it clouded her mind in a way that made it impossible to think, let alone act!

She stood frozen in shock, staring wide-eyed as the strange bedfellow slowly turned around, opened his eyes, saw her watching him, frowned to himself in confusion, closed his eyes and shook his head, opened them again, frowned further...

“Who the devil are you?” he asked, his voice thick and husky. “And what are you doing in my room?”

Her mouth hung open in a way that she imagined made her look like a fish trying to breathe on dry land.

“Well?” He sat up and scowled at her. “Speak, woman! Or do you make a habit of sneaking into men’s rooms as they try and slumber?”

“I... I... I...” she stammered stupidly.

Selina’s mind raced as she tried to piece together how this could have happened. The previous evening, her mother had thrown a house party and invited every eligible bachelor in London to attend. The goal was to acquaint them with Selina in the hopes that one might take an interest and court her this Season. Selina could remember meeting many decent fellows, drinking plenty of wine, and then... that was where things turned fuzzy.

“Oh, great, she’s simple,” the man groaned and rubbed his eyes. “And I have a splitting headache—what was in that wine? Make yourself useful, will you, and fetch me a glass of water. And be quick about it.”

He did not recognize her, mistaking her for a maid. Selina suspected that his hangover was to blame, for his sweat-drenched skin and sunken eyes suggested that he was in a similar state to her own. A shame then that she recognized him... oh, how she did.

His name was Edmund Seymour, the younger brother of Benedict Seymour, the Duke of Northwick. Vague memories of speaking to the man last night flashed through her mind, but they were blurry and sporadic and impossible to piece together. As was any sense of how the two had ended up in bed together.

How much did I drink last night?

“Well?” he grunted as he massaged his temples. “Now would be preferable.”

Selina almost snapped at him, for he was not a very nice gentleman, and ordinarily, she would not stand for such rudeness. But there was nothing ordinary about this situation.

“Y-Yes,” she stammered stupidly instead. “I will be right back.”

It didn’t matter how this had happened. All that did matter was that nobody found out. For if someone did...

Selina spun about quickly, intending to sprint out of the room and never look back. She barely took a single step before Lord Edmund spoke again.

“Wait a minute,” he called. “What are you wearing?”

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“S-Sorry?” She stiffened with her back to him, refusing to turn back.

“Why are you dressed like that? Did you—Did we—Oh no. Edmund,” he chastised himself. “What were you thinking? And with the help! Urgh, this is just what I need.”

It was stupid. And Selina knew that she should have just ignored it and bolted from the room as if her life depended on it. But his denouncement of her stung her pride.

“I will have you know that I am not a maid!” She spun back and put her hands on her hips. “And despite what the situation might suggest, I can assure you that nothing untoward happened.”

His mouth dropped open. “Miss Gouldsmith!”

“Good morning,” she drawled, feeling strangely triumphant. “Look who has finally caught up.”

“What are you doing here?!”

“I might ask you the same question.”

“Me? This is not my doing. You are the one who?”

“Who what?”

His lip curled. “Based on what I know about you, Miss Gouldsmith, I should not be surprised. Let me guess—you snuck into my room after I had fallen asleep, hoping to

trick me. Or trap me, more like.”

“How dare you!”

“I know your past,” he continued rudely. “My brother warned me of it. I just wish I had listened. And locked the door!”

“My past?” she seethed. “That is rich, coming from a rake like you.”

“Better a rake than a spinster.”

The nerve of this brute!

Selina was vaguely aware of Lord Edmund’s colorful reputation, a true philander who loved women almost as much as he loved the drink. He was a few years older than her, classically handsome but a little boyish for his age, and most certainly another type.

“You wish for proof that I had nothing to do with this?” Selina snapped.

“How about it never having happened at all?”

“Oh! You are such a...” She shook with rage and might have leveled more hostility in his direction, but now that she had assessed the situation slightly, the danger inherent in what had happened was becoming more apparent.

What was more, the potential consequences if they were caught.

“How is this for proof!” She widened her eyes at him in fury, spun around, and marched toward the door. And she might have stormed through it too, was it not for what happened next.

“Edmund!” a deep male voice called from the other side. “Are you awake?”

“Oh no!” Edmund gasped, pulling at his bed sheets as if he meant to cover himself. “My brother.”

“Your brother! But he was not here last night!”

“Well observed,” Lord Edmund groaned. “This ought to be painful. And then some.”

There was nothing she could do. Frozen halfway across the room, Selina stared stupidly ahead as the door flew open and in walked perhaps the most terrifying man that she had ever seen—the Duke of Northwick.

She gasped at the sight of him.

It was not his size and indomitable prowess that did it, the way his mere presence filled the room as if it was not built to house men of his stature. Nor was it the sense of command that radiated from his being, born from living in a world where he was not used to being told no.

The way she stared at him, the way her mouth hung open, and the way her heart began to race... that was because of his scars. They crisscrossed the right side of his face. Hideous, to be sure. His skin was mangled from brow to chin, the scars snaking down his neck and vanishing beneath his collar.

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He is a monster...

“Edmund...” The Duke took in the scene and groaned to himself. “I thought we had spoken about this.”

“Brother!” Lord Edmund squeaked as he pulled the sheets up to his chin.

The Duke spared a glance at Selina, barely paying her attention. Like his brother, he most probably thought she was a maid and thus not worth bothering himself with. Which was a good thing, as Selina was still gaping at him.

“What you do in your own time and under your own roof is one thing. But you are a guest here—how do you think Lady Langham would feel if she were to find out that you spent the evening with the help?”

“It was not like that!”

“Oh, was it not?” The Duke turned to Selina, and while she gasped as he fixed his attention on her, thankfully, he did not seem too surprised by her reaction. “Tell me truthfully, did you and my brother sleep together last night?”

Selina could barely look at him. She tried her best, daring to look past the scarring to meet his eyes. But that made things even worse, as beyond the disfigurement she sensed power and strength and danger the likes of which she had never known.

It struck her, and her knees began to tremble. Thus, she tore her eyes away. Her breathing was ragged, and she struggled to keep herself under control.

“Well?” the Duke barked. “Answer me, woman!”

“Brother!” Lord Edmund scrambled to the edge of the bed. “She is not a maid!”

“What?” The Duke spun back. “What do you mean? Who is she, then?”

“Lady Langham’s daughter,” Lord Edmund explained awkwardly, sucking air through his teeth as he spoke. “Miss Selina Gouldsmith...”

“Miss Selina Gouldsmith?” The Duke looked from his brother to Selina and back again. Lord Edmund had hung his head, properly chastised, while Selina continued to avert her gaze. “Oh, no. Edmund... what have you done?”

“Nothing!” Lord Edmund yelped. “She snuck into my room whilst I slept, I swear it.”

The smart thing to do would have been to use this distraction to sneak out and then put as much distance between herself and this ghastly situation as possible. Indeed, Selina very much wanted to escape the Duke, for whenever she dared to glance up and meet his eyes... she became undone.

But Selina never was much for smart decision-making, and Lord Edmund’s effort to blame her made her common sense take a back seat.

“That is a filthy lie!” Her head snapped up, and she glared daggers at him. “I did no such thing.”

“You did!”

“You are the one who likely snuck in while I was sleeping,” she continued angrily. “I can only be thankful that you were too drunk to do anything else.”

“You were the one who?—”

“Quiet!” The Duke turned to face Selina, and this time she did not look away. She tried to meet his eyes, to stand tall and not cower. But just to look at him filled her with fear. A complete and utter feeling of hopelessness because in this man’s presence, she knew she had no power. “Is this the truth?” he asked.

“That your brother is a sneak?” she somehow managed, her voice quivering. “Yes, it is.”

“She is lying!”

“Quiet!” The Duke snapped at his brother without looking at him. He was studying Selina with a sense of curiosity, as if surprised that she was able to look at him without wincing.

Selina felt her body flush as she dared to hold his gaze. But she would not back down, not now, not when her reputation was at stake. And it was because she refused to look away that she sensed the Duke’s surprise... even excitement, as if he could not believe she would do such a thing.

For a moment, perhaps a second or more, he stared at her, and she stared back, refusing to blink as if she was challenging him. A small smile worked its way up the side of his deformed lips, and his eyes flashed daringly, testing her, seeing if she would back away. And she nearly did—her body began to tremble and burn in a way she did not understand.

“Brother!” Lord Edmund huffed, pulling the Duke’s attention away from her.

The moment his eyes were off Selina, she took her first breath, nearly collapsing as her heart pounded furiously in her chest.

“Do not listen to her. This entire thing is clearly some sort of ploy, orchestrated by the Dowager Viscountess.”

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“Enough!” the Duke growled at Lord Edmund in a way that Selina suspected was common—a tone that brooked no argument. “Am I expected to believe you?”

“It is the truth!”

The Duke groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Again and again, Edmund. How many times do we have to—” He caught his tongue and took a deep, calming breath. “Put your clothes on, now. We’re leaving.”

“But—”

“We will talk about this later,” he growled further.

Lord Edmund recoiled. “A-Alright. Let me just...” He began to look about the room for his clothes. “Where did I put my shirt?”

“Miss Gouldsmith.” The Duke looked at Selina again, not with the same intensity as before, but still with command. “Although I do not know what has happened here, what I would appreciate more than anything is your discretion.”

“Me?” she stammered stupidly.

“And my brother will do that same. No doubt you are aware of what might be said if...” He gestured to his brother, who was now frantically searching for his clothes. “Whatever it is that the two of you did?—”

“We did nothing!”

“That is neither here nor there.”

“Oh! I do not believe—” Selina caught her tongue, her body shaking. She told herself it was anger that did it, but deep down, she sensed it was something else. “Fine! You wish for discretion? How is this for discretion?”

She widened her eyes at him a final time, curled her lip, and then turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

She took a deep breath the moment she was in the hall. It was as if she was fleeing a furnace, for how hot her body ran. Her mind, too, was frazzled and reeling.

What was that?

It was a natural reaction to her anger, that was all. The accusation. The way the Duke had tried to bully her! So large and intimidating, he clearly thought he could dominate her any way he pleased. Even if she was completely innocent. Even if it was his brother who?—

“Oh!” she yelped.

Being in such a hurry, her body not behaving the way it ought to, Selina suddenly lost her footing, and before she knew what was happening, she plummeted to the ground in a painful heap.

“Miss Gouldsmith?” The Duke strode out of the room. “What happened?”

“I fell,” she groaned, almost to herself. “My head...”

“Can you stand by yourself?”

“I... I think so...” She grimaced as she gingerly made to stand up.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

Without asking permission, the Duke bent down and scooped her up into his arms as if she weighed nothing. For a man of his size, that was practically the case.

“Oh!” Selina yelped again as he lifted her into his arms and pressed her to him.

“What are you?—”

“Where is your room?” he asked.

“My... my room?” she repeated, her voice cracking.

“Yes,” he said. “Which way?”

In hindsight, the reason he asked such a thing was obvious, and it was only Selina’s hungover state and shock that had her stammering. But that would come later.

For all the fear she had presumably felt earlier, the way he lifted her and carried and held her evoked totally unexpected feelings...

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His arms were thick like tree trunks. His chest was meaty and round like a barrel. Selina was utterly helpless in his arms, which elicited excitement in ways that she had never known before and did not have time to contemplate because she was trying far too hard to resist the urge to wrap her arms around his large neck and?—

“Your room?” he prompted angrily. “Which way?”

“My... oh!” Her eyes widened when she realized the reason he was asking the question. Relief flooded her, or was that disappointment? “T-That way.” She pointed to the right.

“We better be quick,” he muttered, taking off.

She was so small in his huge arms. So helpless and powerless, completely at his mercy. Even if she wanted to, she would not have been able to fight him off. And while she should have wanted such a thing, the feel of those arms holding her as she rested against his large chest was a sensation that she relished quietly—and she refused to admit why.

The Duke suddenly came to a halt.

“What is the meaning of this!” Lady Langham stood at the end of the hallway. “Your Grace? Selina!”

“Lady Langham!” The Duke faltered, still holding Selina, seeming to clutch her even tighter to his muscled chest. “Your daughter fell,” he explained. “I was simply carrying her to her room.”

“And the nightgown?” Lady Langham raised an eyebrow at them both. “Need I ask my daughter what she was doing, wandering the halls dressed like this?”

It was a strange thing, but the Dowager Viscountess did not appear as angry as she ought to be. Not happy, yes. But not ropeable, as would have been expected. If anything—and only because Selina knew her mother so well—Lady Langham looked almost pleased... even vindicated.

“This is all perfectly explainable,” the Duke said with far more poise than Selina could fathom. “If you will allow me to?—”

“Brother!” Lord Edmund stepped out of the bedroom with his shirt open, his hands fumbling with his breeches as he pulled them up. “I cannot find my boots, and I—” He came to a grinding halt when he saw Lady Langham standing there.

“I am eagerly awaiting that explanation, Your Grace,” she said. She crossed her arms and looked between the three of them, a smirk working up the side of her face. “Let me see how you spin this!”

Selina’s heart raced as she assessed the situation. Caught being carried by the Duke. Still wearing a nightgown and looking as if she had only just woken up. The Duke’s half-naked brother coming out of the bedroom, stunned into silence as he realized what was happening.

Oh no... Please, God, no.

“Well!” the Dowager Viscountess snapped.

“My brother and your daughter...” The Duke’s body stiffened, and his jaw set determinedly. “There has been a slight misunderstanding, I am afraid. But they assured me that nothing untoward happened.”

“I will tell you what happened! Your brother seduced my daughter! Got her good and drunk and lured her into his room?—”

“That’s a lie!” Lord Edmund cried.

“Quiet!” the Duke snarled.

“He speaks the truth,” Selina implored. “Mother, please, this is not...” she trailed off as she realized how futile her argument was, especially considering the fact that she was still in the Duke’s arms.

“This is an outrage!” her mother exclaimed. “Your Grace, what do you have to say about this?!”

The Duke sucked air through his teeth, and despite the calamity of the situation, Selina was surprised at how calm he was—his heart rate was slow, and his chest rose and fell steadily.

“My brother has erred,” he relented. “And as far as I can see, there is but one solution.”

“I am listening.”

The Duke turned to his brother and shook his head in disappointment. “Lady Langham, I propose that my brother marry your daughter without delay.”

“What?” Selina tried to wriggle free, although she doubted the Duke so much as felt it. “Mother, no! Do not listen?—”

“I accept,” Lady Langham said quickly.

“What? Brother, no!” Lord Edmund cried. “I must protest?—”

“You will do no such thing!” the Duke snapped before fixing his attention back on the Dowager Viscountess. “There is to be a ball tonight, yes?”

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“Yes,” she confirmed. “One I was expecting the both of you to attend.”

“Attend we will,” the Duke said. He turned back and eyed his brother warningly, before once again looking at the Dowager Viscountess. “At which point Lord Edmund will make the necessary announcement. If that is agreeable with you.”

“Mother!” Selina cried in protest as the reality of the situation slowly sank in... and slipped away.

“Very agreeable.” Her mother nodded. “Tonight, it shall be done!”

Lord Edmund groaned.

Selina opened her mouth to protest when she caught sight of the smirk on her mother’s face, the way her eyes flashed with triumph. And that was when she understood what had really happened here today.

This wasn’t an accident at all, but planned! It seemed that Selina’s eagerness to find a husband paled in comparison to her mother’s.

## Chapter Two

“Mother, how could you!” Selina shouted after her mother as she chased her through the house.

Each step rattled her, for despite it being later in the day, the dregs of her hangover still lingered, and when paired with the calamity and horror of what had occurred

today, it was a wonder that Selina could walk at all, let alone give chase.

“I did what was right,” her mother responded calmly as she strolled down the hallway, apparently none too concerned about her daughter’s hysteria. “And really, dear, with everything that has happened, you should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you! You tricked me! You tricked His Grace and his brother! And the way you did it?—”

“Was necessary!” Lady Langham rounded on Selina quickly. “I thought to include you, dear. I did. But I knew that you would object. You left me no choice.”

“I thought that we had an agreement, Mother? The Season has not yet started, and you allowed me to believe that I would have its entire length to find a husband.”

“And that was the plan,” Lady Langham said simply, showing not an ounce of guilt for her actions. “Truly, I meant it when I said it. But you are three-and-twenty, Selina. If things did not work out the way we hoped this Season, it would be next to impossible for you to find a man of good standing. It was a risk I could not take.”

“And what about me!” Selina cried, her body shaking—part anger, part disbelief, part sickness from the day’s events... and last night’s, for that matter. “I am supposed to marry Lord Edmund without even knowing him? Without having any say whatsoever?!”

Her mother fixed her with an unamused expression, a cold dismissal of her objections. “You had your chance, Selina. You were betrothed to a good man, a duke who was more than either of us could have hoped for. But you ruined that chance, and for that reason, I needed to take matters into my own hands.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Lady Langham held a hand up to silence her daughter. “It is done, and nothing is going to change that. Isn’t that right...” She looked warningly at Selina now, the implication all too clear.

Selina was angry. She was mortified. She was still in disbelief because her mother was many things, but this was a level of conniving yet unseen. But the look her mother fixed her with, as well as its implication, was enough to make her suppress her anger and look away—properly chastised.

My mother is correct in saying that this is all my fault. Mistakes made, actions taken, and consequences now reckoned with.

“You lied to me,” Selina seethed. “You lied to me, and for what? Because you do not trust me.”

“Oh, do not pout, dear,” Lady Langham sighed. “This is about more than marriage, and you know it. You have three sisters to think about—sisters whose chances will considerably improve once you are married to Lord Edmund.”

“They will, regardless of my affairs?—”

“And none of that is to mention your uncle,” Lady Langham cut her off. “Leopold has been a terror since inheriting your father’s title, and I do not need to tell you how cheap the man is! Once you are wed and we have the power of Lord Edmund’s name behind you, he will have no choice but to support us as your father originally wished.”

“Oh, certainly it cannot be that bad!”

“It is worse, dear. Much, much worse.”

The Viscount Langham was the patriarch of their family, an honor inherited after Selina's father had passed away, leaving behind four daughters and not a son to carry on his legacy. As was the way, this gave Leopold full control of their allowances, which she knew he was withholding because he was as miserly as he was repugnant.

Selina frowned. "Surely, Uncle Leopold does not know how bad things are for us? If you were to speak with him?—"

"Ha! What do you think I have been doing?" Lady Langham scoffed. "The man is intent on bankrupting us, dear. Which he will do if we do not action! I had hoped it would not come to this, yet here we are. Desperate times, Selina. And I do meandesperate."

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Selina had no idea things were that bad. Oh sure, she was vaguely aware of her family's financial issues, brought about by the death of her father. But she had not known they were so serious. And she had certainly not known that her family's entire future rested on her shoulders.

"I am sorry, Mother," she sighed. "I should not have yelled at you."

"It is alright, dear." Her mother took her hands and squeezed them. "I understand perfectly well why you are upset, and I do not begrudge you. All I ask is that you at least try with Lord Edmund. Yes, his reputation is a tad?—"

"Grotesque."

Lady Langham chuckled. "That is just because he has not met the right woman yet. And if I know one thing about my daughter, there is hardly a man who can resist her charm. Win him over, Selina. Make him realize how lucky he is to have you as his wife, and I promise that if you do that, your marriage will not only be strong but also happy." She smiled softly, her eyes twinkling as if holding back tears.

"I will, Mother," Selina said, squeezing her mother's hands back and returning her smile. "I promise."

Although Selina could not feel any excitement at the prospect of marrying Lord Edmund, she realized now that she had no real choice. Worse, too, that, unlike the last time she was betrothed, she would have no choice but to proceed with this marriage.

For her family, if nothing else.

Oh yes, Selina had been engaged once before. It was last Season when she had been engaged to the Duke of Thorne—an engagement she had not wanted, for the Duke was said to be a cold and cruel man incapable of love.

She had wanted a love match—ever since she was a little girl, that was all she had wished for. Sensing such a thing would not occur between herself and the Duke of Thorne, she had used trickery to end the engagement, orchestrating a scandal involving the Duke and her cousin. This saw the Duke marry her cousin instead, thus allowing her to escape the betrothal so that she might have a chance to marry the man she wanted, not the one foisted on her.

The irony was bitter to swallow, and if Selina was not feeling so positively crestfallen, she might have even seen the humor in it.

Her only hope was that the man she had met this morning was not the same who would share her bed for the rest of her life. Surely, there was more to Lord Edmund than what the rumors said?

Something was wrong. And for once, it was not Selina's fault.

The ball was in full swing, and Selina was desperate not to appear as if her world was about to end. She smiled as she wandered. She laughed as people joked. She feigned excitement the best she could, all the while wondering to herself what would happen when she was forced to speak with Lord Edmund for the first real time.

Lord Edmund, however, was nowhere to be found.

The Duke had arrived late at the ball, and once he had, he asked to have a word with Lady Langham. Selina had seen it happen from across the ballroom, but caught up in

conversation with her sisters, she was unable to excuse herself in time to follow them.

The Duke and her mother had disappeared for five minutes, and it did not escape her notice that while the Duke was here, his brother was not. In that, Selina allowed herself to feel hope. She dared to dream. She even hurried out of the house, found the carriage that the Duke had arrived in, and confirmed that it was empty.

Lord Edmund... Where is he?

When she returned to the ballroom, she found the Duke standing in the middle of the ballroom, trying to capture the room's attention. Lady Langham stood beside him, and when she saw Selina, she beckoned her over.

"There you are!" Lady Langham grabbed her by the arm and pulled her beside her.

"Where did you go?"

"What is going on, Mother?" Selina asked, tempering her excitement. "Where is Lord Edmund?"

"Do not worry yourself with such things."

"He is not here," Selina noted, still doing her best to refrain from sounding relieved.

"Where is he? What has?—"

"I said, do not worry." Her mother squeezed her hand warningly. "His Grace is about to speak, and all your questions will be answered."

The Duke stood tall and firm as he patiently waited for the chatter to die down. Selina had forgotten just how powerful the man's presence was. The scars were one thing, and it did not escape her notice that a few people were looking at them and gasping. But it was his stature that made the murmurs die down quickly, his steely gaze which

he swept over the room and fixed on the few who were a bit too slow to stop chattering.

“I wish to make an announcement,” he began, his voice deep like the rumble of thunder. “The reason why Lady Langham is hosting us at her estate this week might not have been spoken about openly, but I am sure that many of you have guessed the reason. Now, it is my pleasure to reveal that reason.”

Selina frowned as she listened. And that frown deepened as she noticed the resigned look on the Duke’s face. He did not seem eager or excited, nor did he seem upset.

Again, Lord Edmund was not here. But the way the Duke spoke suggested that this marriage was still going ahead. Only, if that was the case...

“Oh no...” Selina gasped as realization dawned on her.

“It brings me great pleasure to announce that I have asked for Miss Selina Gouldsmith’s hand in marriage and that she has graciously accepted. We are to be wed!”

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The room seemed to spin around Selina as the announcement struck home. Those around them erupted in applause and cheers, but she barely heard it. Hands grabbed at her and pulled her into tight hugs. Kisses on cheeks. Smiles and words of congratulations—a blur, it was, for Selina felt detached from her body, as if she was floating and watching from above.

This cannot be happening. I must have misheard. A mistake! This must be a mistake!

The next ten minutes passed quickly as Selina was passed around the room like a delicious entrée that everyone wished to sample before there was nothing left. Lady Langham stayed by her side, speaking for her, blissfully unaware of how distraught her daughter was.

And as this was happening, Selina watched the Duke closely, the way he shook hands with those who approached him. The way he nodded his head and accepted congratulations without a hint of disappointment. Oh sure, he was not smiling or laughing, but that was not his way.

What she noticed most was, for how shattered her reality was, he seemed completely unaffected!

When he strode out of the room, heading in the direction of the washroom down the hall, Selina followed him. She did not remember saying anything to her mother, instead pulling away and charging after the man set to ruin her life.

What she planned on saying to him, she had no idea. But she was certain something would come to mind once they were alone—a moment that came once she rounded

the corner into the empty hallway.

“What do you think you are doing!” she exclaimed in anger, the first words she could remember speaking since the announcement. Not the most elegant turn-of-phrase, but it was a start.

The Duke stopped walking and turned around, saw Selina coming for him, and frowned as if surprised that she was there. Or perhaps he was surprised that she was upset? This lack of empathy, however, only angered her further.

“Miss Gouldsmith, what are you?—”

“I said, what do you think you are doing?!” she snarled as she marched toward him. “How dare you do this!”

At that moment, with how enraged and betrayed she was feeling, she thought she might just charge at him like a bull flying out of the gates.

The Duke did not balk, nor did he move so much as an inch. And as she came closer, his size and breadth seemed to rear up like a mountain springing from the ground, and her temper withered as she was forced to stop before running headfirst into him.

“Will you please calm down,” he said to her, ironically not looking nearly so calm himself.

She could see the corner of his lips twitching and his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. While Selina shook from anger, he appeared at pains to keep himself from exploding.

“Let us discuss this rationally.”

“Rationally, he says!” She threw her hands in the air. “There is nothing rational about this! Your brother, where is he?!”

“He has left.”

“Left? What does that mean?”

“It means that he ran. Rather than marrying you, he chose to flee. With no other choice, I have decided to marry you in his stead.”

“You decided!”

“Yes.”

“What of me? What of what I want!”

“That is irrelevant,” he said in a dispassionate tone. “After what occurred this morning, someone had to marry you. We could not risk letting word get out?—”

“Nobody knows!” she cut him off angrily. The Duke stiffened, likely not used to being spoken over like that. “My mother was the only one who saw what happened, and if you had requested it, surely she would have seen reason.”

“I am afraid that was not an option.”

“It is! If you had just told my mother—stood up to her!” she shouted in his face, caring not for the way his lip twitched. “But no, you... you are a coward! You let my mother walk all over you.”

“Your mother had nothing to do with this.” A growl rumbled in his chest, and she could see the fire in his eyes. “This was about my brother and his reputation. If I

canceled the betrothal completely, the ton would have found out. Our family name was at stake here, and you should know there is nothing I would not do to protect it.”

“Ha! If you are so concerned about your family name, perhaps it is your brother whom you should be attempting to control better, not me. I know of his reputation. I know the scoundrel that he is, the rake, the?—”

It happened quickly.

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The Duke, fed up with the way he was being treated, took her by the arms, lifted her off her feet, and swung her about until he had her pressed against the wall. He let her go then, careful not to hurt her, but he stayed standing over her, his hulking frame cutting her off so that she could see nothing but his hideous face.

“Let us be clear,” he hissed. “This marriage is not my doing. I do not want this any more than you, but unlike you, I can see reason and understand that duty is what matters now. What we want is secondary. Is that understood?”

Selina stood frozen, terror cascading over her body. She felt like prey cornered by a ravenous predator—one wrong move would surely be the end of her.

She tried to meet his eyes in an effort to show some bravery. But she saw his scars, the fire in his gaze, and she looked away. All the while, her body trembled.

“No, no.” His hand snatched her face, and he forced her to look right at him, right into his eyes. “Do not cower, Miss Gouldsmith. I know that is not who you are.”

“I...” Her voice trembled as she looked into his eyes, as she held them, and as he held her. His hand was hooked under her chin, his grip strong as he bore down on her.

He wasterrifying.

“This is me,” he said through a clenched jaw. “And you better get used to it. We have no choice.”

“B-But we do,” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper as her entire body

shook with fear at the way he loomed over her. “There is no need to go through with this.”

“This marriage,” he continued, still standing over her—a boulder that she could not move, no matter how hard she tried. “Neither of us wants it, but it is done. And behaving like a child, as you are doing right now, will only worsen what is already a most embarrassing situation.”

Despite the fear, there was something else trickling down Selina’s spine that she could not fathom. The heat radiating from the Duke’s body, his breath, for she could feel its warmth on her skin, made her legs tremble and her heart race... but not in a way that had her wanting to cry or cower.

A tingling sensation began to work its way up her thighs, memories of how she had felt in his arms, the power of the man, the dominance that was his presence. She hated what was happening, but, strangely, a part of her was excited by it.

“Tonight,” he continued, still growling, even if he seemed perfectly calm, “I want you on your best behavior. My brother has already brought shame upon this family, and I will not take such behavior from my future wife. Is that understood?”

She said nothing, refusing to look at him because if she did, her heart rate would spike.

“Answer me,” he barked.

“Y-Yes.”

“Good.” Slowly, he stepped back, but she did not breathe a sigh of relief, still against the wall, still feeling utterly powerless and at his mercy. “And during our wedding—for it will happen soon—I want no surprises. We will marry, and there is

nothing either of us can do to stop it.”

“Y-Yes,” she stammered again. “I understand.”

He stepped back further, exhaled, and then straightened. “This was regrettable, Miss Gouldsmith. I would ask that you do not force such an action from me again.” And then, without another word, he turned and strode back down the hallway.

Selina gasped the moment she was alone—a deep breath, for she realized that she had been holding it.

She thought to feel anger, for that was rational. She thought to feel fear, for now she saw the true nature of the beast she was set to marry. But for reasons that she could not fathom, her mind went to the sensation of helplessness and powerlessness and vulnerability she had felt just now, how utterly in the Duke’s thrall she had been. And dammit... it wasn’t nearly as bad as it should have been.

What was that?

It excited her. Far more than it would have had it been Lord Edmund, that was for sure.

### Chapter Three

The wedding was a small and frightfully quick affair. Organized, acted upon, and then over with in what felt like the blink of an eye.

And by the time Selina found herself at the wedding breakfast, sitting with her sisters, the reality of her new life still felt strange and alien to her, such that it was hard to truly fathom everything that had happened these past two weeks... and what was yet to come.

“He is not as bad-looking as one might think,” Louisa noted in a way that suggested she was struggling to speak the words. She was younger than Selina by four years, and she sat on her right. “Beastly, but in a rugged way.”

“I was thinking the same,” Isabella, Louisa’s twin, said airily. She sat on Selina’s left. “From the left side, especially. And he certainly is big.”

“Do we know what caused the scars?” Diana asked. She was the youngest of the four, barely turned sixteen.

“Does it matter?” Louisa widened her eyes at her younger sister, a warning not to bring up such a touchy subject. “I do not think it does. They are hardly even noticeable. Again, from the right angle.”

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“If anything, you want a man who is not perfect,” Isabella picked up. “That means there is little chance of other women trying to steal his attention.”

“But there are so many scars,” Diana pointed out as she bit her lip. “I cannot look at him without wincing.”

“Diana!” Louisa snapped. “Now is not the time!”

“I did not mean anything by it,” Diana apologized. “I was just curious.”

“Well, be curious somewhere else,” Louisa snapped. “His Grace is a most...” She hesitated, as if the next words would pain her. “He is a most handsome groom, and I would be remiss if I did not tell you, Selina, how jealous I am.”

“As am I,” Isabella agreed, although she did not sound as if she meant it. “So very jealous. I hope that Mother finds someone similar for me.”

“And Mother certainly is pleased with him,” Diana added in a bid to be a part of the conversation, and hopefully not put her foot in her mouth. “That must count for something?”

“Diana...” Louisa groaned.

“What?”

“Are you incapable of saying the right thing?” Louisa said. “I swear, girl, you were dropped on your head as a baby.”

“I was not!”

“You were,” Isabella affirmed. “And I know it because I was the one who dropped you.”

“You did not!”

“I was there,” Louisa added, trying her best not to burst into laughter. “And for good measure, I then picked you up and dropped you a second time.”

The twin sisters burst into a fit of giggles as Diana screwed up her face and glared at them. She was used to being the butt of their jokes, and now that Selina was going to move out, the teasing would only grow worse.

Times were that Selina might have told them to stop teasing their sister, for she had always been protective of Diana. But with everything going on today, not to mention these past two weeks, she could not bring herself to care one bit. Her life was a misery of the highest order, and oh what she would not give to trade lives with Diana, or Louisa, or Isabella or... or... or anyone, to be perfectly honest.

Even the help’s lives, for how simple they are, might be an improvement.

Two weeks could not make Selina change her feelings about this marriage. If anything, the fourteen days that had passed since that brief exchange in the hallway had only made things worse.

She had not spoken a single word to the Duke in that time.

She had not heard from him.

She had not been given any indication that he cared for her or their impending

marriage one little bit. In fact, based on their single exchange, it seemed that he wanted as little to do with this marriage as she did and, by extension, as little to do with her.

There he stood, across the room, seeming to purposefully ignore her as he spoke with people she did not know or care to know. She felt like an imposition at her own wedding, in the way and utterly inconsequential. Quite a way to feel on one's wedding day.

“Are you going to speak with him anytime soon?” Louisa asked suddenly.

“What was that?” Selina snapped, not meaning to but unable to control herself.

Louisa reared back, but Isabella stepped in. “She is right, Selina. You cannot sit here pouting all day.”

“I am doing no such thing.”

“Sulking then—and do not say otherwise, for that is exactly what you are doing.”

“It is not on me to speak with my own husband,” Selia said stubbornly. “If he has anything to say, he knows where I am.” She crossed her arms and pursed her lips.

It looked as if she had spoken too soon, for her husband turned around suddenly and started toward her. The sight of him coming her way had her heart racing, nerves it felt like—trepidation because she suddenly remembered how she had felt the last time they had spoken.

He was just so big... and scary... and powerful. The room seemed to move around him as if he were the center of gravity. And as she watched him approach, she met his eyes and he held her stare. It was not love she saw in his eyes, however, but anger.

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“Your Grace.” Isabella stood up quickly as he reached them. “It is wonderful to meet you, finally.”

“Your Grace,” Louisa echoed, also standing. “We have heard so much about you.”

He eyed them dismissively, barely acknowledging them, before turning his attention back to Selina. “We are leaving soon,” he announced gruffly. “Best that you say your goodbyes now.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I said we are leaving soon.”

“I heard you,” Selina replied. “But it is so early. There is no need to leave just yet.”

His expression darkened. “That is for me to decide. My estate is some distance from here, so we will have to stop at an inn for the night. I do not wish to arrive there after dusk. So again...” He raised an eyebrow in warning—the left eyebrow, for the right one was badly scarred. “Say your goodbyes, but do it quickly. I do not wish to be late.”

And then, without another word, he turned and walked away.

If there had ever been a chance that Selina might have felt even a tinge of hope for this marriage, the barest chance that it had potential... it was dashed in that instant.

As a girl, when Selina had pictured her future husband, she had dreamed of a love

match. Now, she would have settled for something as simple as liking him.

“Well, that was certainly rude,” Isabella huffed as she sat back down.

“He’s not exactly Mr. Personality, is he?” Louisa remarked.

“You have no idea,” Selina muttered bitterly.

The day thus came to a close earlier than she had expected, her new life set to start the moment she left her home for the last time. She said goodbye to her sisters right there before seeking out her mother, whose eyes brimmed with tears.

“I could not be happier for how this has turned out,” Lady Langham said as she hugged her. “I am so proud of you, dear, for everything.”

A kiss on each cheek, a commitment to pretending that this was something they both wanted. And before Selina knew it, she was walking across the driveway, toward the carriage, beside which her husband stood waiting. He did not smile. He did not look pleased to see her. Resigned, was the sense that she got.

The way he looks at me, one would think that I was the one who forced this marriage on him!

“Husband,” she uttered as she reached the carriage.

He cleared his throat but still said nothing, waving her inside. She curled her lip purposefully at him and then, with nothing else for it, she climbed into the carriage and said goodbye to her old life once and for all.

The silence that filled the carriage was as tense as it was awkward. It had been nearly an hour since Selina and her husband had climbed inside and begun the long journey

north, and during that time, not so much as a word had been spoken.

Is this what I am to expect for my future, from now until the day that I die? Silence?

It seemed, from the way her husband was behaving, that this would indeed be the case.

He sat across from her, his large body turned to face the window. His stare was purposeful, his expression hardened, and the look in his eyes suggested that he would rather be running beside the carriage than stuck inside with her.

There was an anger inside him. Selina could sense it. And while that scared her a little—for how could it not?—she told herself that fear was not an emotion she could live with for the rest of her days. They were married now, this was her life. It might not be the love match she had always wanted, but that did not mean the two had to hate one another.

And so, wishing to put the past behind them and perhaps attempt some sense of congeniality, she dared to break the silence.

“Exactly how far away is this estate of yours?” Selina asked, for she knew not what else to say.

“Some distance,” he replied carefully, not so much as bothering to look at her.

“Oh, well, thank you for the clarification.”

His jaw clenched, and she saw him take a deep breath. “Northwick Estate... it is just south of Manchester, which means that we will not arrive until tomorrow morning.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “That is farther than I thought.” The implication hit her, and she

could not help but sink down in her seat. “Much farther...”

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That far? Completely removed from my life and everything that I know. Such a distance that I will be as good as trapped.

“It is rather lovely up there,” he added cautiously, as if he sensed her mood and wanted to reassure her. “This time of year, especially. I am sure you will grow to love it.”

She frowned. “Yes, perhaps you are right.”

Silence fell between them again. Only this time, it was not quite so tense.

Their interaction, although brief, surprised Selina because it almost sounded as if Benedict was trying to placate her. As if he had sensed her disappointment and wished to reassure her that things would not be so bad as they sounded.

Is it possible that he feels sorry for me?

A laughable concept, as he did not seem the type. Although...

Selina dared to study him. He was still facing the window, but he was not as turned toward it as he had been. And his eyes, every few moments, would flick to her as if trying to get a better look at the woman who was now his wife. He was still rugged. He was still tense. But the anger had faded... if only slightly.

Selina watched him closely. This time, she tried to see through the fear, past the monster that her husband seemed so intent on embodying. His frame was large. His face was scarred horribly. But his eyes... dark eyes... there was a softness behind

them, she was sure of it. Pain, perhaps? As if the true him was trapped inside the monster and wished for a way out.

She almost laughed at that. Surely, she was just being hopeful.

“It is my thought that since I’ll be living far away from my family, it might be nice if my sisters come and visit sometime soon,” she ventured, testing the waters.

Benedict’s head snapped around—he was surprised by the turn the conversation had taken. “Excuse me?”

“My sisters,” she repeated. “If the country is as lovely as you say, then I am sure they would love nothing more than to?—”

“That is not an option,” he said harshly.

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

He bit his tongue and took a slow breath. “My meaning is, I am not one to ordinarily receive guests. They would not be comfortable.”

She snorted. “I am sure they will be. My sisters are not dainty. A bed is all they require, some food when they are feeling hungry, and a washroom to clean themselves in the morning. Surely, this vast estate of yours has all of?—”

“I said no!” he snapped, which had Selina recoiling as if struck. So much for her belief that there might be a softer side to the beast. “What I meant to say is that in time, perhaps your sisters may visit?—”

“In time?” she cut him off, feeling angry now because while she had tried her best to extend some sort of olive branch, he appeared dismissive of it, not caring for her

needs at all! “What does that mean?”

The corner of his lips twitched. “This marriage has been a surprise to more than you and I. Half the ton is talking about it, and although we have managed to avoid a scandal, I have no doubt that there are more than a few who are hoping to unearth one.”

“And this has to do with my sisters visiting because...?”

“In time, they will be allowed to visit.” He looked warningly at her. “But only when I am certain that the excitement this marriage has caused has calmed down significantly.”

“Allowed?” Selina asked angrily.

“Yes...” Benedict uttered, sensing a trap. “When the timing is right, I will allow you to invite them over.”

“So, I am to be your prisoner. Is that it?”

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“This marriage of ours,” she began with a flutter of her eyelashes and a softening of her voice. “Will I need to ask permission when I wish to bathe in the morning also?”

He frowned as if he did not understand her. “What? No. Of course not.”

“How about when I break my fast in the morning? Or sup in the evening?”

“Do not be ridiculous.”

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“And when I wish to go outside? Shall I ask your permission for each book I wish to read?”

The change in his expression told her that he finally understood what she was doing—mocking him. His gaze hardened, and he bared his teeth like a wolf stalking its prey. But Selina, feeling fed up, did not care.

“Stop that,” he commanded.

“Perhaps you would like the final say over what I wear each day too,” she continued, ignoring his words. “I would hate for you to be embarrassed by me if we were seen in public together.”

“I said, stop that.”

“Not that we will be seen in public, so there is no need to worry. I wonder if you will also chain me to the wall at night. May I request a collar rather than manacles? I have such weak wrists, and I fear they may hurt me.”

“Selina...” The corner of his lips twitched again, and his leg began to bounce. “You are being highly ridiculous. I was simply expressing a concern that?”

“That I belong to you, I heard you,” she cut him off. “And I am simply trying to ascertain what I will be allowed to do while under your roof.”

“It is not my roof. It will be our home, and all I wish is for you to be comf?—”

“Your prisoner, I heard you the first time.”

“Enough!” Benedict roared, well and truly at the end of his tether.

Selina’s eyes widened, and she squeaked in shock, pushing her body back against the seat as if the mere force of his expletive was like a gust of wind battering her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly, looking away.

Her heart raced as she felt his glare on her. Her body felt as if it was on fire. Fear seized her as she suddenly remembered the last time she had tested his temper, and how that had ended. In the hallway, on the night of the announcement of their betrothal, his huge body looming over her in a way that suggested he could crush her like a bug if he so wished.

“You are trying to bait me.” He pushed himself to the edge of his seat until he was leaning over her.

“N-No, I swear I am not”

She pressed her body as hard as she could against the cushions, trembling beneath him. And while she did indeed feel the fear build inside her, there was something else. Something that she had felt before but still did not fully understand.

Why does this excite me? It should not. I should wish to scream! And yet...

“You are,” he growled as he bore down on her. “You take pleasure in it.”

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do.” He reached out and stroked the side of her face. His fingers were

rough on her smooth skin.

She gasped at his touch, and her heart leaped into her throat. Looking up, she met his eyes, and when she saw the rage in them, she gasped again. Only this time, she did not look away. She held his stare, determined not to give in... because she wanted to see what would happen if she pushed.

“You are not my prisoner,” he said in a deep whisper, almost a growl. “But you will treat me with respect. Is that understood?”

“And if I do not?” she asked, her eyes flashing defiantly.

Those words had come from nowhere, but she knew right away they were the right ones. The way the Duke balked, the way he then sneered and growled as if to reassert dominance... Oh, the way it had her legs trembling was a sensation she very much enjoyed.

“Do not push me,” he warned as he leaned even closer. “You will not like it.”

He was on top of her, his face a mere inch away. She could feel his breath on her lips. She could literally feel his heartbeat, as if it was her own. And as he glared at her, his eyes flicked to her lips...

“I am not your prisoner,” she murmured. “I am your wife. Although I wish I was not even that.”

“That makes two of us.”

They stared at one another in challenge. Like a wolf coming upon a rabbit in the wild, Benedict had his prey trapped beneath him. But this rabbit wasn't going to go quietly, and she made sure that he knew it.

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His eyes lingered on her lips, and the hunger she saw in them had her wanting to lean forward, had her hands itching to reach out and grab him and pull him to her... But he was the predator, and she was the prey, and she knew that the next move was his to make.

Their anger brought out a burning passion in both of them. That was what Selina was starting to realize. Oh, she might hate him, and he might hate her, but it was in that hate, that antipathy, that they had found something else.

And that something else... it was felt in their stare... it was felt in the way their bodies shook... it was felt in the way their moist lips inched closer and closer until Selina was forced to hold her breath because she knew exactly what was about to—

The carriage came to a sudden halt, sending Benedict tumbling back onto his seat.

“We’re here!” the footman called from the driver’s seat. “Your Grace! We have arrived!”

And just like that, the tension was broken, and not a moment too soon. Although seeing as they were staying at an inn for the night, in the middle of nowhere, on their wedding night, Selina got the distinct impression that what had started just now in the carriage was a long way from being over.

It promised to be a very long night, indeed.

Chapter Four

“This will be our room for the night,” the Duke said with a simple hand gesture. “I hope it will suffice.”

Selina hesitated as she looked the room over, registering Benedict’s words and what they meant. Her gaze shifted from the modestly sized room to her husband, who stood by the open door.

“Our room?”

“That is what I said.”

“I did not think—I mean, I expected that we might...” She felt herself flush. “I assumed that we would be sleeping separately.”

Benedict studied her, his expression vacillating between amusement and confusion. No doubt he could see how uncomfortable she was. “That would not be proper. Although this marriage is far from normal, certain expectations come with it.”

She swallowed, her mind now racing... the implication of that word. “Expectations?”

“I expressed earlier my desire to avoid a scandal or to give anyone a reason to gossip about our marriage beyond the usual. If it was found out that we did not share a room on our wedding night, I do not doubt that word would spread, and this marriage would be for naught.”

“Oh...” Still, her body ran hot, and she could feel the color reaching her face. “So, we are just to share the room? That is what you meant?”

“What else would I mean?”

Was he toying with her? Was he purposefully trying to make her feel

uncomfortable?He must be. No doubt Benedict was aware of the implication of sharing a room, and yet he was either too slow to pick up her meaning or he was having far too much fun with it.

“Nothing,” she said dismissively. “I am just making sure.”

They stood in the doorway, and she could feel his eyes on her. Studying her. Watching her closely. He was just so big, his presence making the room beyond look miniature by comparison. And as he stood over her, she could not help but remember that moment they had just shared in the carriage.

It should have terrified her. It should have made her demand a room of her own. But her eyes flicked to the bed, and she wondered how it would feel if those powerful arms of his lifted her, tossed her onto the mattress, and then had their way with her.

“I have arranged supper,” he continued as if he could not see how undone she had become. “It will be served shortly downstairs.” He turned to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“To see to its preparation,” he replied as if it was obvious. “And to confirm that we will have a separate room to dine in. It would be inappropriate if we were forced to dine with the other customers.”

“R-Right. Yes. I will be down short—” She did not even have time to finish what she was saying before he strode away.

Selina watched him go, struggling to reckon with how she felt about him.

On the one hand, she was committed to her desire to hate him, because certainly he had earned it. Rude, temperamental, hostile—there was nothing good about him, and

it only confirmed how horrid this marriage promised to be.

Yet, on the other hand, she felt a tingling in her thighs that worked its way up her body whenever she chose to remember that moment in the carriage. It should have terrified her. It should have made her scream for help. But for reasons that she could not fathom, she wanted to experience it again.

A quick glance at their room for the night, the knowledge that they would be sharing a bed, and Selina got the sense that she might experience it again sooner rather than later. And when that thought struck her, she worked to suppress her smile as she hurried to ready herself for supper.

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Benedict was sure not to engage his new wife as they ate their supper. Confined to a small dining room toward the back of the inn, it was just the two of them at a round table. Raucous noise from the common room beyond drifted through the closed doors, breaking the silence somewhat, but nowhere near enough to completely undo the tension that lingered like a thick smog.

I must be careful. The way I behaved earlier in the carriage cannot happen again. No matter what.

Most of all, he had to be wary of his wife's abrasive personality and hot temper. She seemed specifically designed to frustrate him, and if he allowed her to, there was no telling what might happen.

"This is good," she said in an effort to break the silence.

Their meal was barley pumpkin soup and freshly baked bread—a simple fare, to say the least.

"It is adequate," he agreed without looking at her. He was desperate not to so much as glance in her direction.

"I did not realize how hungry I was." She chuckled as she slurped her soup. "I have half a mind to dunk my entire head in the bowl."

"I would ask that you do not," he said, still not looking at her.

"I was only joking..." she murmured, more to herself.

To this, Benedict gave no answer. He was thinking of the night ahead, when the two would be forced to share a bed. If this was a proper marriage, one that he wished for, it would be his right to take his wife as a husband ought to on their wedding night.

But there was nothing proper about this marriage. In fact, Benedict had resigned himself not to sleep with his wife at all. She did not want him, and this did not surprise him one little bit. So, if he did bed her, it would be forced, taken not given, and the thought of that sickened him.

People assumed Benedict was a monster. The scars that covered the right side of his face implied as much. And pair that with his short temper, it was no wonder that his wife was already terrified of him. That she hated him. Thus, he was determined to prove her wrong.

That is if she does not bait me. If she does do... No! She already thinks that I am some sort of animal, trapping her in a marriage she does not desire. Do not give her a reason to confirm it as true.

Benedict could not help but remember what had just happened between them in the carriage. The way she had provoked him, the way she had tested his temper. She must have heard the things people said about him, and for reasons he could not fathom, she seemed determined to find out their truth.

That was what scared Benedict the most, and that was the reason he was so careful not to engage her. While he was not a monster, he had a temper of fire and brimstone, and if he didn't keep it in check... he shuddered to think what he might do.

"It is tomorrow morning that we will arrive?" his wife asked.

"That is right."

“So, if I was so inclined, I would be able to travel back to London within a day?” She lifted a spoonful of soup to her lips, slurping it purposefully. “If I was inclined.”

“And why would you be?”

“No reason,” she said, and he sensed the sarcasm in her voice. “Just making conversation.”

Benedict had not wanted this marriage. If he had his way, he would not have proceeded with it. But his brother’s actions had forced his hand, and rather than risk sullyng his good name and adding muck to his brother’s reputation, he had agreed to marry Selina.

But this was not to be a traditional marriage. Benedict could not dare consider such a thing. What he wanted, what he prayed for, was that once they arrived back at his estate, he could avoid her as often as possible, to such a degree that he might be able to pretend she did not exist.

For her own safety, as well as his...

He dared to look at her, feeling a tightness in his chest because he remembered once more what had just happened in the carriage. She was far too beautiful for his liking, far too gorgeous, and hard to look away from. His heart beat furiously as his eyes lingered on her plump lips then traced the column of her throat, which had him salivating.

Suddenly, he became aware of Selina looking at him. She wore a knowing smirk, and his eyes widened before he quickly looked away.

He gritted his teeth and swallowed a spoonful of soup. Self-control. Calmness. Do not give in to temptation. He repeated that mantra in his head as he and his wife ate a

very awkward, very silent supper together.

The first of many, Benedict assumed. A marriage that he did not want and was now forced to endure, for better or for worse.

Selina gasped when she walked into the bedroom.

She had changed in the changing room next door, slipping into a nightgown that was made from thin linen—nothing too scandalous, but she felt naked in it. Her heart had beat furiously as she braced herself to enter the room, where she knew her husband was waiting, still not entirely sure what would come from that night.

The light was dim—a single lantern sitting beside the bed provided the only illumination, leaving the room mostly in darkness. His back was to her, and he wore nothing but a pair of breeches. It was this sight that had her gasping.

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The scars on his face ran down the entirety of his back, covering it in a way that had his skin looking like worn leather, beaten and carved—hideous, to say the least. But he was so broad-shouldered and muscular that somehow it did not make him appear disfigured. If anything, it only added to his rugged charm.

“What is it?” He looked over his shoulder and scowled.

“N-Nothing,” she said, her voice dropping as she looked away.

He nodded in approval and then climbed into bed. She stayed by the door a moment longer, hesitating because she still did not know what she wanted from him. Or most importantly, what he wanted from her.

“Are you coming to bed?” his voice spoke through the darkness.

“Oh. Sorry. Yes.” She closed the door and crossed the room. When she reached the bed, she hesitated again.

He slept on the opposite side, his back already turned to her. Body curled in on itself, he gave no indication that once she climbed in, he might take her.

Good. He realizes that I do not want anything to do with him.

Easy words to say. Harder words to believe.

She carefully climbed into bed, keeping to her side as she slipped under the blankets. A solid foot separated the two of them, and in the darkness, all she could make out

was his hulking mass.

For a moment, she lay there, half expecting him to turn to her suddenly and take her. She braced herself, ready to push him away if he dared to try...

Only, he did no such thing. His breathing was slow and steady, not indicating that he meant to move. This was, or should have been, a relief, but why did it not feel that way?

Feeling frustrated, and a little uncomfortable, she shifted in bed as if to get his attention. Still, she could not find comfort, so she pulled up the blankets, stretched out her legs, and shifted again by turning her back on him. With her back to him, she felt exposed and unaware, a sense that she needed to keep her eyes on him all the time.

She turned back around and frowned to see that he had not moved an inch.

Her pillow felt stiff, so she went on one elbow and fluffed it, fell back down, and huffed because she was now running warm. Her eyes flicked to Benedict's back again, and she frowned at his lack of movement. She told herself it was good, only to kick out her legs because the blanket felt suffocating?—

“Will you please stop fidgeting?” Benedict growled suddenly. “I am trying to sleep.”

“Oh.” Her eyes went wide, and she braced for him to turn to her. “I thought you were asleep already.”

“How could I be, with you moving like a cat in a potato sack?”

“I am just trying to make myself comfortable. I did not know I was disturbing your precious slumber so.” She saw him stiffen at the jibe, and her heart began to race.

“I am beginning to regret not asking for separate rooms.”

“As am I.”

He chuckled deeply, and she could not help but smile.

She waited for him to say something, but silence followed his short bout of laughter. She frowned to herself, feeling a need to speak because as strange as it was, this felt like the first civil conversation they’d ever had.

“I suppose that once we arrive at your estate, we will have separate rooms?”

He paused before responding, and Selina felt herself begin to sweat. “Would that please you?”

“Oh.” Her heart raced as she searched for an answer... the right answer, even if she did not know what that might be. “I am not sure—I mean, we are expected to share a room. Yes?”

“So, you wish to share a room with me.”

“Only if it is necessary,” she said quickly. “I do not want to presume anything—I mean, we can discuss it later.”

“As you wish.”

Silence again. By now, Selina’s heart was racing, her mind was whirring, and she knew that sleep would be impossible. Unable to stop thinking about what was just said, she replayed it over in her mind, wondering what she had meant. And what he had meant.

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Did he want to share a room with her? Was he pleased that she had implied as much? And if so, why is he still turned away from her? If he wanted her as his wife, surely he should turn around and take her?

“I suppose that it might be best if we do,” she added eventually. “At least at first, so that if we have visitors?—”

“You are not going to stop talking, are you?”

She chuckled softly. “I am having trouble sleeping.”

“As am I.”

“Sorry about that,” she murmured. “But I have a habit of talking when nervous, and I do not do well with long silences. Which I suppose paints quite the picture for—oh!”

The Duke shifted suddenly. His lumbering frame lifted itself, turned, and before she knew it, he was facing her. What was more, he had moved closer, half a foot away at most. It was still too dark to make out his face clearly, but through the shadows, she could see his eyes sparkling as he watched her.

She inhaled sharply, suppressing the desire to shift closer. Really, she assumed that he had turned to silence her, doing as he had done before and bearing down on her in a demonstration of raw aggression and power.

“You are not going to stop talking, are you?” he growled.

“I—would that be such a bad thing?” she asked warily, hopefully, trying to meet his eyes through the darkness.

“I am trying to sleep. As should you be.”

“I am doing my best.”

“Do better.”

Her heart rate spiked. That deep, commanding growl struck her right in the chest, and she braced herself, certain that the monster was going to roar. After everything she had seen and heard of her husband, the fact that he had taken this long was what surprised her the most.

Only... nothing.

She narrowed her eyes as she tried to see him through the darkness, her stomach sinking when she realized that his eyes were closed. He was sleeping! At least he was trying to.

Selina thought to speak again, a final attempt to provoke his anger, but a voice in the back of her head curbed that notion. She listened carefully, hearing him snoring softly, and despite her deepest, darkest desires, she did not want to anger him. Only annoy him, as if that was the key to unlocking his lust. And her own, for that matter.

She frowned as she gently shifted, trying again to get comfortable. Confusion reigned, for she knew that being bedded by the Duke was the last thing she should want, while also unable to heed that notion because dammit if she wasn't feeling things that she never had before.

Her husband... he was not who she had thought him to be. Nor was she, for that

matter. One day in and already this marriage was proving revealing in ways previously thought unimaginable.

What might tomorrow bring? That was as terrifying as it was exciting.

## Chapter Five

Benedict woke up in a state of comfort that he did not think possible. The kind that he never wanted to be pulled from. Eyes closed, the sun gently warming his face, it took him a moment to understand why it was that he felt so at peace with the world...

His eyes shot open when he realized that his arm was wrapped around Selina as she slept. Frozen in shock, he was careful not to move for fear of waking her.

He could feel the rise and fall of her chest as she slept soundly. Her hair was in his face, and its scent was intoxicating. She wore a thin nightgown, and through it, he could feel the soft curves of her body pressed against his own. She wiggled her hips slightly as she slept, her buttocks rubbing against his crotch, and his manhood stiffened.

It would be so easy to take her. Right here. Right now. What is more, I know that she wants it...

Oh, how he wanted it too.

He clenched his jaw as he resisted the urge to turn her over and climb on top. He squeezed his eyes shut and slowed his breathing, knowing that no good could come from it.

She did not want him. How could she? He was a burned beast, an animal, and to her mind, he had kidnapped her and forced her into this marriage.

It was wrong to even consider taking her right here and now, and if he tried, he would just prove her right—that he was an animal with no control, that did not care one bit about her...

Somehow, he pulled back, and the moment he did, she stifled a yawn and stirred.

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“Oh...” She yawned further and shuffled back, her behind nearly grazing his manhood again. “Is it morning already? God, I slept better than I expected.”

Benedict was quick to climb out of bed, fearful of what might happen if he remained there any longer. The urge to climb over her was more than he could bear, forcing him to look away as he rose.

“How did you sleep?” she asked.

“Terribly,” he barked, angry at himself, not her.

“Oh. I am... I am sorry.”

He winced when he heard the hurt in her voice, but he did not dare turn around. Lying in bed as she was, the morning sun shining on her face, her nightgown barely managing to hide the voluptuous body beneath, Benedict did not dare gaze upon her.

“We need to leave soon,” he said instead as he rounded the bed and made for the door. “Do not linger in bed all morning.”

He did not wait to hear her response as he stumbled out of the room, finding safety and peace of mind around the corner and away from his wife. Alone, he pressed himself against the wall and took deep breaths, closing his eyes and focusing on anything but her.

That was too close. Far, far too close.

It was less than an hour later when they found themselves back on the road. As was the case yesterday, Selina sat across from Benedict, who spent the journey facing away from her, ignoring her the best he could. He felt guilty for behaving in such a way but told himself it was for the best.

What would happen when they arrived and were forced to live together? He still was not sure. But for now, dispassion and disinterest were the best he could offer. That, at least, would force him to control himself.

“How much longer until we arrive?” Selina asked suddenly, over an hour into their journey.

“Soon,” Benedict uttered, not looking at her.

“Could you please be more specific?”

He groaned purposefully. “Within the hour. Possibly less.”

“Good.” She shifted nervously. “I am not one for traveling, truth be told. It will be nice when we finally arrive.”

He nodded but said nothing.

Throughout the journey, he had dared cast the occasional glance in her direction. She was dressed simply today, in a yellow petticoat paired with a white chemise and a maroon spencer. Nothing overtly sexual about it, but with her ample curves, it was as if she was trying to tempt him.

Worse than once again, he could feel her watching him. He continued to stare out the window, praying that she would look away.

“Have I done something to offend you?” she asked suddenly.

“Excuse me?” He turned and looked at her.

She raised an eyebrow. “You have barely strung two words together since we left the inn, and while I have long since accepted that you are the strong and silent type, it is beginning to feel personal.”

“I assure you it is not.”

“So, you are not angry with me?”

“Why would I be?”

She shrugged. “Any number of reasons, I imagine. But this marriage seems like a pretty good place to start.”

“I have told you my feelings about this marriage.”

“And I have told you mine. Which is why I think it is rather unfair to hold it against me, as you’re clearly doing.”

Benedict clenched his jaw and took a deep breath. “I am not holding it against you. Far from it.”

“Well, what then?” she huffed. “To be honest, I thought that we were... I do not know, making some progress? If we are to spend the rest of our lives together, it would be nice if we could talk to one another.”

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What could he tell her? That he was avoiding speaking to her because he feared what might happen? That they would inevitably argue, his temper would flare, and then he would lose control? That he did not want such a thing because once that happened, there was no going back? And because she hated him, because she very likely did not want him, when he did take her, it would be against her will?

The beast inside would not stop, and he would prove everyone correct. That was something he simply could not afford.

“I am just tired,” he tried.

“Yes, you said that already,” she snapped. “But even as tired as you must be, surely it is not too much to ask that you treat me not as an imposition, but as your wife.”

They were coming dangerously close to fighting again. Benedict took a calming breath. “I apologize. I do. And while you might think that I blame you for this marriage or am taking it out on you, I assure you that is not the case.”

“Good,” she said. “Because if anyone should experience your wrath, it’s my mother.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh... nothing.”

“Selina,” he growled, not caring this time, “what does that mean?”

She sucked through her teeth. “Only that—and please, promise not to be mad. But

what happened between your brother and I, that was because of my mother.”

“Meaning?” he growled again.

“She was the one who...” She hesitated, grimacing the whole while. “She was the one who conspired to make your brother and I wake up in the same bed. She made sure that we were both drunk and then—I am not sure, to be honest—lured me into his room or vice versa. Ensured that she found us the next morning. This entire marriage was orchestrated by her.”

Benedict had promised himself that he would not get angry. He had done all he could to keep his temper. But promises made and promises kept were two different things, and as Selina’s explanation sank in, he felt that familiar sting of fury piercing through his forced calm.

This marriage wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t a misunderstanding. It wasn’t bad luck! It was forced! Orchestrated! Lady Langham had taken it upon herself to see his brother tricked into marriage, caring not for the lives she might ruin along the way.

She had abused his brother’s reputation! And she had nearly ruined his own!

“Do not blame her!” Selina cried desperately. “My mother is esoteric and a little rash, but she means well. She did not mean to?—”

“She went too far!” Benedict snarled. “The nerve of the woman. And after the way she behaved, as if my brother was some sort of cretin who had snuck into your bed! I ought to have her?—”

“Please!” Selina cried. “She means well!”

“And how eager she was to see me take his place,” he continued, barely able to

control himself now, his body shaking as if he might explode. “She might not have suggested it, but she encouraged it! She implied that if I did not, word about my brother’s actions would spread! Oh...” He bared his teeth. “Your mother?—”

“Made a mistake!”

“For which we are now paying!”

This changed everything! It shone a light on just how unjust this marriage was, how pointless and avoidable it could have been. Before, Benedict had not wanted it but had agreed to it because it had been the right thing to do. Now, he did not want it because it was a trick, a trap, a most loathsome ploy that was beneath even the lowliest of sinners.

“I am so sorry...” Selina was leaning back, her eyes full of fear because she recognized the beast before her only too well. “Truly, I am.”

For once, Benedict’s anger didn’t bring with it the usual bout of amorous desire. Because this time, his anger wasn’t directed at Selina. It was directed at her mother instead.

He did not blame Selina, for she was as much a victim in this as he was. Two people who should have never ended up together now forced to spend the rest of their lives together, their hopes and dreams and desires soundly ignored. Deemed not important.

Benedict had not been certain about this marriage, how it might proceed or what would come out of it. But now he knew that there could never be a future, not when the past was as rotten as it was.

“It is not your fault,” he said, unable to look at Selina as his body shook. “And do not think I hold you responsible.”

“You are angry.”

He chuckled bitterly. “Furious.”

“What... what will you do?”

To this, Benedict had no answer. However, he knew one thing for sure—this marriage could not go on. As to what he meant to do about that? He hadn't a clue.

### Chapter Six

The moment they arrived at Northwick Estate, Benedict bolted out of the carriage as if it was on fire. The staff were standing outside, awaiting his arrival, but he stormed past them and inside without so much as a word.

“Well, that was rude,” Selina muttered to herself as she watched him go. “Not that I can blame him,” she then added, finding it strange that she was so willing to explain away the Duke's temper.

Used to how angry her mother often made her, perhaps this was the one time that she could understand too well why her husband felt the same way.

Look at us, finding common ground.

By the time Selina alighted from the carriage, there was an elderly butler standing there, waiting for her. He was grey in the hair and wrinkled in the face, with a slightly bent back, but he stood as tall as he could, and his smile was kind.

“Welcome, Your Grace,” he greeted her. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance, finally.”

“Thank you,” she said with much relief as he helped her step down from the carriage. “I am sorry about His Grace, I am not entirely sure what has gotten into him.”

The butler chuckled. “Oh, do not let that worry you. I have served His Grace since he was yai tall—” He indicated just below his knees. “And I am more than familiar with his moods. My name is Mr. Harris, and I am the head of staff here at Northwick Estate.”

“Wonderful.”

“Please...” He offered her his arm. “Leave your belongings, for they will be brought up to your room shortly. For now, I believe that a tour is what is needed. This is, after all, your new home, and it will not do for it to feel like anything other than that.”

Selina let out another sigh of relief and gave her first genuine smile in weeks. “That would be perfect, thank you so much.”

“Think nothing of it, Your Grace.”

As horribly as the day had begun, the rest was rather pleasant. Mr. Harris was kind and affable and even funny. He introduced Selina to the staff before leading her through the large manor, where he made sure to guide her through its intricacies and peculiarities. From the dining area to the reading room to the drawing room to the library to the ballroom and everything in between.

The manor was even larger than the one she had grown up in, and she wondered how easy it would be to avoid her husband if she so wished it. Even though at that moment, it felt as if he was avoiding her.

“Tell me, Harris,” she began carefully as they made their way back into the foyer.

She stopped short, looking upon a large portrait of a child who she presumed was the Duke in his younger years. No older than twelve, covered in the same scars, it was the portrait of the master of the house—strange for one so young.

“Has Benedict—His Grace, I mean. Has he always been...” She grimaced, not certain how to ask the question.

“So short-tempered?” Mr. Harris chuckled.

“Well, yes,” she sighed. “It is just that he is next-to-impossible to read. One moment he seems calm and perfectly reasonable, and the next...” she trailed off, not wanting to offend.

Mr. Harris, still holding her by the arm, gave it a gentle pat. “He was a lively child, I will tell you that much. So full of energy that I once suggested to his father that we tie him to a tree in the yard so he can run in circles and wear himself out.” He laughed at the memory. “As expected, sadly, that energy went away after the accident.”

“Accident?” She assumed he was referring to the scars.

Strange that nobody she had spoken with seemed to know their cause—all she had ever heard were guesses and gossip that ranged from being caught in a house fire, to having set the fire himself so as to murder his parents, to being born with them as if the Devil himself wished the world to know how rotten he was.

“It is not my place to say,” Mr. Harris said seriously. “I am sure that His Grace will tell you when he feels the time is right.”

She clicked her tongue. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“What I will tell you is that it occurred when he was young. That is the reason why...” He gestured to the portrait. “He inherited the dukedom at such a young age, at a time in his life when pain was all he knew. It changed him, forced him to become a man long before he should have had the thought in his head.”

“He does seem a touch serious.” She chuckled.

Mr. Harris laughed along. “He is not always that way. Yes, his mood can sometimes get the best of him. But I assure you, Your Grace, that there is a soft, gentle side that he rarely lets others see. But with you being his wife...” He smiled, and the two started toward the stairs. “If you are patient, I have no doubt that soon, that is all you will know.”

“I hope so, Harris.”

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“Marriage is never easy but always worth the effort,” he added sagely.

It was a truth that she did not wish to hear. Growing up, she had pictured marriage as a perfect union between two people who loved one another beyond reason. Not something to be worked on, but to be enjoyed and basked in, for what could be better than spending the rest of your life with the person you love?

She did not want this marriage. Given the chance, she would leave and never look back. Sadly, she knew that wasn't an option.

It was thus that Selina came to a decision. Now that she was here, now that the marriage was set in stone, she wasn't going to shy away from her husband, avoid him, or try and agitate him as she was so adept at doing. Rather, she promised to do everything she could to make this marriage work.

What choice do I have? None is the answer.

It might not have been a love match, but that did not mean she could not be happy. And surely, Benedict wanted the same thing? How could he not?

### Chapter Seven

Selina was beginning to get frustrated. And angry! Although she told herself that anger would not do and what she needed was calm and patience... and perhaps a little bit of anger, just because a person could only be so calm and so patient before they snapped.

Her husband was avoiding her. Easy to do in a manor of this size.

On her first night, she was not surprised to find that she had been assigned a separate room. After what had happened in the carriage, she hoped that perhaps he just needed a night to cool off, and the following morning they could begin fixing their relationship.

She did not see him the following morning. Nor did she see him throughout the day. And she certainly did not see him that evening.

The second night was much the same, only more frustrating because Selina knew that her husband slept just down the hall. Why was he avoiding her? Did he really mean to never speak with her again?

The thought of that was insane!

And the next day, once again, she did not hear so much as a word of his presence. She even checked to make sure he was still in the ginormous manor, confirmed but not told exactly where.

By the time the third night came to a close and Selina had to once again consider retiring to bed on her own, she realized that she needed to act. So, her husband did not want to see her? Fine! She would simply go see him.

We need to talk. More than that, we need to come to some sort of agreement. We cannot go on like this. I will not allow it!

And so it was late that night, when the house fell quiet and the servants began to retire to their rooms, that she snuck out of her chamber and started down the hallway carefully and slowly. Her heart hammered in her chest as she thought about what she was going to do. And her mind raced with possibilities—some scary, some satisfying,

some... Well, best not to go there.

She reached Benedict's bedroom door and paused. Quickly fixed her hair and straightened her nightgown. Made sure she was not flushed and, most importantly, not angry.

And then, with nothing else for it, she popped open the door and stepped inside. By the time she came out, she was certain that their marriage would finally be on track.

It was not as if things could get any worse!

"What do you think you are doing?" Benedict leaped from his bed as the door flew open and Selina stormed inside.

"We must talk."

"You need to knock!"

He was shirtless, and this gave Selina pause. His body was a mass of corded muscle. A smattering of hair across his chest, tight lines running down his front, and veins snaking their way toward?—

Selina tore her eyes away, determined not to go down that path!

"Shall I walk outside again and knock?" She put her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at him. "However, I do not see the point, seeing as I am here now."

"This is highly inappropriate," he snapped.

"Inappropriate. Ha!" She laughed. "What is inappropriate is you avoiding me for the past couple of days. As far as I am concerned, this room is technically mine, so what

need is there to knock?”

“That is not?—”

“And do not tell me that I have my own room either,” she spoke over him, the words flowing unrestrained. She’d had three days to mull over them, after all. “As if that is some sort of winning argument. That is the entire point!”

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“You are angry,” he said with great calm, a perfect contrast to the anger that surged through her. “Perhaps we can speak of this another time when you have calmed down?”

“There will be no other time. I am your wife, and it is time you started treating me as such. For all your talk of doing the right thing so as not to cause a scandal, how do you think it will look if people find out the way I have been treated? The way you have treated me!”

Benedict closed his eyes tightly and rubbed them, and she could see him trying to control his temper.

Selina had not meant to come in here angry, but that was the state of things, and there was little to be done about it now. Benedict, however, was responding to her anger with a forced calmness that she was grateful for.

“All I have done is give you space,” he tried to explain, forcing himself not to look at her. “After these past few days, I thought you might need it.”

“You have avoided me on purpose,” she snapped. “And I do not know why.”

“To think,” he tried.

“To think about what!” She threw her hands in the air, her anger not abating. “As much as neither of us wish it, we are married now, Benedict. It has happened, and avoiding the topic will not make it go away.”

“It is not so simple as that, although I wish it was.”

“It is!” She went for him without thinking. He took a step back, and she stopped. “It seems that all we do is fight, but that is not how things have to be.”

“Is that right?” His laughter sounded genuine. “So far, that seems to be the norm.”

She laughed too, softening, thankfully. “It does not have to be. I can... I am not always this hostile.”

He chuckled again. “And I am not always this moody.”

Sensing a shift in the atmosphere, she dared to walk closer. And Benedict, sensing it too, dared to look at her.

“Neither of us wished for this marriage,” he began.

“That seems irrelevant now.”

He shook his head. “It does not have to be. You might wish for it to work, but that does not mean that you want it—and do not lie to me and tell me otherwise. If you had a choice, you would happily run away and pretend it never happened.” He met her eyes. “Tell me I am wrong.”

She opened her mouth to argue but then bit her tongue and looked away. “I am just trying to make the best of what we have.”

And that was the truth. Did Selina wish for this marriage? Of course not! What she had always wanted, since she was a little girl, was a love match. Romance. Happiness. All those wonderful things that she had read about in stories. This situation, this entire marriage, was as far removed from that as possible.

But she was also a realist. She knew that there was nothing to be done and was thus determined to make the best of a bad situation. Or, in this case, a tragic one.

Benedict nodded, but he did not look upset. With a deep sigh, he walked to the bed and sat down. There, he patted the space beside him. Selina frowned as if she did not understand, and he rolled his eyes.

“Come here.”

“Why?”

“Because there is something we need to discuss.”

She hesitated further, her eyes darting from his half-naked body to the bed and then around the room. It was as if she was just now realizing that they were alone, the anger gone but the heat still simmering such that her body was flushed and her heart was still racing.

“I can... here is fine,” she mumbled.

“Come. Here.” It was not a question, but a demand.

She winced but acquiesced. Slowly, she slunk toward the bed and then, even more slowly, sat down. Although she did so away from him, careful not to get too close.

He looked pointedly at her. She attempted to do the same. A raised eyebrow, as if to challenge him.

“What?” she asked stubbornly. “You asked me to sit.”

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“Not there,” he growled. “Here.” He slapped the space beside him.

“Here is fine.”

He groaned and rubbed his eyes again. “Do not make me ask you again.”

Clearly, he was not used to being turned down or denied. And while Selina knew that she should have just apologized and done as he asked, she had always been stubborn, and the thought of provoking his anger a little excited her more than it should have.

“S-So now you wish to control me. Two days of ignoring me and you chose this moment to—woah!”

Suddenly, Benedict’s large arm shot out and wrapped around her, lifted her into the air, and then planted her on his lap like a child who had misbehaved.

Typically, the moment she was on his lap, with his arm around her waist, her hand pressing against his chest to steady herself, their eyes meeting as the shock gave way to the realization of what had just happened and what it might mean, they both seemed to understand what a terrible mistake that was.

Not that either cared. Not immediately, anyhow.

“I—” His voice trembled, and a growl rumbled in his chest, making Selina’s inner thighs tingle. He looked up at her, his eyes flicking from her lips to her neck hungrily.

“What is it?” she asked, her voice now hushed.

With one arm around his back and the other resting on his naked chest, she could feel his heart racing.

“This... this marriage,” he began, barely able to concentrate, for his eyes were now on her lips. His hand, now on her waist, gripped her supple curves in a way that made her quiver. “It is...”

“Is it what?” She shifted slightly, her buttocks pressing against his crotch, making him stiffen.

She could feel his manhood beneath her. It elicited an excitement in her that she had never known. A sense of control and power that she had over this beast of a man. It was stupid to think. It was wrong too. But she rocked her hips slightly, she felt him stiffen, and he groaned in a way that spoke of pleasure.

Selina had come in here to find a middle ground, and it seemed that she had found one.

Still looking down at him, she cocked an eyebrow as if to dare him. He hesitated... he tried to resist... he sucked air through his teeth, and she rocked her hips again.

Benedict roared as if he was unleashing the beast within, and his hand suddenly grabbed her by the back of the head and pulled her face down to his.

Predictably, she did not fight him.

Their lips met in an explosion of passion that had been building since even before they got married. The fury. The anger. The storm that brewed whenever they spoke. It roared fire and brimstone as their lips collided, as their mouths opened, as their tongues explored one another in ways that they had both spent hours thinking about.

Benedict kept one hand on the back of Selina's head as the other squeezed her waist. She yelped and pulled back, her eyes flashing with the thrill, before taking his mouth once more. She nibbled on his bottom lip. Her hand, those claws, dug into his chest. It was ravenous and wild, unhinged in a way that only the truly depraved can ever understand.

And it might not have stopped either. For a few moments there, Selina did not want it to. She imagined him picking her up, tossing her on the bed, and taking her as was his right.

It was not the perfect marriage. It was not built on love and romance. But as the two kissed, she began to wonder if maybe that wasn't so bad? If they could not love one another, then why could this passion not be their savior? Why not have one another like two animals in heat in the wild, in lieu of love?

Selina moaned as she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him hard, fully expecting him to give in and?—

“No!” Benedict tore his lips away and then, without thinking, lifted her off his lap and tossed her on the bed.

“Woah!” she yelped.

“I am sorry,” he apologized, stumbling back. “I should not have—that was—forgive me.”

She turned around on the bed, doing what she could not to look upset or broken. Truly, she was more shocked than anything, and as she observed her husband, she began to see him differently than she had since they first met.

Perhaps she was wrong about him? Perhaps he was not an animal, after all?

“Two months,” Benedict sputtered. “That is what I ask of you.”

“Excuse me?”

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“I do not want this marriage any more than you do,” he spoke quickly, a little too honestly. “Which is why I have a proposal for you.”

She hesitated, pushing herself up. Her face was still flushed, her breathing was ragged, and while she told herself that she was not upset about what had just happened, she sensed that the look in her eyes gave it away.

“Speak,” she said carefully.

“As I said, we must present ourselves to the ton as a happily married couple for long enough that it is considered a real marriage and not one brought about by scandal,” he explained quickly, careful not to look her in the eye. “And my brother, he must not be implicated in any of this—as far as anybody is concerned, he is not involved.”

“He should have thought about that before he ran,” Selina said coldly, unable to help herself.

His eyes flashed with anger, but then he closed them and took a deep breath. “That is neither here nor there. What’s done is done, and all we can do now is try and soften the blow. Or better, insist it never occurred in the first place. We are happy, my brother is glad about it, and that is all anybody needs to know.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?”

“Two months,” he repeated. “We must stay together for two months and present a united front. By my reckoning, that should give the rumor-mongering ample time to cease.”

“And then what?”

She could still taste him on her lips, she could still feel him. It might have been a nice sensation was it not for the words tumbling past those very same lips.

“And then, once I am satisfied that this farce of a marriage is no longer the talk of the ton, and once I am certain that my brother’s reputation will not be sullied, you will be free to go wherever you wish.”

Selina balked at the proposal. Truly, she gaped and stared openly, her mind racing as she tried to fathom what on earth he was speaking of. Considering what had just happened, it was hard to believe that he would say such a thing.

She supposed that just spoke to how little he thought of her. His true feelings, that is. A crushing realization that she tried to ignore.

“Free to go. What does that mean?” she asked finally.

“It means that we will be married in name only. Where you choose to go is up to you, but...” He grimaced. “So long as it is nowhere near me.”

Selina did not know what to say. Or what to think, for that matter.

The truth was, she should have been thrilled about the proposal. This marriage was not one she had wished for, it would never be what she truly wanted, and a chance to escape should have made her jump to her feet and cry out with glee. Was this only a few days ago, she might have done so.

But that kiss... it lingered on her lips and in her mind. The heat coursing through her body and the tingling sensation in her inner thighs refused to abate. It made this rather brash proposal seem somewhat ill-timed. Even wrong.

“Well?” he barked.

She gave her head a shake and decided something with finality—the Duke did not care one whit about her, so why would she do the same for him?

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” she said coldly. “Two months, you say?”

“That should do it.”

“I wish it was sooner, but I suppose I can stand to live under your roof for that long. As horrible as it will be.”

“We are in agreement, then.” He nodded once. “Until then, I think it is better if you sleep elsewhere.”

“Good.” She rose from the bed. “My room is far more comfortable, anyhow.”

“I am glad for it. Good night.”

He did not look at her as she stormed past him, and it felt purposeful. As if he needed her to see how little he cared. Although Selina wished that he was looking, so he might see the rueful expression on her face.

She marched out of his room, leaving the door open as she then swept down the hallway, determined to put as much space between herself and Benedict as she could. And as she did so, she worked overtime to convince herself of the merit of his proposal.

A marriage with an end date.

Two months of fakery, and then she could break free from this prison that she had

been forced into. It was a perfect scenario, a dream and a blessing, and she could not wait until that day came!

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However, once she made it inside her room, closed the door, sat down, and felt her body temperature return to normal, she began to consider the other side of the coin. That kiss still lingered. Memories of how her body had felt under his touch haunted her. And while she truly wanted what the Duke had suggested, she also knew that it was not the boon that she pretended it was.

Two months with the Duke. Two months of pretending that she hated him and wanted nothing to do with him. Two months of pretending their kiss never happened, of thinking about everything but his hands on her, of convincing herself that she did not want him.

It would be easier said than done.

### Chapter Eight

Selina walked into the dining room the following morning to find that Benedict was not there. Not only was she unsurprised by his absence, but she was glad for it!

Good. If I have my way, I might never lay eyes on him again!

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Mr. Harris greeted her as she walked through the door and made for the table. “I hope you are feeling well rested.”

“Harris.” She smiled as she sat down at the head of the table—not her place, but she took pleasure in wondering what Benedict would do if he were to arrive and see her sitting there. “I slept wonderfully. Perhaps the best sleep I’ve had yet.”

The butler eyed her with worry, swallowing his nerves as he glanced at the door, as if expecting Benedict to come through. Little did he realize that her husband was a coward and would not dare join her this morning.

“That is good to hear,” he said evenly.

“The bed is soft, warm, and cozy,” she continued. “And what is more, private. Is there a better feeling than sleeping with one’s arms and legs stretched out without having to be concerned about another sleeping beside you? I highly doubt there is.”

“That is...” Mr. Harris frowned. “I am happy that the bed is to your liking.”

“More than to my liking,” she affirmed pleasantly. “It is exactly what I wished for when I arrived. Please, if you see His Grace, make sure to thank him for me, won’t you?”

“It shall be done...” He swallowed awkwardly. “Will you be waiting for His Grace? Or shall I?—”

“I believe I shall be breakfasting alone,” Selina spoke quickly. “Please, tell the kitchen staff I am ready when they are.”

She smiled at him, feigning a state of mind that transcended happiness.

“It will be done.” He gave a short bow and then hurried to the kitchens.

Only when she was alone did Selina allow her true feelings to come out. Her body sagged in her chair. Her face dropped. And was she not worried that Mr. Harris might return at any moment, she would have laid her head on the table and closed her eyes because despite what she had just told him, she was perhaps the most tired that she had ever been in her young life.

Selina did not sleep a wink last night. What started with her pacing the room—because she had never been so angry in her life—soon gave way to tossing and turning brought about by a mix of confusion and unfulfillment.

That kiss... the passion... the explosion that it had caused between them. Like lightning striking a tree and setting it aflame, it was unlike anything she had ever felt before. So darn indescribable that she had been willing to ignore that voice in the back of her head that warned her from pursuing such a thing because she knew that once she did, there would be no going back.

It seemed that Benedict was not of the same mind. And if he was, he possessed greater self-control than she did.

“Your Grace,” Mr. Harris called as he strode back into the room.

She sat up quickly and smiled. “Harris, is breakfast almost ready?”

“Another moment, I am sorry to say,” he apologized with a deep bow.

“No matter,” she assured him. “I have nothing but time.”

“Speaking of, Your Grace, might I ask how you wish to spend the day? It has not escaped my notice that you have been cooped up indoors these past couple of days, and I would be remiss if I did not suggest a few activities to occupy your time.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

“And His Grace?” Mr. Harris pressed. “Shall I enquire if he wishes to partake? No doubt he yearns to show you himself, for this is his home and he knows it better than?—”

“No, no,” she cut him off. “I am sure that he is busy...” She let that final word drip like poison from her tongue. “It shall be a solo venture today, I am afraid.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “For which I could not be happier.”

Putting aside the kiss—no easy thing to do—Benedict had made it all too clear how he felt about their marriage. He did not want it. In fact, he had given their marriage an ultimatum, an end date, a two-month expiry after which they would be married in name only.

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Just three days ago, Selina would have rejoiced at the concept. She had not wanted this marriage any more than he did, and knowing that soon she might never have to see her husband again should have had her on the table, singing and dancing with joy.

But that was three days ago, and a lot has changed since then...

Assuming she'd had no other choice, Selina had set herself the task of making this marriage work. Her husband might have been a harsh, beast of a man, with a temper the likes of which she had never known, but surely they could have made it work? Surely, if they had at least tried, something might have come out of this arrangement?

Ha! A laughable concept now. Benedict had made his thoughts and feelings clear, and Selina was not the type to go begging. Certainly not to him.

"So, tell me," she began pleasantly. "The day is a glorious one and still quite young. What would you suggest, Harris? A horse ride? A walk through the forest? Perhaps there is a stream nearby in which I could go for a swim?"

Two months. That was how long Selina needed to occupy herself. Two months and she could turn her back on this marriage as if it had never happened.

As for her husband? As to that kiss? With how she was feeling, she did not give a damn for either! In a home this large, if she was lucky, she might never lay eyes on him again.

“Your Grace?” A soft knock sounded at the door before Mr. Harris poked his head into the study. “A moment of your time, if it is not a disturbance?”

“Ah, Harris.” Benedict sighed and put down his quill, glad for the distraction. “Not at all. Please, come in.”

Benedict had been at it all morning, locked away in his study, forcing himself to write so that he might stay busy enough that his mind would not wander. What was more, so that he might not search for an excuse to leave his study, which would inevitably see him cross paths with his wife.

“Thank you.” Mr. Harris closed the door softly behind him and made his way toward the desk. “How are you this morning?” he asked.

“Busy,” Benedict said as he indicated the parchment laid out before him. “It’s my darn brother—you know, I still have not heard from him since he vanished. It is not the first time he has disappeared like this, of course, but given the circumstances...”

Mr. Harris nodded. “I am certain that he has come to no harm.”

“Ha! That is not my concern. My concern is that I need him here, where I can keep an eye on him. That is what I am doing now, writing to everyone who might know of his whereabouts.” Benedict groaned and rubbed his temples. “I swear, sometimes that man was put on this earth just to vex me.”

He was more worried about Edmund than he was letting on. Ever since they were boys, Benedict had felt responsible for his younger brother, having taken up the mantle of Duke at the age of twelve. It was a title he took in stride, while his younger brother was the complete opposite.

What Benedict needed was for Edmund to know what he was doing for him so that

Edmund might at the very least lie low until the scandal that was this marriage blew over. While Edmund liked to pretend he cared little for his name and title, that would one day change, and when it did, Benedict did not wish for the stink of this situation to have followed him, making it impossible for him to find a bride.

But that meant Benedict had to find his brother first.

“I need you to send these out for me, once they are written,” Benedict continued. “And, most importantly, to be discreet.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Benedict groaned and rubbed his eyes.

“Are you tired, Your Grace?” Mr. Harris asked. “Perhaps this can wait?”

“No, no,” Benedict lied. “I slept rather well, in fact.”

“That is good, Your Grace. I am pleased to hear it.” Mr. Harris licked his lips, casting a nervous glance about the room. “It might interest you to hear that Her Grace also slept soundly.”

“Is that so?”

“At least that was what she told me, Your Grace. However, the bags under her eyes told a different story.” Mr. Harris raised a knowing eyebrow at him. “As do your own.”

Benedict stiffened. Had it been anyone else making such a point, he would have done more than glare at them. But Mr. Harris was more than a simple butler, almost a father, for Benedict had known him his entire life.

Not that this excused the comment.

“Be careful what you say next, Harris. I am in no mood.”

Mr. Harris’ expression turned pleading, almost worried. “I have just left your wife, Your Grace.”

“And?”

“She is to spend the day on horseback, observing the estate. As she told it, she does not expect to be back until dusk.”

“And your point?”

“I worry that it is not my place to say.”

“Perhaps you should not say it, then,” Benedict scoffed.

Mr. Harris looked pointedly at him. “She puts on a facade, Your Grace. She is an expert at feigning disinterest. But I could see through the act, and what I saw was not an independent lady set on forging her own path. I saw loneliness, Your Grace. She does not wish to be on her own.”

Benedict had to work extra hard not to let the disinterested mask he wore slip. Even for a second. Despite the pang of guilt that stabbed his insides, the look he gave Mr. Harris was a rebuke and a reminder to keep his thoughts to himself.

“On the contrary, Harris, I am quite certain that my wife wishes for nothing but solitude.”

“But Your Grace?—”

“You are aware of the circumstances of this marriage, Harris, so it should not surprise you that we will not be spending long days together. Or any days at all, for that

matter.”

“But Your Grace, if you just?—”

“And further to that point,” Benedict spoke over the man, making sure to fix him with a look that he knew only too well—one of fury. “How my wife and I choose to spend our time is not up for discussion, and I would ask you to ensure that the servants are aware of this. The two of us have spoken, and we have agreed on what is expected from our union, and that is between us and us alone. Do I make myself clear?”

He knew Mr. Harris well enough to know the desire his elderly butler must have felt to press the point. But Mr. Harris knew him equally as well, and it was for that reason alone that he made the smart decision.

“Of course, Your Grace.” He gave a short bow. “My thinking was that you would simply like to know your wife’s whereabouts.”

“And it is appreciated, Harris. Now, if you do not mind, I have a lot of work to do. So, if there is nothing else...” Benedict raised an eyebrow, indicating the end of the conversation.

“Your Grace.” Mr. Harris executed another bow and then hurried to exit.

However, before he did, he made sure to fix Benedict with a final pleading stare, silently begging him not to go down this path and to heed his warning. Then he closed the door, and again Benedict was left alone. A state of being that he had grown used to, and one that he would continue to thrive in, for that seemed the norm for someone like him.

Is this really the best course? Avoidance. Pretending the other does not exist, as if that might solve everything? Children behave this way, not adults.

Last night, he had been so close to going down a different path. He had lost control. Taken by her beauty. Lured in by her fire. The beast inside him had roared when it sensed that she needed taming, and he had allowed it to lash out and take her.

Only for a second. Just for long enough for him to realize what he was doing. Somehow, he had managed to contain the beast and force it back into hiding. But alas, it was too late, and Benedict feared the damage was done.

For all of last night and all of this morning, he had gone over that evening. Everything from Selina's sudden appearance in his room to her admission that she would happily leave if she was allowed to, to their kiss, to his angry proposal.

It was not an easy decision to make, but it was the right one.

Benedict had never wanted this marriage, having only agreed to it for the sake of his brother's name, as well as his own. Growing up, love and romance were not concepts he had ever thought to experience, as he was not the type. Too hostile. Too vicious. To him, love was like a beautiful vase, fragile and delicate, to be admired from a distance but never handled personally, for he would only break it.

He was not such a fool to completely ignore what had happened between himself and Selina, however. And he understood perfectly well that she was mistaking her fear of him for passion. At first, that might suffice. But the time would come when she would understand who he truly was, that her fear was warranted, that the passion was fleeting, and then she would regret having ever laid eyes on him.

It was fun to think of what could have been. It was tantalizing to imagine his hands around her as he feasted on her without care.

But this was safer. A marriage with an expiration date.

For two months, he would avoid her. For two months, he would pretend that she did not exist. For two months, he would do what he could not to think about her taste and the feel of her and?—

He groaned as his manhood stiffened, and he forced himself to resume writing to his brother. Two months. It promised to be a very long two months, indeed.

## Chapter Ten

“Is something the matter, Your Grace?” Mr. Harris asked one morning as Selina broke her fast alone, as was typical.

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“Am I that transparent?” she sighed, looking up from her plate.

He laughed softly. His kindly face always brought a smile to her lips, and was it not for him, she might have lost her mind.

“I have always been good at reading people,” he explained. “But it does not take a savant to see that something is on your mind.”

“Oh, it is nothing,” she sighed. “I am simply a little bored.”

Is that not the understatement of the century?

For five days now, Selina had been at pains to entertain herself, doing everything within her power to keep her attention fixed on the present while not looking to the future because that two-month deadline that Benedict had set felt like it might never arrive.

She went for a horse ride every morning.

She spent the afternoon reading, as Northwick Estate had a formidable library.

She took up crocheting, became an expert on botany, and was even considering learning another language because, at this point, she would try anything!

She wrote to her sisters also, explaining that she would invite them to visit her soon. A small part of her wondered if she might test the boundaries of Benedict’s wrath and invite them immediately, but she abstained from that because even she was not so

foolish.

Not that I do not mind the idea of seeing him angry again...

Five days in, however, and she was finding herself at her wits' end. Avoiding Benedict had seemed like a good idea at the time, but with the benefit of hindsight and the passage of time, she struggled to justify that decision.

Surely enough time has passed by now that the two of us can be in the same room as one another and remain civil? And surely, like me, he is beginning to realize that living in the same house while avoiding one another is no way to live?

It was on that fifth day that Selina began to wonder. Was it worth paying Benedict a visit? Dipping her toes in the pond, so to speak, to see what the temperature might be. Just a short conversation. Just a test, proof to herself and him that they could have a civil conversation without insulting one another... or having a repeat of the last time they'd been alone.

"May I suggest a new activity?" Mr. Harris asked.

"Truthfully, I do not think that will help. A lady can only engage herself in so many activities before she is stretched thin if you understand my meaning?"

"Ah, so it is a lack of socializing that is the problem?"

"Do not take it personally, Harris," she joked.

He chuckled. "I assure you that I do not."

It was subtle, but she could see a shadow pass behind Mr. Harris' eyes. His expression tightened, concern written all over his face, a sense that a thought had

come to him that he wasn't sure whether or not he should voice.

"It is funny," he spoke slowly and carefully, as if even he was not sure that he should be speaking. "But His Grace was saying the same thing to me earlier."

"Really?" She perked up.

She was surprised by her sudden reaction, for that should have told her everything she needed to know.

"Oh yes." Mr. Harris nodded seriously. "I spoke with him just last evening—he has been so busy with work this past week, and he was complaining to the effect that he has forgotten how to speak with people and worries that soon he might lose the ability to communicate altogether."

She snorted. "I doubt that."

"Do not underestimate him, Your Grace. I know that His Grace comes across as a little disinterested at times, but he is human like the rest of us. And humans are social creatures at their core. In fact..." He shrugged casually. "I am sure he would appreciate the chance to take some time off and socialize with someone."

Selina knew that the butler was lying. And she knew exactly what he was trying to do. Despite this, with how bored she was and how desperate she was to break this silent pact she and her husband had made to avoid one another, she did not care.

"Hhmmm." She rubbed her chin as if in thought. "Do you think he might mind if I pop up and say hello? Even if it is just for a moment."

"I am sure he would relish the idea, Your Grace."

“If that is the case...” She pushed back her chair and stood up. “I best be off, then. Just for a moment, however,” she made sure to add. “Likely, I will be back down here before you can so much as blink.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Excitement was what Selina felt as she hurried through the house. She told herself it was brought about by boredom, and that she would feel this way regardless of whom she was on her way to see.

That is the easier lie to swallow, and swallow it I shall.

Deep down, she could not help but wonder if this was the best idea she'd had since arriving here or the worst. For she knew that this might be the last chance that she and her husband had at bridging the gap that had existed between them since they first met.

Ultimately, it would come down to her husband and what he wanted. That, however, was a mystery to her. Soon to be solved.

The knock at the door had Benedict's head snapping up from what he was doing, which was the same thing he had been doing all week—trying to look busy.

“What is it, Harris?” he called out. “I told you I was busy.”

The door cracked open, and a soft voice that was certainly not Mr. Harris's spoke, “I'm sorry, I did not mean to disturb you. I can... I can come back later if you wish?”

“Selina!” Benedict stood up without thinking. The panic that took over was as unexpected as it was unpredictable. “I'm sorry, I thought you were Harris.”

Selina lingered in the doorway as if scared to enter. Not that this was surprising. The very fact that she was there at all was a shock to Benedict. But she said nothing, as if only just now realizing what a terrible idea this was.

“What are you doing here?” he barked, to which she winced. He sucked air through his teeth because he had not meant to sound so harsh. “I mean, I did not expect to see you,” he tried again, his voice softer.

“I was speaking with Harris,” she began, still standing in the doorway. “And he told me that...” She bit her lip. “That you might appreciate some company.”

Benedict frowned. “He did?”

“I can leave if you like,” she added quickly. “If he was mistaken?—”

“No!” Benedict hurried around his desk. “You do not have to leave. If you came all this way...”

She snorted. “It was quite the journey. So many steps.”

He laughed also. “I just meant, now that you are here...” He tried for a casual shrug, a means to dispel the tension he could feel growing between them. “Would you like to come in?”

“I would like that very much,” she said with a genuine smile.

She turned and closed the door—the sound of it clicking shut pierced the silence—and then wandered into the study. But not too far in. Benedict stood in front of his desk, and she stopped halfway as if an invisible barrier was blocking her path.

Has it really been five days since we last saw one another? It is hard to believe...

harder still to believe that I was able to stay away for this long.

They said that time healed all wounds, and although that might not have been entirely accurate, Benedict certainly felt that it helped to obscure them.

The truth was, he had forgotten how beautiful she was. Her dark features. Those little freckles on her delicate nose. Her plump lips. Her figure, curvaceous yet still so petite and fragile that he worried that just being in his presence might make her break.

When Benedict had decided that avoiding Selina was the best course of action, it had made perfect sense—it had felt right. But now, five days later, after more time spent wondering if he had spoken too quickly or said the wrong thing, none of what had mattered back then seemed nearly as present now.

If he and Selina ever had a chance at a fresh start, this was it. All he had to do was not ruin it.

Easier said than done.

“So...” He swallowed. “How have you been?”

“Bored,” she said simply. “And you?”

“Busy,” he responded shortly. Then he added quickly, “Which is not an excuse. I have not been avoiding you on purpose, is my meaning.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you sure about that? It seems to me that is exactly what you have been doing.”

He leaned back, surprised by the sudden aggression. It had been so long since the two had spoken that he had forgotten what she was like. And dammit if it didn’t excite

him.

Careful. Do not go there.

“I am just joking,” she clarified, laughing awkwardly. “Just a joke.”

“Right, a joke.” He laughed along, sensing the conversation falling terribly flat. “Very amusing.”

“Ah... thank you?”

Silence. A predictable one. And a most unwelcome one at that.

The two stood awkwardly, looking everywhere but at one another, the tension between them building. So intense was it that Benedict very nearly announced that he had somewhere he needed to be, figuring anywhere must be better than this.

He did not, however. Rather, he forced himself to look at Selina, seeing in her eyes just how nervous she was—she could barely even look at him. She might have found the bravery to come and see him, but that was where it ended.

If Benedict wanted them to move on from this most undesirable moment, it would be on him to do it. Not an easy task, for he had never been very good with words...

“Listen,” he began, exhaling as if to dispel the awkwardness. “About what I said the other night?—”

“You do not have to,” she said quickly, sounding relieved. “Really, there is no need to?—”

“What I said to you,” he spoke over her, “I thought it was what you wanted. And whether it was or not, the way I treated you afterward was abhorrent, and for that I am sorry.”

“You... you are?”

“I should not have kicked you out the way I did. And I certainly should not have avoided you since—making you feel like an outsider in your own home. This marriage might not be what either of us had in mind, but it does not have to be painful.”

She laughed. “That is one word I would use.”

He grinned. “It is for that reason that I think we should call a truce, of sorts.”

“Oh?”

“A call to civility,” he continued. “Just because this marriage has an end date does not mean we cannot be civil to one another. It certainly does not mean we must avoid each other either.”

She considered his suggestion. “About this end date. You were not very clear on what that means exactly.”

It had been a rushed proposition at the time, and even Benedict had not been entirely certain of the details. A desire to put this circumstance behind him because he felt that he must, and he had said what he thought he needed to.

And he still thought the same. Even if in the face of Selina’s beauty, as memories of the last time they had spoken flashed through his mind, he could not convince himself of why that was.

“I take it that you still feel the same?” he asked carefully, looking right at her as he searched for the truth in her words. “That, in two months, we should separate.”

“Of course,” she said quickly. “You have made it clear how you feel about this marriage, and I am of the same mind.” Her eyes flicked over him before she looked away. “An end date. Whatever that might look like.”

“It does not have to be anything official,” he began slowly. “In fact, that might be for the best. If we were to annul this marriage, people would talk, which is the exact opposite of what we need.”

“So, what do you propose?”

“As I said before, a separation, of sorts. I own many estates throughout the country, and there is no reason that you cannot choose one to live in. We will still be married on paper, but we simply will not have to see one another.”

“So, similar to how things are right now?”

He laughed. “Only you will not have to worry about seeing my ugly face lurking around the corner wherever you go.”

She laughed softly at that. “I like the sound of that—having my own home, I mean. Not...” She grimaced awkwardly. “Not what you said about your face.”

“I suppose that goes without saying.”

She shook her head, and for the first time, she looked at him. Really looked at him. By now, she must have been used to his scars, so he did not expect her to wince or curl her lip in disgust. And truthfully, she never really had—her fear was usually caused by his actions.

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This time, too, she seemed to look past his scars. Into his eyes, holding them with an unblinking stare. There was an honesty in her eyes, a softness that was so very unlike the fiery passion he knew she possessed in spades.

It was so intense that Benedict found himself looking away, his heart racing.

What was that?

“I do not think you are ugly,” she whispered.

He scoffed. “Lies do not become you, Selina.”

“Truly,” she insisted and took a step toward him, breaking through that invisible barrier. “I do not. Not your face, anyhow.” She laughed. “Your temperament and personality... that is another matter.”

He could not help but smile.

She was standing less than two feet away from him, and he looked down at her. The smile he wore reached his eyes, and she returned it. Silence fell between them again, only this one was not awkward. Still tense, but for an entirely different reason.

In the past, any attraction that Benedict and Selina had felt was the result of their hostility to each other. She would argue. He would shout. They would get close, and that proximity would bring out a side in the two of them that neither could understand. Even if it made perfect sense from afar.

It was explainable, and Benedict had convinced himself that the attraction was not real. That once they cooled down, they would both realize this and ultimately regret what they had done. That she would regret it, especially.

Only now...

There was a spark between them. A heat resulting not from words but from a desire that Benedict could see in her eyes as much as he could feel in the way she carried herself. She held his gaze, and even more than the other night, he wanted nothing more than to lean in and kiss her.

Not to throw her around. Not to dominate her. But to kiss her passionately and be kissed back in the same way.

His eyes flicked to her lips. She licked them. Standing over her, so close, all he needed to do was lean in, and he was certain she would accept him.

“So, we are in agreement then.” Benedict looked away and took a step back. It was subtle, but he thought he saw disappointment in her eyes as he moved away. “A truce.”

She tilted her head, a curious look in her eyes as she studied him. “A truce,” she agreed. “Which means no more avoiding one another.”

Benedict swallowed. After what he had just felt, he was beginning to wonder again if maybe avoidance was the smarter play. It was easy when anger and antipathy were the cause of his lust. That, he understood.

However, this was something else entirely. Something he did not understand.

“I will do my best,” he said with a stern expression, attempting to pull back a little

from their previous moment of honesty.

“Your best?” She cocked an eyebrow at him. “That does not sound very reassuring.”

“I am quite busy,” he explained, still stern, gesturing around the study and to the piles of paper on his desk. “Being a duke isn’t all balls and masquerades and dinner parties.”

“Oh...” She bit her lip, looking downcast—a look that stabbed Benedict through the chest like a cold knife.

“But I have been working too hard,” he added quickly, again pivoting. “Especially of late.”

She perked up. “Breakfast?”

“Excuse me?”

“Breakfast,” she repeated. “I was about to break my fast before coming up here, and now that we have agreed on this little truce, would you care to join me?”

“Oh...” He considered it, saw the danger, and decided on a middle ground instead. “I will try—meaning, give me five minutes,” he hurried to explain when he saw the disappointment in her eyes. “I just need to finish up something here and then I will be right down.”

She smiled appreciatively. “I will make sure to save you a plate.”

“How very kind.”

“Oh, I can be kind.” She laughed as she slowly stepped back toward the door. Her

hips swayed as she did so, those curves of hers drawing his eyes as if she was doing it on purpose. “It is not all fire and brimstone.”

“Only mostly,” he joked.

“Only when you bring it out in me,” she countered. At the door now, she paused and asked, “I shall see you soon?”

“As soon as I am able,” he agreed with a smile.

She took that as a clear agreement, returned his smile, and then stepped into the hall.

As soon as he was alone, Benedict stumbled back and leaned against the desk as his mind, and indeed the room, spun around him. It had started off so promising, an agreement to treat one another with respect and not pretend as if the other did not exist, only to be upended by a pesky attraction that he had not considered possible.

Yes, he found her breathtaking, that was obvious. But his desire for her, and her own for him, always came in the heat of passion—perfectly explainable and, more importantly, avoidable.

What happened just now... that was something else entirely.

It was something he did not understand but knew intrinsically that it was best avoided. Easier to know that he and Selina could never work than daring to wonder if they might.

He wanted their relationship to be agreeable. He did not want to avoid her and pretend she did not exist. But he also did not wish to explore feelings that he was certain could only lead to trouble and heartache, a reminder to himself and the world

that he was a monster on the outside as well as on the inside.

Being hated was something he was used to, and seeing as she was going to be leaving soon anyway, was it not better to stoke those feelings, rather than fight them?

Surely, that was safer. If not harder to do, at the same time.

To join her for breakfast or not to join her? Even now, he could not say what he should do.

## Chapter Eleven

It had been twenty minutes since Selina left Benedict's study, and still, he had not joined her for breakfast.

"Shall I have your plate made, Your Grace?" Mr. Harris asked as he hovered behind her chair.

"No... not yet."

She looked again at the door, expecting any second to see her husband walk through it. An apologetic smile on his face, an explanation about time getting away from him, a chuckle, an eye roll, and they would put this little misstep behind them.

Good luck with that!

"He often becomes inundated with work," Mr. Harris explained as if he could read her mind. "Because he underestimates just how much work he has and how long it will take him."

"Is that right?"

“It is not unusual for me to have to drag him out of his study at night. Otherwise, I have no doubt he would simply fall asleep at his desk.”

“I had no idea he was so busy,” Selina said dryly.

“Do not take it personally, Your Grace. I have no doubt that he meant to join you. He still may...” The butler sounded none too confident in that final statement.

She was still watching the door. Still clinging to the final vestiges of hope that had carried her out of Benedict’s study not twenty minutes ago, bringing a smile to her face because she had been certain that things were about to change for the better. And she was still refusing to believe that her husband could be so darn rude!

But the doorway remained empty. There was no sound coming from beyond, no rustling from upstairs or the sound of a door swinging open to indicate that he would be down shortly. Silence was what Selina heard, a sound she had become all too familiar with of late.

Benedict was not coming.

“On second thought, Harris, a plate would be lovely, thank you.”

“Right away, Your Grace!” Mr. Harris hurried toward the kitchen.

“Oh! Harris,” Selina called before he vanished. A most sorrowful thought came to mind, one she did not wish for but was unable to scrub clean once it had taken root. “Would you please fetch me a bottle of wine? The same that was served with supper last night.”

Mr. Harris frowned. “Wine, Your Grace? Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“This early...” He glanced at the window, the early morning sun still shining as if to emphasize the point.

“I am aware of the time, Harris,” Selina responded pointedly. “Now, please, a plate and a glass of wine.” She raised an eyebrow at him in warning, not in the mood to argue... or be judged.

She was done. Unequivocally, unapologetically done. She had extended an olive branch. She had tried to find a middle ground. She had put herself out there in an effort to bring a sense of civility into this marriage so that the next two months would be bearable. And in response, her husband had spat in her face.

It was just so strange. They had spoken honestly for the first time. They had made it through a conversation without fighting! The future had looked bright, and she had looked forward to what might come next.

Now, to put it simply, she did not care one little bit about civility or decorum or trying to make the best of a bad situation. With how she was feeling, what she wanted more than anything was revenge. Petty, spiteful revenge.

“Your Grace...” Mr. Harris swept back into the room with a plate balanced on his hand. “Here is your breakfast, as requested. Regarding the wine, if you will allow me a few more minutes to find a bottle, for the one from last night was?—”

“Never mind the wine,” Selina cut him off as he placed the plate before her. “I have

changed my mind.”

“Oh? Wonderful, Your Grace. I did not want to push, but it is my thought that it is far too early to be drinking.”

“I could not agree more.” An idea had come to mind, a most wicked one. “In fact, I was just thinking of something that you mentioned a few days ago.”

“Concerning?”

“You suggested that I might learn a musical instrument. The flute, I believe was your suggestion.”

“Ah, yes.” He brightened. “A most excellent idea. If you will allow me, I can send for an instructor. I know a few who?—”

“No need for that,” she reassured him. “I am a quick study and would relish the chance to learn on my own.”

He frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She smiled. “All I need is time and a room for practice. In fact, I noticed that the room beside His Grace’s study is empty.”

Mr. Harris hesitated. “It is empty, yes. His Grace wanted it so, for he requires silence for his work.”

“Perfect.” She pulled the plate of food toward her. “Take the flute to that room, won’t you? I will be there as soon as I finish here.”

“Your Grace...”

“That will be all, Harris.” She smiled pleasantly at him and then shooed him away.

It was a petty idea. It was bound to anger her husband terribly. But that was also the point.

He wanted to ignore her? He wanted to pretend that she did not exist? Selina could not help but laugh as she pictured the look on her husband’s face when he came to learn that she was not one to be dismissed so easily.

Likely, it would lead to a fight, but that was better than nothing. Such was the state of Selina’s marriage.

At first, Benedict thought that he was imagining it.

Unable to get any real work done, because the guilt he felt at not joining Selina for breakfast was worse than he could have possibly imagined, he’d resigned himself to sitting in his study and waiting.

Waiting until he was sure that Selina was finished downstairs. Waiting until he was certain she had left the house for the day. Waiting until he could stomach running into her by accident and not being completely undone by it.

It promised to be a rather long and painful day.

But then he heard... something. He wasn’t certain what it was, at first. Music, although that was a rather generous term for the noise that broke the silence in his study. There was no melody to it. No rhythm. Just noise.

He sat listening as the noise built. It was coming from the room next door, he was certain. And the longer he listened, the more he became certain what instrument was being played—a flute. Although it didn’t sound as if someone was playing it so much

as trying to torture his eardrums, as if he was a prisoner of war withholding precious information.

About to stand up and see what the heck was going on, the door suddenly popped open, and Mr. Harris hurried inside.

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“Harris!” Benedict said with some relief. “What on earth is going on?”

“I thought it best that you hear it from me, Your Grace.”

“That noise!” It was growing louder, more aggressive. Benedict shoved a finger into his ear as if to block it out. “It is horrid. Where is it coming from?”

“Next door.”

“I know that! Why? Who is doing that?”

Mr. Harris grimaced. “It is Her Grace. She has decided to take up playing the flute and thought the room next to your study was a perfect place to practice.”

Benedict blinked and leaned back. “She did? Why on earth...” It came to him slowly, a little slower than it should have. “Ah, I see.”

“I asked her not to,” Mr. Harris added hurriedly. “I suggested a room downstairs and out of the?—”

“It is fine, Harris,” Benedict grumbled as he sat back down. “It is nothing to concern yourself with.”

“Shall I tell her that it is too noisy for your work?” Mr. Harris suggested. “Perhaps that will make her practice somewhere else.”

“No...” Benedict pursed his lips. “Somehow, I do not think that will worry her.”

Another loud screech had him wincing. “Not one little bit.”

He knew what she was doing. Punishment for breaking his promise to break his fast with her. For suggesting that they call a truce, only to break that truce immediately.

His wife certainly was something special.

Mr. Harris left, and Benedict attempted to return to work, all the while forced to listen to what was an objectionably horrendous noise. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck. It made his skin break out into goosebumps. Shuddering. Shifting. Trying to block his ears but still able to hear it.

I have half a mind to storm into that room, break the flute over my knee, and be done with it! See how she likes that!

Benedict reminded himself not to lose his temper. That was what she wanted. If he did so, then she would have won. But if he sat there and let her finish, pretending that he hadn't heard her, letting her play her little game until she got bored, then he was certain that would be the end of it.

Easier said than done.

As the minutes ticked by, Benedict felt his patience running thin. His leg was bouncing. His fists were clenched. His anger was flaring. He felt like a snake being charmed out of its nest, only this was an entirely different sort of charm,

Does she want me angry? Surely, she must know what will likely occur if that happens? Or is she just so desperate not to be made a fool of that she has not thought that far ahead?

Benedict knew the best course of action was avoidance. Being nice to one another

had elicited a rather alarming reaction that had nearly seen him kiss her where she had stood. While getting into a fight was much the same, only with less control.

To not see her at all was the only move to make. And yet...

The noise continued. It grew louder. If he did not know any better, she was standing right by his wall and blowing the flute as hard as she could. Likely, that was exactly what she was doing!

Ignore it... do not let her get to you... do not take the risk...

Benedict only had so much self-control. It was one note in particular. One long, drawn-out screech that was like nails dragging down a chalkboard. His entire body spasmed at the sound, and he jumped to his feet without thinking. And then, giving in to his anger, he strode across the study.

“She wishes to see me angry!” he roared to himself as he threw open the door. “Let us see how she likes it!”

## Chapter Twelve

The door flew open as if it had been kicked in.

“What do you think you are doing?” Benedict swept into the room as if being carried by a tempestuous gale, red in the face, his body shaking.

Selina could not remember a time she had seen him so mad.

“Oh, hello,” she said pleasantly. The flute was still pressed to her lips, and she made sure to keep it there, projecting a sense of calm that contrasted with the sudden bout of fear at seeing her angry husband. “Is something the matter?”

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“I said...” He stormed toward her, his fists clenched by his sides. “What do you think you are doing?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.” She indicated the flute. “I am learning to play the flute. Why? What did you think I was doing?”

He came within five feet of her and then stopped, as if he forced himself to. “I know what this is. Do not think me a fool.”

“I hope that you are smart enough to see it,” she continued with as much calm as she could. “The flute in my hands is surely the giveaway.”

It had been a while since she had seen her husband angry. Long enough that she had nearly forgotten what it was like. More than that, she had nearly forgotten what the sight of his impossible rage did to her.

Perhaps this was not such a brilliant idea, after all.

He was as big as a mountain, the way he loomed over her. His scarred face had turned red, his eyes were wide and wild, and his teeth were bared in a vicious growl. He could do whatever he wanted to her and she would be powerless to stop him. Lucky then that he seemed to be doing everything he could to control his anger.

Selina felt her body flush as he stood over her. She felt her heart race and her loins tingle with memories of the last time he had manhandled her—in the carriage, and before that in the hallway in Langham Manor—growling in warning, completely dominating her in ways that titillated her.

Had that been her goal today? Selina would have said no. But then again, she had always been rather adept at lying.

“You are trying to frustrate me.”

“I am trying to practice the flute,” she countered, her voice cracking in the face of his fury. “Why? Was it too loud? I confess I did not consider that it might disturb you.”

“You are angry with me.”

She scoffed. “I am not the one shaking as if I might explode.”

His jaw clenched tighter, and her heart rate spiked. “You are trying to get back at me for refusing to join you for breakfast. Do not say otherwise.”

She met his cold stare with her hardened one. “Refusing to join me? Is that what you think happened?”

“I was busy. I do not have time to?—”

“You did not refuse,” she cut him off, taking a little too much pleasure in the way his eyes narrowed at being interrupted. “You simply did not show up after you told me you would. That is what happened.”

“You were the one who stormed into my study and demanded that I join you!”

“Ha!” She laughed, and he tensed up further. “I came to you because I was desperate. A week of being ignored and even the idea of spending time with you somehow felt preferable.”

“You know what this is,” he snarled at her. “This marriage. It was never meant to be

anything more than a convenience.”

“Which is exactly what I wish for.”

“All I have done is?—”

“Whatever you please,” she scoffed, feeling another thrill upon hearing him growl. “I understand that you do not wish to be married to me, and I”—she curled her lip as she looked him over—“have no desire to be wed to you either. I suppose that I am the fool for thinking that despite our predicament, we might have been able to at least spend some time together. A most absurd notion, I know.”

“It is not that simple.”

She laughed coldly. “Clearly not. Now, if you do not mind...” She held his eyes, looking into them as if daring him to react.

Her body was running so hot that she thought she might catch fire. Trembling from feet to brow as fear besieged her. She knew if he acted as she guessed he wished to, she would not try and stop him. The only question was, would he?

Holding his stare, Selina slowly brought the flute back to her lips.

“Do not dare,” he growled.

“Just try and stop me,” she sneered as the flute touched her lips and she blew?—

He lunged at her, his large paws snatching the flute from her hands.

“Give that back!” she cried.

He stormed across the room and toward the doorway. There, he looked at her a final time, holding the flute up to show what he meant to do with it.

“Do not even think about it,” she warned him.

He not only thought about it, but he also did it. Still looking at her, Benedict flung the flute through the doorway and down the hall. The sound of it crashing against the wooden floor echoed through the room.

“Are you insane!”

“I am what you made me.” He stormed back to where she was standing as if he meant to take her next and do the same—that being, flinging her down the hall.

If Selina was smart, she would have said nothing. She would have left him and thanked God that she made it out of the room in one piece. But the sight of her husband’s short temper lit a fire inside her the likes of which she had never known. There was no logic to it. No explanation that she understood. Just raw, unabated lust.

“You enjoy testing me,” he snarled, still looking at his feet.

“Better than dying of boredom,” she snapped.

“You enjoy angering me.”

“It is not a hard thing to do.”

“You best be careful...” He took a deep breath and stopped in front of her. “If you push me too far, there is no telling what I might do.”

She opened her mouth to tease him further. To push him that little bit harder. It would be so easy. He wanted it as did she. About to say the words, her body now trembling as much as her husband’s, Selina realized that they were through playing games.

Her husband truly was a beast. From his size to his fury to his hideously scarred face. He was a beast, she was his prey, and unlike most prey, she wanted nothing more than for him to devour her. As was his right.

“Show me,” she said instead, her words a throaty whisper.

He stiffened. Slowly, he raised his head, and she gasped upon seeing the look in his eyes. She had never seen such hunger. Even his teeth seemed to have turned into fangs. His lips twitched. His fists unclenched and clenched again. A step forward, to which she did not back down. And then another.

“Show me now.”

Benedict let out a roar as he grabbed her around the waist, lifted her into the air, and pulled her to his shaking body. Her legs wrapped his waist, his nails dug into her back, her hands took hold of his head, and the two kissed like beasts in the throes of heat.

This wasn’t like the other times. There would be no stopping them. No resisting. No chance that they might snap out of this trance that they had both found themselves in and regret their actions.

Selina had never felt more wanted. And she had never wanted anyone more. This had not been her intention. This had not been why she'd decided to annoy him with her flute practice. That was done out of frustration, an act of rebellion because she had been at her wits' end.

Although she supposed that if she thought about it, perhaps this was the goal? She and Benedict could not be friendly, and ignoring one another was never going to work. So, if not those two options, that left just one more at their disposal.

It was an option that had been building between them for nearly two weeks now, and thus when it came about, it did so with the burning intensity of a forest fire left unchecked, whose only goal was to consume and burn and destroy everything in its path.

Their lips met in a clash. Benedict's tongue plunged into her mouth. It explored her. It licked and wrestled with her tongue. It darted in and out of her mouth, over her lips, back into her mouth. And Selina accepted all of it, nibbling on his lips, moaning her pleasure at his taste, gripping him harder with her legs and hands to show that she did not want him to stop.

Holding her as he was, Benedict stumbled forward, still kissing her until he found a table. There, he sat her down and then pulled back so that he could use his hands to rip open the front of her dress. She gasped at the action. He growled and narrowed his eyes at her in warning. And she looked daringly back at him.

Her breasts were out, heaving in his face, and the way he stared at them made her tremble. He wrapped his hands around them, brought her erect nipples to his lips, and began to suck on them.

"Oh..." She yelped as he sucked on her nipples harder. "Benedict... oh!"

“Quiet,” he ordered as he continued to suck, biting down gently, which made her yelp again from the pain. “You wanted this, remember that.”

She laughed as she leaned back, giving herself to him fully. “Show me.”

Selina had never felt such passion before. Even in her dreams, when she had pictured them together, it had paled in comparison to the raw energy that engulfed them both. Two bodies turned into one, merging as their impulses spoke through their actions and transformed them into wild animals.

Benedict dropped to his knees suddenly.

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“Benedict,” she gasped at the realization. “What are you?—”

“I said quiet,” he growled as he forced her legs open. “Do not dare move.”

Selina hesitated, for she suddenly realized how out of her depth she was. And while she might have balked, the commanding look in his eyes had her wanting to do anything he asked. She needed to please him.

Her fingers delved into his hair as she opened herself to him.

He lifted the skirt of her dress and began to kiss up her thigh, licking her skin softly, nibbling and then biting down, which had her gasping. She could already feel the warm wetness between her thighs. And the way he moaned as he kissed her only made her legs tremble harder.

He moved to her folds. He licked them and then gently dipped his tongue inside her. Then he stroked it up her folds, toward her pleasure center, and she gasped as waves of pleasure shot from between her thighs and spread through her body.

And when he finally wrapped his lips around that bundle of nerves and began to suck, the noises that Selina made were that of a wild animal. Such that she wondered if she was the true beast.

“Urgh! Yes! Ben—Oh! Argh! What are you—there! There! Yes! Yes!” she screamed at the top of her lungs as he sucked on her. As he slipped his fingers inside her and pressed them against her wall. As he slid them in and out to the rhythm of her breathing and panting and shaking.

“Do not dare stop!”

Benedict pulled back, pushed up the skirt of her dress, and looked up at her. “What did I say about telling me what to do?”

Her eyes went wide, almost fearful. “I?—”

“Don’t.” He was on his feet in a second.

She gasped as his hands wrapped around her knees and pulled her forward. She almost fell off the table, but he stepped closer to her, kissing her full on the lips again.

They were man and wife now. There was nothing wrong about what they were doing. And while consequences might eventually arise from this, Selina did not care. She was far too turned on for that.

While kissing her fully on the lips, Benedict moved his hands to his pants and began to undo them. Not knowing what to do, as his pants dropped and his member sprung out, Selina wrapped her hand around him and squeezed.

“Urgh...” He groaned as his body tensed up. There was a power to it, a sense that she had full control over him.

“Like this?” she asked between kisses as she continued to squeeze and stroke up his length. His legs shook as she did so, and she relished it.

Funny that before now, the two had only kissed. Funny that now, despite everything that had happened and everything that had not, they both seemed to understand what would happen next. Even funnier still that neither seemed willing to question it.

With her legs wrapped around him, and with his member out and ready, Selina

prepared to be penetrated. Only, he paused when he caught her looking at him. It was subtle, but he seemed to rear back as if from worry, as if ashamed of what she must have seen.

Selina almost laughed it off, but before she had a chance, Benedict lifted her to her feet and turned her around.

“What are you—oh!” she gasped as he pushed her forward so that she was bent over the table. “Benedict...”

He leaned over her and growled in her ear, “Do you want this?”

“More than anything.”

Benedict thrust himself inside her. One glorious motion that saw her take his full length until he was buried all the way to his balls. Her body went stiff as she accepted him. She moaned and tried to fight him, only to relax as he leaned over her and bit her neck.

Then, slowly, gently, Benedict began to thrust. Long, powerful thrusts. He pulled out all the way before pushing back inside of her. Each time he did, Selina stiffened and gasped, then melted as she took him fully. Her hands were flat on the table. His arm was wrapped around her neck. She was so small and helpless compared to his lumbering frame, and the power he felt over her was a turn-on in itself.

“Yes!” she moaned as he started to thrust harder. “Yes... there... Benedict...”

“You asked for this,” he growled as he continued to thrust into her. “Remember that.”

“I deserve it,” she cried out in pleasure. “All of it.”

“You wanted the monster!”

“Give him to me!”

“You begged for him!”

“This is what I asked for!”

Harder and harder he thrust. Faster and faster. He pulled his arm from underneath her and pushed her head forward, careful that she was not looking at him. He grabbed hold of her hips and roared as he continued to pound into her. She spasmed and convulsed. She writhed as she took him. She threw her head back and screamed at the top of her lungs as he punished her.

And then, Selina began to feel it. His legs trembled. His thrusts became more sporadic and random. His breath hitched, and she wondered what was going on.

Suddenly, he wrapped his arm around her neck again. He pulled her back and bit her neck. He buried himself inside her deeply, and she felt him climax—a sensation she could not have imagined until it happened, one that had her eyes growing wide in surprise and her smile growing even wider than that.

She moaned and wiggled her hips as he filled her with his seed, and then she ground herself against him so that he could not pull out.

It might have been awkward after that. It might have been tense. Strangely, it was neither of those things.

Benedict pulled out and turned his back on her as if ashamed. She stepped behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. She could feel his heart racing, as was her own.

Silence fell over them, neither knowing what to say or do. That was until a thought came to mind, one which Selina could not help but voice, for she knew it would seal this moment as what they both knew it to be—right.

“I will tell you one thing,” she said as she kissed the back of his neck. “That certainly beats flute practice.”

## Chapter Thirteen

“So... that was something,” Selina murmured after a long silence.

“It certainly was,” Benedict agreed.

“A shame you tossed my flute down the hall,” she ventured. “It is likely broken.”

“I hope it is.”

“Now I might have to find other ways of forcing you to speak with me. Heaven forbid.”

He chuckled softly. “I am sure you will think of something.”

“Perhaps I will have Harris move the pianoforte into this room tomorrow. Let’s see if you’ll toss it down the hall too.”

“I suppose that depends on how angry you make me.”

They lay on the floor in the spare room, wrapped in one another’s arms. The conversation was minimal at best, but agreeable and in no way awkward.

Selina’s head rested on Benedict’s bare chest. It was more comfortable than it should

have been, and even the wooden floor beneath her hips was barely noticeable, as she was able to focus on his large arm under her waist. For one who was so violent and vicious when it came to lovemaking, he was surprisingly tender and gentle once it was over.

As to the silence that came after each effort she made at conversation? Selina had no idea what was going on inside Benedict's head, far too concerned with her confused thoughts.

Well... that was unexpected. Or perhaps it was the most predictable thing of all time?

When Selina had decided to play the flute to annoy Benedict, she truly had not considered where it might lead. Yes, she had wanted to annoy him. And yes, she had wanted to anger him. But did she think that it would end in such passion that her legs still trembled nearly ten minutes later? Certainly not.

He is just so impossible to figure out.

On the one hand, he seemed to want nothing to do with her. On the other hand, whenever he dared to speak with her, to engage in any meaningful way, it was undeniable how simpatico they were. Even when they were fighting, there was a sense of agreement between them, as if they only did so because they knew each other that well.

But it couldn't just be the fighting. And after what had just happened, there was no way they could go back to ignoring one another. A middle ground was needed. One that she fully expected her husband to stick to.

"Benedict..." She gently extricated herself from his arms. "I think we need to talk."

She looked at him expectantly, but as was ever his way, he said nothing, staring at the

ceiling as if she had not spoken. Was he going to pretend that this had not just happened? Was he content to go back to how things had been?

“What just happened...” She hesitated, again waiting for him to look at her. “I think we can both agree that it was unexpected.” She chuckled, but he did not return it. “Yet, at the same time, I think that it was also necessary.”

That had him looking at her.

The scars on his face twitched as he frowned in confusion, as if he had misheard her.

“What do you mean?”

“It is no secret that this marriage is strange, for want of a better word.”

He laughed. “Strange, indeed.”

“And since the first day we met, there has been a tension hovering between the two of us that we have both resoundingly ignored. We would fight, and it would grow. We would fight further, and it would threaten to explode.”

He scoffed. “I think it just did.”

“That is my point,” she continued with a smile. “The way we have been treating one another—even these last five days, pretending that the other does not exist. This was bound to happen because we have not done the one thing that all married couples should do.”

“Were you not here for what just happened?” he joked.

She looked at him flatly. “Talk is my meaning. Fighting is not talking, and it is no wonder that every time we do try and have a conversation, it devolves into an argument.”

“You do have a way about you.”

“As do you.” She raised an eyebrow at him, and he chuckled. “I do not regret what just happened.” Oh, how I do not. “But what I do not want is for us to go back to the way that things were. For the time being, we are man and wife, and I think it would be for the best if we started to act like it.”

He pushed himself onto his elbow. “For the time being?”

She blinked. “Well... yes. My meaning is?—”

“The two-month ultimatum?” he spoke over her quickly. “You still wish for it?”

“Oh.” She had not thought of that. Not really, anyhow. “Yes,” she said slowly, searching his eyes to see what he might want. If he had changed his mind, even if she was not entirely certain that she wanted him to. “I think so.”

“Good,” he uttered quickly. “As do I.”

He met her eyes and looked right at her, as if he was daring her to question him.

“Wonderful,” she said, holding his stare, reflecting that same sense of determination... even if she was not feeling it as strongly as she had last week. “But that does not mean things have to remain as they are. Until that time comes, I would rather we remain civil to one another. Surely, we can manage that?”

“You mean a truce?” he asked dryly.

She rolled her eyes. “One that you stick to this time.”

He laughed. “Better that than having to put up with any more of your flute lessons.”

She laughed softly. “I do not want to spend the next two months fighting. And I am

sure that you do not want that either.”

He did not answer right away. His brow furrowed as he considered what she said, likely mulling over its larger implications.

If they were going to go their separate ways in two months, what just happened could not happen again. As wonderful as it was, it was also dangerous because she sensed that any more of what just happened and feelings might develop—which she did not want, and nor did Benedict, she was certain.

Best that they stick to their original plan. That meant no fighting. That meant civility. That meant being able to be in the same room as one another without turning into rabid beasts with less self-control than animals in heat.

“Are you suggesting that we be friends?” Benedict asked after some time.

“Oh.” She blinked. “Yes... I suppose I am. If that is fine with you?”

A strange question, seeing as they were lying naked together, having just made ravenous love that reached such levels of excessive debauchery that Selina did not know how she was going to look the staff in the eyes without blushing.

But it was the right thing to do. It had to be. If this marriage had an end date, what point was there in doing this again?

“I think it is a most valid point and an even better idea,” Benedict said.

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He smiled at her, she returned it, and they held stares in a way that if they lingered for too long, all attempts to continue this so-called friendship were doomed to failure.

Indeed, even without the anger, she could feel the same pull. Her body already flushed. Images of his hulking frame pressing against her fresh in her mind. Their legs entwined. Their bodies pressed close.

Perhaps if they were to have sex one more time, it would not be so bad...

“On that note, I best be getting up.” Benedict extricated himself from under her, shuffled to his knees, and then stood up. He was stark naked, and she averted her eyes, her cheeks flushing furiously. “And perhaps find my clothes.”

“Good idea,” she said as she awkwardly looked around the room, covering her chest with her arm at the same time. “Me too.”

“Supper tonight,” Benedict then spoke as he stepped around her, bending down and scooping up his pants. “Will you be—perhaps it will be fine for me to join you? If that is agreeable with you?”

She smiled. “I would like that.”

He smiled back. Again, they stared at one another, so much to say but too afraid to say it.

Could this really work? Friends? With Benedict, of all people?

“I will see you then,” he said and tore his eyes away.

And then, before she could say anything else, he strode out of the room, stark naked.

“Friends...” Selina muttered to herself, testing out the word as she sat there.  
“Friends...”

A simple enough concept to grasp, to be sure. But to execute it? She had hated this man just a few days ago. Despised him, as she was certain that he despised her. The only way they could talk was through shouting, but they could not do that anymore either. And so, friends it was.

Was such a thing possible? Were they doomed to go back to their old ways of anger and fury, and then, most likely sex? Only time would tell, she supposed. And if the worst were to happen and they had a repeat of what happened earlier... well, that would not be the worst thing either.

## Chapter Fourteen

“But which is your favorite?” Benedict asked around a mouthful of venison.

“I told you, I do not have a favorite. I love them all equally.”

“Oh, you do not.” He swallowed and looked pointedly at her. “Everyone has a favorite sibling. Yes, you might love them all, but do not lie to me.”

“I am not lying.”

“You are,” he insisted as he reached for his glass of wine and took a large sip. “And quite frankly, I feel obliged to call you out on it.”

“How so?”

“This effort of yours to be friends,” he said simply as he put down his wine glass and began to cut his meat. “It will not work if you insist on treating me like a fool.”

“Ha! But you make it so easy.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Careful now, Selina. I thought you promised to be friendly.”

“It is hard when someone accuses me of lying.”

“Which is hard not to do when one is being lied to so blatantly.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are not going to drop this, are you?”

He shrugged. “Wasn’t the point of this entire thing for us to get to know each other better? How can we do such a thing if you refuse to open up?”

“I suppose I was hoping for small talk. The weather. What books we are reading. That sort of thing.”

He speared a piece of venison with his fork and tore at it with his teeth. “I think we can both agree that you and I are well beyond small talk by now.” He winked. “All things considered.”

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She looked at him flatly. “And as your friend, I will remind you that you will do well to avoid mentioning anything that might force me to reconsider this entire venture.”

He swallowed. “My mistake. It won’t happen again. Now...” He took another sip of wine before giving her an innocent smile. “Tell me the truth—which of your sisters is your favorite? I have my suspicions, but I wish to see how well I know you.”

“You are not going to drop this, are you?”

“Not on your life.”

Benedict was doing his best not to focus on what had happened earlier. An effort that he thought would have been impossible, all things considered.

Sleeping with Selina as he had... His leg literally trembled, and his mouth salivated as he remembered it. The way she had pushed him. The way he had then taken her. The passion that had exploded in that glorious instant was unlike anything he had expected. So much so that if he did not think she would deny him, he might have leaped across the table right now?—

Careful, Benedict... do not let your mind go there. That is dangerous territory.

He attempted to focus on the present instead. This supper, for one, and how effortless it felt. What started off with slight trepidation soon turned jovial as they both found a groove that allowed them to talk freely and openly like... well, like old friends.

That word...friends. It was a rather strange way of describing the relationship that the

married couple was trying desperately to nurture. An agreement to ignore what had happened—as if ignoring such a thing was even possible.

“Fine,” Selina sighed as she too took a large sip of her wine. “If I had to pick one... Diana—but only because you made me choose.”

“The youngest.” Benedict nodded in understanding. “I’m not surprised, truth be told.”

“And why is that?” she scoffed.

“It makes sense. The twins have one another, and no doubt, as the oldest, you feel protective of her. I bet they pick on her too, don’t they?”

She tilted her head and frowned. “How did you know that?”

He laughed. “I know people, is why. It’s easier to pick on the outsider, and in your sister’s world, Diana is undoubtedly that. Lucky that she has an older sister like you to watch out for her,” he finished with a wink.

Selina eyed him curiously, as if expecting some sort of punchline or rebuke. As if she was surprised that he could be so insightful.

Not that Benedict took her confusion personally. This right here was the most the two had spoken to one another since their wedding day. Until now, he might have guessed that she thought him a mute! Certainly, a dumb brute.

“And you?” she asked. “Although I suppose with just one sibling, it should be obvious who you favor. There’s no competition.”

He laughed. “I love and hate Edmund in equal measure.”

“In your defense, he is rather easy to hate.” She chuckled, only to gasp and look at him apologetically. “I am sorry. I did not mean?—”

“It is quite alright,” he assured her, making sure to smile so she could see that he was not angry.

Had she said such a thing earlier, he might have gotten angry, for, like Selina with her youngest sister, he was extremely protective of Edmund.

“He did seem rather nice,” she offered meekly. “From the little I saw of him.”

“It is fine.” He chuckled. “Edmund is a unique breed. He has the power to both frustrate beyond reason and garner sympathy so that despite my best efforts, I can never be too angry with him.”

“I’ll have to ask him how he does it.” She snorted. “Keeping your anger in check is my meaning.”

He rolled his eyes. “For starters, he knows better than to bait me.” He raised an eyebrow at her in warning, and she pretended to look offended. “And when he and I fight, there is a good chance it will end in fists. Considering I’m bigger than him, Edmund knows better than to push me.”

She laughed. “Again, I think I could learn from him. I would do well to know when to count my losses and get out before you snap.” She pumped her eyebrows as she picked up her wine glass and took a large mouthful.

She seemed at pains not to annoy him or say the wrong thing. As he was at pains not to react the few times she accidentally crossed the line.

They both seemed to understand what would likely happen if that occurred.

As they joked and laughed, Benedict studied Selina from across the table. From the way she spoke, there was no suggestion at all that what had happened earlier affected her. It was as if she had totally scrubbed it from her mind and was now content to simply be friendly with him.

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Benedict told himself this was a good thing. Why couldn't they be friends? Especially if she would be leaving in less than two months—as she seemed to want. And as he wanted, for that matter. This marriage could never work, and they would both be happier when it was behind them, as they had agreed.

Thus, for now, it was better to be safe than risk anything else happening. Anything that might make her eventual decision to leave that much messier. Anything other than being friendly.

But would that be so bad? Just one more time, the two of us, giving in to our most carnal desires as we had already done...

Just the thought of that had his leg shaking again.

“He is not as bad as everyone thinks,” Benedict continued, giving his head a shake to dispel any thoughts of ravenous delight that took over when he gazed upon Selina and dared to think what might happen if he raised his voice... just a little.

“Is that right?”

“He was only eight when our parents died. Truthfully, I am not even sure if he remembers them. And while I became set on living up to the legacy that I knew they would want for me, Edmund was never sure of his place. And seeing as I was only twelve, I regret that I was not old enough to guide him.”

She frowned. “You speak as if it is your fault.”

He shrugged. “Perhaps that is silly of me. I barely knew what I was doing, let alone having the forethought to guide my brother...” He chuckled as memories of his youth came to him. “Most of what you hear about him is not true.” A wink. “Most of it, anyhow.”

“Have you heard from him?” she asked. “Since...”

He grimaced. “Whispers. I have sent letters to friends who I know he may be staying with, and I am hoping to hear from him soon. He will be fine—it is not his safety I’m worried about. My biggest fear is that he is scared of what I might do when he decides to come home. Scared that I might...” He clicked his tongue. “That I might overreact.”

She pretended to gasp. “You? Never?”

“Careful, Selina,” he said jokingly. “Do not test me.”

She rolled her eyes. “You need to learn to take a joke, Benedict. Not every word of derision is intended to insult. Only most of them,” she added with a cheeky grin and a wink.

They were walking a dangerous line. Benedict had no doubt that she wanted to be friends, or at the very least friendly. But despite the jovial nature of their conversation, she could not help but poke at him gently, to test his limits, to remind him that she had the inane ability to anger him if she so chose.

Truthfully, Benedict knew that it would be far simpler for the both of them when the time came for her to leave. Yes, right now, things seemed easy, and they had found a middle ground that allowed them to be friendly. But it would not last. A fight would occur again. Perhaps worse than the last time, one after which Selina would finally understand who it was that she was living with. A monster.

Benedict was never meant to marry. He knew that. He had resigned himself to that. And when Selina left him and he could go back to the way things were, he would be... well, not happy. That was never his fate.

Content. For Benedict, that was the best he could hope for.

## Chapter Fifteen

It was strange the difference that a few days made. Much like the weather, what started as a torrential storm to which there seemed no end soon turned sunny and glorious, ending like a day torn from the pages of a romance novel.

Perhaps a slight exaggeration, especially concerning the romance, but as the days progressed, that was exactly how it felt.

“So, dear husband, what is it that you have planned for today?” Selina asked as they sat down together to break their fast.

“Thank you for asking, lovely wife,” he responded.

It was an inside joke, the nicknames, because this marriage was anything but traditional, so they thought it funny to act otherwise.

“It is a busy day ahead for me, I am afraid.”

“Oh?”

Benedict sighed and sank down in his chair. “I am afraid I must head north to Manchester, where I will likely be until well after noon.”

“Anything worth worrying about?”

“Not really...” He clicked his tongue in vexation. “Just some tenants I must deal with. They have fallen rather behind on their rent and need to be reminded that late payments will not be tolerated.”

She chuckled as she reached for a scone. “How terrifying. For them, I mean.”

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He looked at her flatly. “I assure you it is business only...” A grin spread up the non-scarred side of his face. “Unless they lie to me, in which case I may have to savage them as I am known to do.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that.” She giggled as she tore a piece of the scone and popped it in her mouth.

“After that, it is all work, I am afraid. If you do not see me, that’s because I’ll be locked away in my study, filling out paperwork until my eyeballs begin to bleed.”

She swallowed. “Sounds painful.”

“For my hand.” He laughed. “But it must be done. I hope you will be fine on your own. I know how bored you tend to get when there is nobody about to entertain you.”

“You would think so, but I have become rather accustomed to entertaining myself. You see, I have a husband who is constantly at pains to avoid me, so it is a state of being I am used to.”

“Naturally.”

“So do not worry about me, dear husband,” she continued pleasantly. “I am perfectly capable of filling out my day.”

“Thank God, for I would have surely worried.”

“So typical of you.” She tore another chunk of her scone and popped it in her mouth,

her eyes flashing wickedly as she swallowed.

He chuckled deeply. “Tomorrow, however—I do not want to excite you or get your hopes up, but my schedule will be empty. Which means...” he trailed off and looked at her expectantly. She motioned for him to continue. “We might spend the day together.”

“Oh my. How did I get so lucky!”

“It will likely be boring,” he added. “And by the end, I know you will yearn for your own company once more. But if you humor me, I would greatly appreciate it.”

She pretended to consider, again picking at her scone. “I suppose it will not be too much of an inconvenience. And tonight? Will I be eating on my own?”

“I would not dream of it.”

“So, a day spent by myself, and then I must put up with you for supper.” She popped the final piece of scone in her mouth, chewed for a moment, and then swallowed. “I suppose that will not be nearly so bad. Bearable, is my meaning.”

He laughed. “So very gracious of you.”

“Unlike you, dear husband, I am a delight.”

“Unlike me, lovely wife, who is a terror.”

Their banter, for how effortless and jovial it seemed, had not come naturally but had been worked on over the past three days.

It started with that first supper, a means to test the other out and prove that they could

converse without descending into argument.

They spent the following day together, going for a walk across the estate, spending the afternoon reading in the garden, and then having supper together, by which point they had begun to figure out each other's personalities.

Since then, Selina and Benedict had fallen into a pattern that, to the untrained eye, might suggest a happy marriage between two souls who had been together for an age and were now the best of friends while still very much in love. Obviously, nothing could be further from the truth.

We are good friends, and that is all we are.

It was a friendship that had caught Selina by surprise but was not at all unwelcome. Friends only... which, it seemed, Benedict was happy with. For if not, surely he would have said something? Or rather, *done something*...

"Well, I am off. I will see you this evening?"

Benedict rose from the table and stretched his arms above his head. As he did, Selina could not help but sneak a glance at his waist... and further south, at his belt, which led her to stare at the noticeable bulge in his pants. Her mind flashed to when that bulge was in her hand and she was stroking it ever so gently...

Selina tore her eyes away and gave her head a shake. They were just friends, and friends did not stare at one another like that. Nor did they imagine the noises that the other made when their hand was wrapped firmly around what was a rather impressive girth?—

"Right here," Selina said a little too loudly as she pointed down the table, forcing her mind back to the conversation at hand. "And you, right there." She pointed at the

head of the table.

Benedict laughed and shook his head. But before he turned to leave, he came for her as if it was automatic. Selina frowned as he leaned toward her, and before he could stop himself, or she could say anything, he kissed her on the forehead.

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The kiss sent a pulse through her forehead, and her cheeks flushed bright red, which had her smiling as if she had no control of them. Her heart fluttered, and she cleared her throat awkwardly and looked away.

What on earth was that...

If Benedict had noticed anything, he did not give an indication. He simply strolled across the room and out the door.

“Have a good day,” she called after him, rather awkwardly, her heart still fluttering strangely.

Was that a normal reaction to a friendly kiss? She was not so sure...

She supposed that just spoke to how very strange this little arrangement of theirs was.

Selina turned her head to watch him go, smiling to herself because she could not have been happier about how things were going. Finally, they were treating one another civilly. Most importantly, they were no longer fighting.

Although...

Is it strange that I miss the fighting?

She was not so foolish as to think that it was the fighting that she missed. She did not miss being belittled and shouted at and bullied. She did not miss being made to feel scared and alone in her own house. What she did miss, or what she still thought of,

was what the fighting had led to.

Just thinking about it made Selina sweat. Face flushing. Body quivering. She found herself glad that Benedict was not here to see it.

What had happened that morning was indescribable. And if they were going to stay together forever, she would have certainly wished for it to happen again. Seeing as that was not the case, she knew deep down there was no point in wishing for it again.

At the end of the day, what Selina wished for more than anything was a marriage built on love. Lust was all well and good, but it was not permanent, and when it simmered, love was what remained. Or so she had been led to believe.

That, she knew, was not what she and Benedict had.

Yes, they had the passion. Yes, they had the intensity. But love? Romance? They were just friends, and even that needed to be worked on.

She was enjoying it for now, but it would not last. At best, she could hope that they keep it going somehow until their marriage came to an end.

Selina spent the day reading. She did consider going for a short walk across the estate, where she had found a hidden spring a few days ago, but she thought that might be saved for tomorrow, when she was with Benedict. She might even pretend not to know about it, letting him believe that he was showing it to her for the first time.

So, a day indoors, nothing too exciting, because supper was what she was looking forward to the most.

Only because I enjoy his company. It is not as if I am looking forward to spending

time with him—and if I am, only as a friend. That is all!

Then why did she make sure to bathe and dress early? Why did she try on three different dresses before deciding on an emerald-green gown with light-green trim which was perhaps a little too fancy for a simple supper, but she knew Benedict would appreciate? And why did she wear her hair up, with a golden tiara to hold it back, matching earrings to triangulate the look, and a new perfume that she had not worn yet but suspected Benedict would like the scent of?

Because he has had a long day and will appreciate the extra effort. What else is a friend if not someone to take the load after a long, hard day?

She arrived at supper early, wanting to be there before Benedict arrived. He was home, she knew, for she had heard him come in hours ago. But he had gone straight to his study, and she had not seen him since.

Likely he was just getting ready and would be down soon...

But soon came and went, and still, there was no sign of Benedict.

Another ten minutes ticked by. And then another five. Selina sat waiting, vacillating between worrying about him and being annoyed at him. Times were that she would have only felt annoyed, and the fact that she dared to worry, as if something might be wrong, told to how far the two had come.

“Harris!” she called to the butler, who was walking back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Where is His Grace? Have you seen him?”

“No...” He looked beyond the door. “I have not heard from him all evening. Perhaps he is still working? Lost track of time, I would guess.”

Do not be upset. Do not go up there in a fury. He made a mistake... and as his friend, I should not hold it against him.

“Shall I fetch him?” Mr. Harris asked.

“No, it is fine,” she sighed and rose from the table. “I shall do it.”

Truthfully, Selina felt more stupid than anything. Dressed splendidly as she was, she did not relish the idea of sharing supper with Benedict, who would likely be wearing the same thing he had been wearing all day.

She arrived at his study and forced herself to take a deep breath. Not to be angry. Not to accuse. To joke and poke fun at his losing track of time. At least that was the idea.

She knocked softly, only to be met with silence. She knocked again, but still to no answer.

“Benedict?” she called as she pushed the door open. “Are you there?” She poked her head inside, and her face dropped when she spotted him behind his desk, head on the table, fast asleep. “Wonderful.”

She slunk inside, smiling to herself because this was the last thing she had expected. Not that she should have been surprised. With how hard he had been working, it was no wonder he was so tired.

She sat on the edge of his desk, right beside his head, and watched him for a moment. It was strange that she hardly noticed his scars anymore. They were still very much there, but she did not mind them one little bit. In fact, studying him closely—really looking at him because for once, she could do so without him noticing—she would not hesitate to say that he was handsome.

Without thinking, she reached out and gently stroked the side of his face. It was warm, and he shifted slightly, making her smile. They were friends, yes, but then why did that smile make her heart flutter? And why did it race the longer she looked at him...

“Huh—” His head jerked suddenly, and his body shifted.

“Oh!” She tumbled back, nearly falling off the desk.

“Selina?” Benedict was awake, stretching himself into consciousness, looking at her as if he was dreaming. “What are you... What is going on?”

She chuckled as she stood up and smoothed down her dress. “You fell asleep, Benedict. I came here to wake you.”

“Did I?” He looked around, and his eyes went wide. “Supper! Oh no?—”

“It is quite alright.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Really, it is no bother.”

He stood up quickly as if he meant to rush out of the room, but then he noticed her as if for the first time. His brow furrowed as he took in her dress, and then his lips curled into a smile. “That dress...”

She felt her cheeks flush. “It is nothing.”

“No, it is not nothing.” He looked right at her, and she tried to meet his eyes... with some difficulty, as her heart began to race again. “It is beautiful.”

“Thank you...” She looked away with embarrassment.

She could feel his eyes on her. Drinking her in. Aware of how good she looked, she had not expected his reaction, how entranced he appeared. It was more than just friendly.

Her body began to run hot. She looked at him quickly, took note of the hunger in his eyes, then looked away. This friendship of theirs had worked well for three days, but perhaps it had always been doomed to failure?

Having gotten to know one another beyond the superficial, Selina found herself wanting to say something disparaging just to stoke his temper.

Do not do it... do not tempt him...

“So...” She hesitated. “Were you planning on keeping me waiting all night?” The words came out before she could stop herself.

Benedict frowned as if he did not understand. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Or perhaps I need to speak slower. For the dim-witted.”

It took him a moment to understand what she was doing, and she silently prayed that he would not take the bait. But then a smile curved his lips, and his eyes roamed down her body. He lingered on her bosom, and he seemed to subconsciously raise his hands, as if he meant to wrap them around her waist. The low growl that escaped his lips indicated just what was on his mind.

“I would not speak to me that way if I were you.”

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“I will speak to you however I wish.” She stepped closer to him, her eyes flicking down to that bulge in his pants—it had been on her mind all day, and oh how she yearned to reach out and grab it. “Unless you plan on stopping me.”

His eyes flashed with hunger, and he opened his mouth to respond when?—

“Your Grace! I am sorry to disturb you!” Mr. Harris walked into the study, looking flustered.

“Harris!” Benedict squeaked. He stepped back quickly and cleared his throat, looking away from Selina as if embarrassed. And she too, feeling the embarrassment, did the same. “We were just coming downstairs.”

“But Your Grace, a missive from your brother!” Mr. Harris was carrying an envelope in his hand, and he held it out to Benedict. “It has just arrived!”

“Edmund!” Benedict turned away from Selina, his eyes lighting up. “Are you certain?”

“It is his seal!”

Benedict snatched the envelope and then hurried around the desk and sat down. He pulled out a small knife and cut the envelope open, excitedly pulling out the letter within.

Selina had not moved. Apparently forgotten. She considered saying nothing, but she did not want to lose the moment they had just shared either. Most importantly, she

did not want this night to come to an end.

“Benedict,” she spoke softly, “about supper...”

“Hhmm?” He looked up. “What was that?”

“Supper? Will you still be joining me or...?”

He frowned at her as if he did not understand the question. Or rather, why she was asking it. “Selina, this is slightly more important than supper. I have not heard from my brother in weeks.”

“Oh... yes. I just thought?—”

“I told you that I have written to him—that I was waiting for a reply.” The look he gave her suggested that she was daft for not understanding. “Thank God he chose to send one. Let us hope that he has done the smart thing and kept his head down these past few weeks.”

“Yes...” She tried for a smile. “But surely, a reply can wait until?—”

“We will speak at breakfast tomorrow.” He lowered his head, his eyes scanning the letter, Selina once again forgotten.

It should not have hurt as much as it did.

And yet, as Selina skulked out of the room, she could not help but feel a tightness in her chest that spoke to how upset she truly was. Suddenly, this friendship was not as rosy as it had seemed. A shame then that she felt it was too late to say otherwise.

She had dug her own grave, and now she was doomed to lie in it. Likely—and this

was the real irony—Benedict would not even notice.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Mr. Harris,” Benedict asked as the elderly butler strode into the dining room the following morning, “have you seen my wife this morning?”

“I am afraid not, Your Grace. Shall I look for her?”

“I am sure it is fine...” he trailed off as he looked at the empty place beside him, which was ordinarily occupied by Selina. “Perhaps she is just running a little late.”

Mr. Harris nodded in agreement. “I shall pop upstairs and double-check.”

“Do not make it obvious you are doing so,” Benedict made sure to request. “And certainly do not tell her I was asking after her.”

“I will be as subtle as a mouse in a storm.” There was a knowing smile on Mr. Harris’ face, to which Benedict responded with a warning look.

It was not until he arrived for breakfast and saw that Selina was not waiting for him that Benedict considered there might be a good reason for her absence. A reason that had everything to do with how he had spoken to her the previous evening.

He had been tired, was all. Caught off guard. And when a letter came from Edmund, the shock of it resulted in him dismissing her in a way he had not meant to.

Surely, she is not upset with me? I did not shout at her. I did not get angry. I simply dismissed her—but for reasons that were perfectly understandable!

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His brother was fine, at least. Staying with a friend. Testing the waters to see if it was safe for him to return. And while he was sorry for his actions—that was very Edmund, asking for forgiveness, rather than permission—the fact that he wished to return was good news. News that Selina should have been glad to hear. That she should have expected to make Benedict so distracted.

The justification fell flat on his conscience and did not make him feel any better. If anything, he only felt worse.

Worse still when Mr. Harris returned moments later...

“Your Grace,” he announced as he strode into the dining room, “I have some troubling news.”

Benedict’s stomach dropped. “She is not coming.”

“Impossible to say, Your Grace, for Her Grace was not in her bedroom, nor is she anywhere in the manor. I asked her chambermaid, who has not seen her since the previous evening, suggesting that she either snuck out last night or early this morning.”

“She... she is gone?” Benedict blinked, not entirely certain how he should feel.

“It would seem that way.”

Benedict’s first instinct was to panic. Considering how he had spoken to Selina last night, he could not escape the feeling that her disappearance was his fault. That she

was upset with him and had decided to leave to teach him a lesson or something of that nature. That did sound like something that she would do.

But then he had to ask himself why she was upset in the first place. If they were just friends, then surely she could not have been that angry with him. Disappointed, perhaps. But not enough that she would run away.

“Shall I send out a search party, Your Grace?” Mr. Harris asked.

“No,” Benedict spoke slowly, “I do not think that will be necessary.”

“But Your Grace?—”

“It is fine, Harris,” he insisted. “Likely, she had gone for an early walk and will be back shortly. It is not that big of a deal.”

Easy words to speak. Harder words to believe.

Benedict broke his fast alone, doing what he could to ignore the guilt churning in his stomach, trying his best to convince himself that this was nothing. He and Selina had come so far these past few days, further than either would have thought possible. There was no reason that his dismissal of her the previous evening should have caused such a reaction.

She would return shortly, they would laugh about the misunderstanding, and that would be the end of it.

He was about to adjourn to his study when he remembered that he had purposefully finished his work yesterday so he could take today off. He had told Selina as much, and she had sounded excited by the prospect.

Again, the fact that she was not here, that she had left without saying anything...

Is now the time to panic?

It should have been obvious that it was panic Benedict was feeling and not anger. He did not rue the fact that she had not thought to let him know what she was doing. Rather, he worried that something had happened to her and that he might be responsible.

“Harris!” he called as he stormed out of the dining room. “Any word?”

“Your Grace!” Mr. Harris came hurrying from around the corner. “I have just come from the stables.”

“And your reason for that?”

“One of the horses is gone, Your Grace,” he explained, out of breath, his face beet red. “According to the stablehand, the tracks lead north toward the forest.”

“She went horse riding,” Benedict groaned. “Why on earth would she do such a thing so early in the morning?”

Mr. Harris looked pointedly at him. “Perhaps she was not certain if you would join her for breakfast, Your Grace, so she saw no need to attend.”

Benedict groaned again and ran a hand through his hair. From his experience with women, he knew them to be temperamental, sensitive creatures likely to take small misunderstandings and spin them out of control. This was not his fault! He had done nothing wrong!

And yet... if that was true, he would not have asked Mr. Harris to have his horse

saddled so he might go after her. Which he did do, without delay.

“Shall I send someone with you?” Mr. Harris asked him.

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“No, no,” Benedict sighed as he walked across the foyer, realizing he would need a change of clothes if he was to go horse riding. “I should be quite alright on my own.”

That, and he sensed that when he found Selina, he might need to offer an apology. Not a concept that he was familiar with. Not one that he even knew how to address. But she was clearly upset with him, and while he told himself that he should not care one little bit—for reasons that were becoming far too obvious to ignore—he did.

This friendship was becoming infinitely complex in ways that Benedict had not imagined. What was more, he sensed that it was only just getting started.

Benedict was no tracker, but it was easy enough to see which way Selina had ridden. Her tracks had flattened the grassy fields that spread north from the estate, heading toward the small forest that sat on its border. From there, he was able to follow a man-made path, conceivably the only way she would be able to steer her mount through the forest.

He reached the path and began to follow it. And as he did, he found his thoughts weighed down by confusion and a determination not to admit the obvious.

This friendship that he and Selina had decided upon was supposed to be an easy solution to their marriage. A way for them to live together without having to admit any real feelings or descend into constant bickering as was their way. What was more, it was only supposed to be temporary.

At least when we fought, it was simple. At least when we argued, we said what we meant and let fate decide the rest.

Benedict did not want to be upset with Selina for this. Technically, she had done nothing wrong. But he could not escape the feeling that there was a hidden message behind her little adventure this morning. While logic told him that when he found her, he needed to be cool and collected so they might discuss what happened civilly, he knew already that was unlikely to happen.

Already, Benedict could sense an argument brewing. And if he did not know any better, he would have said that she wanted it.

Dammit if I don't want it too.

He followed the path until it reached a fork. One direction led deeper into the forest while the other led toward a hidden spring that he had not visited since he was a boy. For reasons he could not explain, as if he could sense the answer deep inside of him, he chose the spring...

It was as he came closer that he heard what he thought to be laughter. It was faint at first, but as he strained his ears, he realized that Selina was, in fact, screaming.

"Selina!" He kicked his feet into the flanks of his horse and took off.

The spring sat in a shallow ravine, snaking its way to the forest. He reached the edge of the ravine and cast his gaze over the spring, immediately spotting Selina. His heart leaped into his throat.

She was in the water.

She was kicking furiously against the current.

What was more, she was in danger!

“Hold on!” Selina cried out, even though she knew there was no point. “I’m coming!” She swam through the stream as fast as her arms could take her, kicking her feet, trying to keep her head above the water as she went. “I am almost there!”

The current was more powerful than she had thought. It was lucky that she’d had the foresight to strip down to a simple chemise. Otherwise, she was certain the weight of her dress would have dragged her down.

Still, it was tough going, and it was all she could do to keep herself from being thrown and battered against the rocks and sunken tree trunks that lurked in the deep. But she could not turn back now, not when she had a life to save.

“I am nearly there!”

The luck that she had decided to come here this morning! Feeling strangely chastised from the previous evening, a ride was what she needed to clear her head. It would likely annoy Benedict that she had left without telling him... but good!

The ride saw her arrive at the spring almost by accident. She had looked upon its gushing waters, feeling a strange sense of kinship with the directionless current. And that was when she had seen it—a puppy, stranded in the middle of the spring, struggling to keep its head above the water.

Selina did not stop to think. She hurried down the bank, stripped off, and dove into the water without delay. The puppy stood on a submerged trunk—the water up to its neck—shaking and freezing and terrified, by the looks of things.

“Almost there!” Selina shouted as she swam closer.

The current was strong, but her determination was stronger. She threw herself onto the submerged trunk and wrapped her arms around the shivering puppy. It went to her

immediately, licking her face in desperation and gratitude.

“Oh, you poor thing.” She chuckled as she balanced herself on the trunk. “Now... how to get back.”

That was going to be difficult. It had been challenging enough to make her way through the strong current. But with a puppy in her arms...

Perhaps this was not such a smart idea, after all.

“Selina!” a voice cried out suddenly, rising over the sound of the water surging around her waist. “Selina!”

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Her eyes went wide, and she perked up, beaming with relief when she saw Benedict sprinting across the bank of the stream. He kicked his boots off as he ran, undid his cravat, and removed his jacket without so much as taking a breath.

“I’m coming!”

“Benedict!” she cried out and waved to him. “Benedict!”

He dove into the water headfirst, head bobbing up as his arms began to flail and his legs began to kick. He was so powerful, so assured in his movements. The way he effortlessly glided through the water, it was as if he was swimming in a placid pond.

Selina exhaled with relief when he reached her. Her heart soared because this was just like a fairytale—the hero coming to save the princess. Surely, he would be just as relieved, overcome with joy that she was not hurt and that she was safe.

No such luck.

The look on his face when he reached her was the stuff of nightmares. Fury was writ large on his expression. A glare that spoke to how angry he was with her. No sense that he was glad for her safety. He certainly didn’t smile or laugh when he pulled himself onto the submerged trunk.

So angry was he that Selina considered diving into the water with the puppy in her arms and taking her chances with the current.

“B-Benedict,” she stammered. “This is not what it looks like.”

“We will talk about it later. Now, can you swim? Are you hurt?”

She swallowed. “I am fine. But the puppy...” She indicated the little creature in her arms. “I cannot swim with it in my arms.”

Benedict groaned as he took the puppy. Then he snatched her arms and wrapped them around his neck. “Hold on,” he commanded. “And try not to make this any more difficult than it needs to be.”

They dove back into the water, Selina on Benedict’s back as he kicked his way to the shore, somehow managing to keep the puppy’s head above the water at the same time.

Selina was glad for the rescue. But it was going to come at a cost, she knew. One that she may come to regret before the day was through.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Here, let me—” Benedict pulled Selina onto dry land and then set about making sure she was not injured. The puppy shook violently from the cold, but he ignored it as his hands began to pat her down.

“I am perfectly fine,” Selina insisted as she tried to swat his hands away. “Embarrassed, but ultimately unharmed.”

“Will you just—” Benedict bit his tongue because he needed to make sure that she was indeed uninjured.

Those last few minutes when he swam through the choppy waters to save her, as his mind raced with worry over what might occur if he was too late, were harder to fathom than he could have imagined.

He cared about this woman. Dammit, it had broken him to think that she might be hurt... or worse. Foreign emotions surged through him, and for now, Benedict decided it was just worry.

“Yes...” he mused as he made sure she was not cut or bruised, as he held a hand to her chest, as he checked her pulse and looked into her eyes. “It seems that you are indeed fine.”

She rolled her eyes and smirked sheepishly. “I told you so.”

Now was the moment of truth. Would Benedict pull her into a hug and thank the Lord that she was fine? Would he laugh this off, ignore his anger, be glad that nothing untoward had happened? Or would the predictable happen?

As this was Benedict, it was predictably the latter.

“What were you thinking?!” he snapped. “Have you lost your mind?!”

He tried not to let the anger overtake him. Oh, how he did. But he felt anger. He felt relief. He felt guilt and rage and worry and a whole host of emotions that were so overwhelming that he thought he might drown in them.

“You could have been killed!” he continued, throwing his free hand in the air wildly, caring not for how demented he must have looked. He was shivering from the cold, but heat surged through his body as his anger grew. “You would have been, was I not here to save you! What were you thinking?!”

The puppy nuzzled his legs, which cut off the stream of expletives. But he did not care. He rose to his feet and stood over Selina, his eyes wide with rage, his body trembling, his temper flaring further. He had so much to say, and he knew there was nothing that could stop him.

“Is this because of last night?” he bellowed. “Because of what I said? Do you not think that immature, Selina? To run off like this! To put yourself in danger! And for what? To teach me a lesson? Although what lesson, I wish I knew!”

He glared at her, expecting her to respond with fire. But strangely, she said nothing.

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“I thought we agreed to be civil!” he shouted. “I thought we were doing this to avoid... to avoid incidents like this one! Friends? Is that not what you wanted? Do you even know what you want?!”

Slowly, Selina stood up. But still, she said nothing.

She was drenched from head to toe. Her white chemise stuck to her curvaceous body, showing off curves that should have had Benedict gawking. And he might have done so too had he not had so much to say. Had he not wished for her to say the same things back.

For days now they had been friendly, knowing that if they descended into fighting, the worst would happen. Or the best, considering what the ‘worst’ consisted of. Benedict was not shouting at Selina because he wished for a repeat of the last time. Not at all.

It was frustration that did it.

What does she want?

But still, Selina did not speak. She did not cower. She did not look upset or angry or scared. She looked at him plainly, her big dark eyes assessing him as if she was bored. Head tilted. Lips pressed together. No sense at all that his words were affecting her.

“Well!” Benedict prompted, wishing to grab her by the arm. “You have nothing to say?” He raised both eyebrows at her. “Say something, won’t you!”

“Are you finished?” she asked calmly.

He opened his mouth to shout but then caught his tongue. “What?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you finished?”

“I have not even gotten started yet!” he hissed.

He had tried to contain his anger, but he was past that now. He wanted the anger. He wanted her to return it. He wanted... he wanted... he wanted her.

Selina, it seemed, had other ideas.

“I appreciate that you are angry.”

“That does not begin to describe?—”

“But now is not the time,” she cut him off. “Be angry. Be furious, for all I care. But can it wait until we are home?”

“Until we are home?!”

She gestured to her soaked dress. “I am wet. I am cold. I am in no state to argue with you right now. I am sorry for what I did, and when I am in a better state, please let me know the mistake that I made here today.”

“A mistake? That does not even begin to cover?—”

“Later,” she warned him, still keeping her temper. “I am not going anywhere. And if I know you, neither is that temper.”

Her sense of calm only infuriated him further. While ordinarily, it was her hot temper that lured him, now it was her disinterest and cool head that had his body shaking and his desire to yank her to him reaching new heights.

Was this a ploy? Did she think that if they waited, he might calm down and they could speak about this civilly? As friends? If so, she had vastly underestimated just how upset he was.

“Later?” he growled.

“If it is acceptable.”

“Fine,” he snarled. “When we are home. But do not think I will forget this.”

She smirked. “Benedict, I would be shocked if you did.”

We can never be friends. Funny that it has taken me this long to realize it.

They rode in silence, side by side, saying nothing as they slowly steered their horses back in the direction of the manor. Selina could feel the steam rising off her husband as they rode. She had never felt such anger from him before.

When he had started berating her just now, her first instinct was to rebuke him the only way she knew how. To fight fire with fire, as it was. But as he shouted, as he screamed, she was able to see past the verbal assault in a way that she had not before. Finally, she was able to understand her husband more deeply than even he understood himself.

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He cares about me. All this fury, all this rage, it is a mask he wears because he knows not how to express his feelings as he truly wishes to.

It was thus that she decided not to rise to the bait. Oh, a fight would come, that was inevitable. Now that she was prepared for it, however, she would not waste time pretending that what was going to happen was some sort of accident or mistake.

They had tried to be friends.

They had tried to be civil.

They had tried to ignore their feelings because that had felt like the easy thing to do.

Seeing Benedict come for her just now, saving her as he did, had brought to light something that Selina had been ignoring all this time. Despite the horrid monster that was her husband, regardless of the tempestuous beast who was as terrifying as he was cold, she was beginning to care for this man.

She might have laughed had this not made things infinitely more complex. A quick glance at her husband, however, at his hard-set features and the snarl he wore as he stared dead ahead, and she smirked to herself.

Perhaps it is not so complex, after all.

They would arrive home shortly, where they would fight.

This time, she would give in to her emotions, letting them fly because she knew

where that would lead. Where they both needed it to lead.

And after that... well, that she was not so certain of. This marriage was supposed to have an end date. As far as she was concerned, it still did. She was certain that it would be for the best, and she was certain that Benedict was of the same mind.

But if they could not be civil and remain friends until then, where did that lead them? She thought she knew, so much so that she was looking forward to arriving home, for the afternoon promised to be fiery.

## Chapter Eighteen

Benedict was aware of how dangerous it was to speak with Selina while he was feeling this way. Even the ride home had done little to cool his temper. Thus, he was thankful for a few more minutes to drop off the puppy in the stables and change out of their wet clothes before finally addressing what had just happened.

Or rather, that was what he had thought would happen.

“I will come find you when I am ready.” He strode through the foyer, unwilling to so much as look at his wife. “I suggest that you take your time.”

Up the stairs he went, still not looking back, then down the hallway and toward his room. There, he would take a few short breaths. He would pace and perhaps punch something. Calm was what he needed, a reminder that he could not let his anger get the better of him.

When he walked into his room and turned to close the door, he balked to find her walking in behind him.

“What are you doing?”

“You wish to talk, do you not?” she said simply as she stepped around him and made for the center of the room. “Let us talk.”

“I—” He caught his tongue as he spun about. “Once you have cleaned yourself and are more presentable, we will?—”

“I think now is better.” She turned back to face him, somehow managing to look in complete control of herself. “We both know where this is going to go, so why waste the time?”

Is she serious? Does she want me to shout at her? What on earth is she trying to do?!

“I should warn you,” he began carefully, feeling his anger spike again. “I am none too pleased with you.”

“I know.”

“This will not end well, for either of us.”

“If that is what you think.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, frustrated because now he could see that she was purposefully baiting him. “You wish to do this now? You are certain?”

She raised a daring eyebrow at him. “I have never been more certain of anything.”

His eyes flashed with rage, and he saw a shadow of excitement pass behind her own. “Fine. But remember, you asked for this.”

And then, he crossed the room to meet her.

Selina did not cower. If anything, she stood taller, welcoming the barrage that was his hulking body flying toward her like a cannonball.

Her chemise was still soaked through, her nipples straining against the fabric, her curves wickedly tempting. Her hair was matted and clinging to her face and neck. But she did not look small and frail, like he might break her if he came too close. The strength that he knew she possessed in spades was at the fore, and she dared him to try and match it.

This only excited him further.

“What were you thinking!” he barked, coming to a halt less than three feet away from her. Again, he was caught off guard that she did not step back or even flinch. “You could have been killed!”

“And that would have upset you?” she responded coolly.

“What?” He recoiled in surprise. “Yes! Of course, it would have upset me!”

“It would not have made you happy? Even relieved? It seems to me that if I had died, it might have solved a lot of problems at once.”

“That is not...” His brow furrowed. “How could you say such a thing?”

“Just a thought.”

“Is that what you think of me?” he growled. “That I am some sort of monster who would wish death upon his own wife? That I might rejoice in it!”

She scoffed. “From what I have heard of you, dear husband, you might eat the carcass after for good measure.”

That felt like a slap to the face. Benedict took a step back, his anger mixing with shame. He searched her face desperately, to see if she was joking, but the fact that she did not so much as blink told him that she was being serious.

“I am not like that,” he snarled at her, taking a step forward, and then another. He towered over her, his body shaking, his fists clenched. Heat surged inside him, only to die down at the sight of that cold expression on her face. “I have never—I would never—” He clenched his jaw. “I am not a monster.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “Is that so? The way you are behaving right now contradicts that claim.” Her lip curled, and she looked him over. “Not a monster? I find that hard to believe.”

She was baiting him. He knew that she was. But that did not make it any easier to bear, for she had touched a nerve that, ironically enough, only proved the point that he was arguing against in the first place.

“I would watch what I say next if I were you.”

“I am not scared of you,” she declared bravely. “Despite how much you wish I was.”

“I do not wish that you?—”

“You do,” she cut him off, which had him wincing because oh how he hated it when she did that. “Not because you want it. Not because you desire it of me. But because

it would make things easier for you if it was the case. That is why you wish that I fear you.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Ha!” Her mocking laughter sent a pang through him, and he groaned as it worked its way up his legs and through his stomach. “You want me to fear you so that you can explain why our marriage is doomed to failure. You want me to think of you as this hideous, scarred beast because that way, when I turn you down, you can cry foul as if there was nothing you could have done.”

Her words were like knives, and the way she sneered as she spoke them was as demoralizing as it was tantalizing. Never one to be spoken to like this, Benedict wanted nothing more than to grab her by the arms and demand that she stop at once.

His hands clenched into fists. His body shook. He glared at her, and she matched it, licking her lips as if daring him to take her.

Does she know what she is doing? Is this her plan? To provoke me so that I have no choice but to demonstrate my power over her? What does she want from me?

“Honestly, I never took you for a coward, Benedict, but that is what you are.”

“Say that again, woman,” he snarled and stepped toward her.

She stayed put, looking into his eyes, daring him. “You are a coward, Benedict, because you are too weak and pathetic to admit the truth.”

“And what truth is that?” His heart raced, for he began to understand what she was saying. But whether he could say it out loud or not...

She scoffed. “Even now you cannot say it. Even after everything we have been through, you still cannot say it.”

“Say what?” he hissed, leaning in, his face inches away from hers.

She held his gaze, their faces so close that their noses were touching. “I will not do your dirty work for you.” A cold, dismissive look and she scoffed again as she stepped around him. “If you cannot say it, then you do not deserve it, and there is no need for me to be here.”

Selina started to walk away. But Benedict was not done yet.

He knew what she was speaking of—this friendship, its failure. They could not be friends, for they wanted one another on a carnal level. Even now, he wished to tear off her clothes and devour her like the animal she thought he was.

More than once, he had wanted to broach the subject, but... well, she had used the word ‘coward’ aptly enough.

He could not say it. Not yet. What he could do, however, was show her.

“Where do you think you are going!” He reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

She spun back, gasping with feigned shock as she looked from his hand around her arm to his face. Her eyes lit up, and he could see the hunger behind them. “Let me go.”

“You are not going anywhere. Not until I am done with you.”

“Is that right?” She licked her lips and looked him right in the eyes. “What are you

going to do about it?”

There was no doubt now as to what Selina wanted from him—what this entire fight had been about. They had tried being friends. They had tried being civil, ignoring the reality that had existed between them since that first night in the hallway, when she had confronted him.

They had tried everything, and it had led them to this.

Benedict, no longer hesitant, no longer worried about the future and what this might mean, finally acted as he should have days ago, and every day since. He growled once, pulled Selina to him with all his might, and kissed her on the lips as if his life depended on it.

And unsurprisingly, she kissed him right back.

Selina had seen this coming—heck, she had made it happen. Still, she was surprisingly unprepared for just how explosive their fight and the kiss that followed were.

Their lips locked as Benedict pressed her against his heaving body. His hand was still around her arm, holding her there, as his other giant paw cupped her chin. Their lips parted as their tongues dove into each other’s mouths, exploring and searching and licking and lapping with untamed desire.

Selina pawed and clawed at his shirt. It was damp from the spring, but his body ran hot underneath. As they kissed, she tore it open and pressed herself against his chest. Her hands then quickly moved to his hair and tugged on it.

He licked into her mouth. He nibbled on her lips. He growled as she leaned away, snapping and snarling and then pulling her face back to his.

His hands released her and then cupped her rear. He lifted her effortlessly, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. He held her aloft as they continued kissing, moans of pleasure escaping their mouths as they broke apart for air.

“This is what you wanted,” he growled as he kissed down her neck. Each wet kiss sent a shiver through her body.

“No. This is what you wanted,” she countered, pulling on his hair as she threw her head back, giving him more access to her neck.

He chuckled deeply as he carried her to the bed and dropped her on it. His large frame pressed her down into the mattress, smothering her so that she could hardly breathe. But then he propped himself up on his knees, pulling back for long enough to gaze down at her quivering body.

His eyes... the way he admired her... she had never felt so desired. He drank her in like she was an elixir—licking his lips, gaping and gawking, almost unwilling to tear his eyes away, as if that might break the spell.

“Well?” she prompted. “Do you want me or not?”

His eyes flashed with anger, and he reached down, grabbed hold of her chemise, and tore it open. Her breasts spilled out, and he swept down, taking them in his massive hands. His lips closed around her nipples, and he sucked and nibbled in a way that was almost painful... had it not been so pleasurable.

On her back, Selina kept her legs wrapped around him as he continued to lick and suck on her heaving breasts. He was like an animal, the way he attacked them, unable to control himself and unwilling to.

Her hands moved under his shirt, and she ran her nails down his back, which had him

moaning in delight.

“Careful,” he growled as he pulled back.

“What?” she challenged him, relishing the way he attempted to look upon her warningly. “I thought you a beast?”

“I have not even started yet.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Show me.”

This was a side of herself that even Selina did not know. She had no idea what she was saying. What she was doing. What any of it meant. But with Benedict, that did not seem to matter. She turned into a different person, one who knew just how to tease and poke him to get what she wanted.

Not that she even knew what she wanted!

Lucky then that Benedict seemed to understand that perfectly.

“Ow!” she yelped as his hands snaked under her back and then flipped her onto her stomach. “What are you?—”

“Quiet,” he growled.

He fell over her, pressing her into the bed. He wrapped one arm around her neck, pulling her head back so he could bite her earlobe. Meanwhile, his other hand trailed under her skirt and stroked her quivering thighs.

“Benedict...” Selina moaned as his fingers circled her pleasure center, stroked her folds, and then gently dipped inside her. “Oh... Benedict. Right there?—”

“I said”—he clapped a hand over her mouth so she could not speak—“Be quiet.”

With one hand still on her mouth, he used the other to force her onto her knees. Next, he pushed her chemise up her thighs and over her rear so that she was practically

naked. Her dress was a torn, disheveled mess by now. She wanted to look back to see what he was doing, but he would not allow her, and that lack of knowing was both terrifying and beyond arousing.

Again, his fingers dipped inside her. She stiffened and bit his hand. He slid his fingers inside her further, and her body spasmed as she felt them press against a sensitive spot. She bit his hand harder, and he growled in warning. She laughed... and then screamed as his hand slapped her bare ass cheek.

“Urgh...” she groaned. “Again!”

He spanked her a second time. And a third! Spikes of pain radiated up her thighs and through her body, but she wanted more. All of it! A friendship had been all well and good, but it was nothing compared to this.

“I ask you again...” He dropped his hand as he kneeled behind her. “Is this what you want?”

“If you are not too much of a coward to take it.”

He laughed deeply as both his hands gripped her hips. She braced herself as she looked ahead, knowing what was about to come. He drew it out... had her shaking until she was just about ready to turn back and demand that he do it already, when?—

“Urgh!” she moaned, her head falling on the mattress as she felt him enter her fully.

Slowly, inch by glorious inch, Benedict slid his manhood inside her. It made her legs shake violently. It made her body stiffen and then shudder and then spasm. She bit into the mattress, only for his hand to wrap around her head and hold it there so she could not look back. And still, he slid deeper and deeper inside her.

Once he was all the way inside, he paused. She could hear him breathing. She could hear him growling. She could hear his heartbeat, or perhaps that was her own?

When Benedict did start to thrust, it was slow and steady at first, but she knew that would not last. Waves of pleasure rolled through her, starting from her loins until they reached her chest. Her entire body thrummed with it, a heat that built and grew each time he thrust deeper inside her.

One hand still holding her head down, his hulking frame bearing down on her, she had no control, no power to stop him even if she wanted to. And how much she loved it!

Benedict had his way with her however he wanted—with her bent over, her rear in the air. She felt like she was being punished for how she had behaved earlier. He roared as he took her. She moaned and cried out and called for more. It was raw and passionate. It was wild and untamed. It was violent and aggressive and a perfect embodiment of their relationship.

Selina did not know what would happen next. She did know, however, that friendship and civility were no longer an option. Not that she wished for them to be. And from the way her husband punished and pleased her in equal measure, she could tell without asking that he was of the same mind.

## Chapter Nineteen

“I have a proposal that you might be interested in,” Benedict said the following morning. “But please, do not read too much into it.”

Selina scoffed. “I will do my best not to become hysterical.”

He sighed. “That is not what I said.”

She looked at him pointedly. “You did not have to say anything. I know exactly what you meant, for it is written all over your face.”

Benedict clenched his jaw as he felt that all-too-familiar pull start in his crotch, blood flowing and engorging his member such that all he could think to do at that moment was stand up, upend the table, and pounce on his wife in a way that he very much suspected she would be perfectly fine with.

She wants me to. I can see it in her eyes. Her smirk. The way she licks her lips as if daring me...

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“What I meant is...” He pushed those thoughts to the back of his mind, for now was not the time. That would come later. “My proposal is going to sound a little odd and unexpected. But I want to assure you that there is a good reason for it.”

It looked to Benedict as if Selina was going to tease him again. No doubt she took note of the way his body stiffened at her jibe, and she knew well enough that another well-aimed blow would see this breakfast devolve into an entirely different sort of meal.

Luckily, she must have noticed how serious he was trying to be, that for once he did not wish to fight. Again... that would come later.

“I’m listening,” she said pleasantly as she reached for a buttered scone. She tore it in half and popped a piece in her mouth, before licking the butter on her lips.

Benedict momentarily forgot what he was saying. His jaw slack, his mouth watering, he became lost in the sight of her plump lips, for his mind went back to where they had been not one hour ago. Wrapped around his?—

“Yes.” He cleared his throat and tore his gaze away from her. “It concerns my brother, in a fashion. But it also concerns us.”

“Oh?” She looked at him. “You have my interest. Nothing sinister, I hope.”

“No, no.” He laughed.

“Shame,” she said, popping another piece of scone in her mouth, licking her lips

again, making sure to stare at him as she did so.

She knew what she was doing. How easy it was for her. How hard it was for him. And was it not for the fact that Benedict really had to broach what was a most sensitive topic before he lost the nerve, he might have given in. Still, he likely would.

Oh, and the fact that Mr. Harris was in the room certainly didn't help.

"As you know, my brother wrote to me a few nights ago," Benedict somehow managed, even as he gaped at his wife.

"I am aware."

"He wishes to return, but he is not certain if the timing is right. He worries that if he does so, it might trigger the rumor mill and have the ton talking once more about... well, our marriage, as you can probably imagine. Not to mention his reputation and what people will say about him."

"He worries, or you worry?"

He laughed. "We share the same fear. It has been a little over two weeks now by my count, which is not a long time in the grand scheme of things. Nowhere near long enough for people to move on from what was a rather..." He swallowed as his eyes traced down her neck to her breasts, which were straining against her corset. "Hasty marriage."

"I remember." She laughed. "I was there. And as much as I hate to admit it, I might have been slightly responsible."

He laughed also. "The point is, I have come to realize that our hiding away might eventually solve the problem, but if my brother is to return and we are to ensure that

the gossip is nipped in the bud and put to bed once and for all, then we might need to act.”

Finally, Selina stopped trying to tempt him. She sat up straighter as a frown slowly creased her face, no doubt trying to figure out where Benedict was going with this.

“What... what are you suggesting?”

This should not have been nearly as difficult as it was. Considering all that had happened in the last eighteen hours, one would think that Benedict and Selina were finally in a space where they could speak of anything without fear of awkwardness.

After all, just this morning, Benedict had woken up with Selina in his bed, where he had then pulled her close, nudged her legs open with his knees, and slipped his member inside her.

And the night before, and that same evening, they had not once left the room because to do so would be to stop the passion that had consumed them both utterly and completely and uncontrollably.

They were finally in a good place. A strange place, yes. But a good place, nonetheless.

Firstly, their marriage was still set to end in a little over one month. Despite how well they seemed to get along now, neither thought that a real marriage between them could ever work. They were too hostile. Too different. Too stubborn.

But civility was also out of the question. The friendship that they had tried to nurture was doomed to failure because friends did not fight the way they did. And friends certainly did not engage in such carnal delights either.

That was the place they had come to—an agreement not to ignore the desire that they felt for one another, figuring that if they were to live together for the next six or so weeks, they might as well enjoy each other while doing it.

We are only human, after all.

“I have been thinking about this all morning,” Benedict admitted, his tone turning serious to warn her off taunting him.

Selina laughed. “I am surprised you were able to. I would have thought your mind was somewhere else.”

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He chuckled. "As unbelievable as it may sound, I can do two things simultaneously."

"Oh, I knowthatfor a fact."

He groaned as he felt his member stiffen again. "There is a ball at the end of next week," he continued, clenching his jaw to feign some semblance of self-control. "And it is my thinking that you and I attend." He looked at her. "As man and wife."

Finally, Selina stopped trying to bait him.

"Oh..." She blinked. "A ball?"

"That is right. Summer began last month, and this promises to be the biggest ball of the Season, so far. A who's who of lords and ladies and social sponges desperate to entrench themselves in the ton should be there, and it might benefit us if we attend." He tried to meet her eyes, but she refused to give them, clearly taken aback by his suggestion. "What do you think?"

"I..." She bit her lip. "I am surprised."

"It is the smart thing to do," he made sure to emphasize. "If we are seen behaving in a civil manner, it will stamp out any lingering gossip. We can... behave civilly, yes?"

She tittered awkwardly. "It depends on what you mean by 'civilly.'"

"Oh, you know," he sighed as he reached across the table and took her hand. "Pleasant conversation. Dancing. Resisting the urge to be at one another's throats for

at least one evening.”

“Ah, well, there is the problem—I do not know if we have it in us.”

She sounded as if she was joking, and perhaps she was.

Benedict and Selina had reached a level of comfort that allowed them to joke and tease each other without taking it seriously, both aware of what they were now and what they wanted.

It was nerves that Benedict could see in his wife. But was she nervous because she did not know if they could spend an evening together without fighting? Or because to do that might risk them exploring another set of feelings that they seemed happy to ignore for now?

“It will just be for show,” he made sure to explain. “Just to prove to everyone that we are happily married and there is no need for concern or alarm.”

She frowned as she looked at him. A shadow passed behind her eyes, a question which she was not sure if she should ask. “So long as it is just for show.”

“What else could it be?”

After what had happened the previous evening, it would not be an understatement to say that Benedict was as happy as he had ever been. And he was certain that Selina was of the same mind. But it was a certain type of happiness, brought about by arguments and taunts because they knew where they would lead.

It was also shallow. Fun, yes. Impossibly enticing and addictive, of course. But it was all superficial, purely physical, a relationship based on giving in to temptation while ignoring any chance that they might delve that little bit deeper.

For now, that was easy enough to justify. With this marriage set to end, why would they want anything else?

“I suppose I ought to choose what I’m going to wear,” Selina said eventually. “If we are going to fool everyone, I wish to look good while doing it.”

Benedict breathed a sigh of relief, glad that she was on board. “I am sure that whatever you pick, you will look wonderful. Although, truth be told, I prefer you in nothing at all.”

Her eyes flashed with excitement. “Careful, husband...” A quick glance across the room, at where Mr. Harris stood awkwardly in the corner. “Perhaps we should make sure that we are alone before engaging in such talk.”

“Yes, I think you are right.” Benedict laughed. “Unless we wish to scar the poor man for life.” His heart began to race, and his member stiffened even further.

Their marriage was far from perfect. It was still only temporary. But for now, he and Selina seemed happy to exist in the space they had created for themselves.

And as happy as he was... Benedict could tell from the look in his wife’s eyes that he was about to be even happier in a few minutes.

## Chapter Twenty

It was five days later, and Selina’s body literally shook because she was that excited. She stood with her hands clasped before her, her eyes wide, her smile so big and toothy that it hurt her face. And while she tried to stand still and present a sophisticated air, not that of a child who had eaten too many sweets, it was awfully hard to do.

“I would have assumed that I had worn you out.” Benedict chuckled from beside her.  
“At least I meant to.”

She did not look at him, for her gaze was saved for the carriage that approached steadily in the distance. But she gave an eye roll and a dismissive snort.

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“You will have to do a lot better than that if you wish to tire me. As I recall, you are the one who tends to tire easily.”

“I would not go so far as to say that...”

She eyed him knowingly. “And yet I am brimming with energy, and you can hardly walk straight.”

To this, Benedict simply grinned.

It was warm in a way that he was not known for, caring in a way that she had come to understand him perfectly capable of. When the two were together, he was mostly dismissive, temper-driven, and animalistic because that was what he knew she liked best.

Selina eyed the smile and the warmth in his eyes as he looked at her. A look she did not recognize, and one she told herself she did not wish to.

It is just an act, for he promised as much. That is all.

Today was different from how the two usually behaved. It had to be.

As promised, Benedict would be on his best behavior, and she would be on hers. They were not to fight. They were not to argue. They were to present a united front, showing the love that they held so dear because they were besotted with one another as any newly married couple should be.

At least that was how it would appear.

She and Benedict were standing outside the manor as they waited and watched the carriage slowly approach. Inside the carriage sat Selina's mother and her three sisters, finally allowed to visit after nearly an entire month.

"I cannot believe they are here," Selina said, feeling a rush of anticipation.

"I told you I would allow it when I thought the time was right."

She snorted. "As if you allowed anything."

His hand rested on her shoulder, and he squeezed ever so gently. A warning. "Careful," he growled. "I thought you promised to behave?"

She grimaced. "Sorry. And yes, thank you for allowing them to visit. I am so grateful." A highly exaggerated fluttering of her eyelashes.

He shook his head and smiled. "Better."

She straightened and went back to watching the carriage approach. Technically, Benedict had given her permission to invite her mother and sisters, although it had come after much arguing... and some very intense lovemaking. But she knew how to get what she wanted, so it was never really a question.

They had both agreed that this little visit would be a perfect test for the upcoming ball. If they wanted the ton to believe that they were a happily married couple, they would need to learn how to behave in public.

That meant no fighting. No arguing. No disappearing into rooms to devour one another because they could not control the urge. They would need to behave civilly

and appropriately and, above all, as if they were in love.

“Mother!” Selina cried the moment the carriage pulled up before them and the door opened. “Sisters!” She ran to the carriage.

“Daughter.” Lady Langham smiled pleasantly as she paused in the open door. “You look well.”

“Selina!” Louisa poked her head around the Dowager Viscountess.

“Selina!” Isabella appeared beside her.

“Girls!” their mother snapped. “Behave!”

Selina laughed to see her two younger sisters struggling to stand still as their mother slowly stepped down from the carriage. Lady Langham wore a bright smile as she then swept toward Selina, her arms open wide.

“Oh, I have missed you!” Selina wrapped her mother in a hug.

“Selina!” The twins were on them next, joining in the hug.

“Girls!”

“Selina!” Diana was next, scrambling down from the carriage and throwing herself into the group hug, from which their mother tried to pry herself free.

“I said calm yourselves!”

The four sisters laughed to see their mother flustered, and for a moment, it was just like old times. Only then, Diana gasped and pulled away, her eyes going wide in fear.

The twins were next, their faces dropping as they scrambled back and bowed their heads.

It took Selina a moment to understand what caused their reaction. But soon enough, the shadow that appeared over her shoulder explained perfectly why her three sisters had suddenly become so docile. Diana, especially, trembled where she stood!

Selina rolled her eyes at the theatrics, for she no longer saw her husband as others did. Yes, he was a little harsh to look at. And yes, he was big and scary and mean if one did not know him well. But she did know him, and she knew that beneath the callous and cold exterior, there was a kind, gentle soul... one who she took a little too much pleasure in provoking.

“Mother, you remember my husband, the Duke of Northwick?”

Lady Langham smiled coyly as she stepped toward Benedict and extended her hand.

“Your Grace, it is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Lady Langham,” Benedict greeted sternly. “You look... well.”

There was a sourness in his gaze, and Selina had no doubt that he still had not forgiven her mother for tricking him into this marriage.

Selina cleared her throat and gently nudged him. Next, she widened her eyes at him in warning, and he forced a smile, as they had spoken about this, and the need to behave superseded his desire for petty retribution.

“And did I mention stunning also?” Benedict took her mother’s hand and kissed the back of it.

“I hope you have been treating my daughter well.”

He flashed a knowing smile, and he glanced quickly at Selina, who blushed furiously and looked away. “Very well. As she has been treating me.”

He released Lady Langham’s hand and then stepped to Selina, wrapping an arm around her waist and even giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Selina straightened up and smiled, ignoring the strange looks her sisters were giving them. But that was nothing compared to the curious expression on her mother’s face. Not disbelieving, but simply skeptical.

“Mother, shall we...” Selina gestured toward the manor. “You must be tired from the journey.”

“Quite,” Lady Langham agreed. “Girls.” She clapped her hands together. “Let us proceed...”

She started ahead, and the three sisters fell in behind her. With their backs turned, Selina fully expected Benedict to let her go, but his grip on her waist seemed to tighten.

“Well, that went well,” he murmured.

“Yes,” Selina agreed as she eyed the hand still wrapped around her waist, one which felt a little too comfortable. “Yes, it did.”

“I must say, Your Grace, I am only too pleased to see what has become of this marriage,” Lady Langham admitted as she took a sip of her wine and then smacked her lips. “I would never have guessed it would blossom the way it has.”

Benedict eyed her with that same sense of annoyance. Oh, how he wanted to savage her just a little. To tell her he knew what she had done and that she would come to regret it—that he was not a chess piece to be played with! But, under the current circumstances, he did no such thing.

“Oh, there is nothing to be surprised by, I assure you.” Benedict chuckled in a most friendly manner. “Your daughter is a pleasure.”

“She has her moments...” Lady Langham eyed her eldest daughter. “It seems that a strong hand is what was needed to tame her. And you clearly have very strong hands.”

“Mother...” Selina groaned.

“I am simply stating a fact!” Lady Langham cried innocently. “I know you as well as I know myself, dear, and while it might be a tad unkind to say, you were not an easy child.”

“Mother,” Selina groaned again. “That is not?—”

“Surprising,” Benedict spoke up. “I mean, that is very surprising. From my experience, your daughter has been nothing but a pleasure for which I find myself more grateful every morning that I am lucky enough to wake up by her side.” He took his wife’s hand and gave it a squeeze, not surprised to find that she was shaking with

anger.

“Is that so?” Lady Langham drawled.

“I will admit that when we first got married, I was a tad unsure. But that seems so long ago now that I find it hard to believe I ever doubted her. Or myself, for that matter.”

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“You do seem rather taken by her,” Lady Langham noted, studying Benedict as if she did not believe it. “A far cry from the last time I saw you.”

“That was weeks ago now, and as I said, a lot has changed.”

“Such as?”

Benedict held his smile, even if it was becoming harder and harder to do. “I got to know your daughter, is what.” He kissed the back of Selina’s hand. “Surely, as her mother, you can understand that beneath the...” He chuckled. “Prickly exterior, there is a rose as beautiful and sweet as any flower known to mankind.”

The twins melted at his words, their eyes seeming to water as they looked upon their sister with such jealousy that he wondered if perhaps he had gone too far in his praise.

The youngest sister snorted but smiled when she met Selina’s eyes, apparently willing to believe that her eldest sister was indeed happy.

But the Dowager Viscountess... she did not react. Another sip of wine. A stern gaze. That sense that she could see through the saccharine words.

“That is wonderful to hear,” she said eventually. “Truly, I could not be happier about it. And the two of you, of course.”

“As we could not be happier,” Benedict added quickly. Still holding Selina’s hand, he gave it another kiss.

He caught her looking at him, and while he had expected a raised eyebrow, a warning to ease off a little because he was spreading the lies far too thickly to be believed, her cheeks became rather flushed, as if she was embarrassed. A sly smile next, and she looked away sheepishly.

It was such a saccharine performance that anyone watching the two would have no doubt that they were desperately in love. Even Benedict was a little shocked by it all.

As good of an actor as I am, Selina is leaving me for dead.

The afternoon and evening had gone pleasantly enough, so far.

They had tea in the garden while Lady Langham told them what they had missed in London since they had left—gossip was not something that Benedict was particularly interested in, but he listened attentively, nonetheless.

Benedict had then left them alone for a few hours so that they might have a chance to catch up properly... and so that he had a chance to take a break because while the sisters were nice, they were also younger and somewhat too loud for his tastes. And that wasn't to mention the way he still felt about the Dowager Viscountess.

And then he had joined them all for supper, making a big show of kissing Selina on the head and telling her how beautiful she was. Not that he needed to fake that last part.

"I am so jealous that you are going to attend the Mayfield Ball," Diana complained. "Mother says that I am too young to attend."

"As you are," the Dowager Viscountess stated rightly.

"We shall be attending," Louisa said with a proud smirk.

“We cannot wait,” Isabella added with a cocky smile aimed at her younger sister.

“It is only two years until you will be able to,” Selina assured Diana, who was now pouting. “And trust me, once you do, you will see that there is nothing exciting about it.”

“Easy for you to say,” Diana whined. “You forget what it is like to be told what you can and cannot do.”

“Oh... I do not know about that.” Selina smirked and glanced quickly at Benedict.

Today had been even easier than Benedict had imagined.

He had worried that being thrust into a situation such as this would bring out the worst in him. Not very good around people, with a short fuse and unable to stomach trivial palaver at the best of times, there had always been a chance that his temper would flare and he would say some not-very-nice things without thinking.

Selina, however, was there to keep him in check.

What was more, he found that while he was at her side, he did not want to show that side of himself. This entire thing was supposed to be an act, a performance in many ways. But as the evening wore on, as he looked at his wife and saw the way she smiled whenever he spoke kindly about her, it was no longer an act, but all too real.

“I was surprised to hear that you were attending,” Lady Langham began. She sat in the middle of the table, but she commanded their attention as if she were at its head. “In truth, many were.”

Benedict chuckled. “I assume I am to blame for that. I am not known for my social graces.”

“It is a good thing that you are,” she continued. “The truth is, Selina, your uncle Leopold has become somewhat... burdensome of late, and it will do to remind him that his niece is a duchess now and we are not to be treated so callously.”

“Uncle Leopold?” Selina asked. “He is still refusing to open his coffers?”

Lady Langham sighed. “Indeed.”

“Who is this?” Benedict spoke up. “Viscount Langham? Your uncle?”

“It is fine,” Selina assured him. “Nothing to?—”

“I did not want to mention it, Your Grace,” the Dowager Viscountess cut her daughter off. “But ever since he inherited my late husband’s title, he has refused to pay us the allowance that was promised in my late husband’s will. It has been a trifling mess which has me at odds with what I might do.”

“Oh...” Benedict blinked. “That is most worrisome.”

“I do not wish to bring the mood down...” the Dowager Viscountess trailed off. “But he will be at the Mayfield Ball next week, and while I intended to speak with him...” She looked pointedly at him.

“Mother,” Selina sighed.

“It is quite alright,” Benedict assured her. “And I will happily speak with him if you want. It is not right that he treats you this way, and seeing as I am family now...” He gave her hand a squeeze. “Perhaps he should be reminded.”

“That would be wonderful,” the Dowager Viscountess sighed with relief. “Truly, Your Grace, I cannot thank you enough.”

“It is I who should be thanking you.”

The Dowager Viscountess studied him curiously. “Yes, it would seem that way.”

Benedict caught Selina watching him again. He met her eyes, and she said a silent ‘thank you,’ the relief clear on her face. To Benedict, the gesture was no big thing, and if they were to show the ton that they had a strong, everlasting marriage, then he should take an interest in family matters such as this.

No small thing...

Yet, why does it feel otherwise?

“A toast, perhaps.” Lady Langham raised a glass. “To our two families coming together and what looks to be a strong, happy marriage.”

“Agreed.” Benedict picked up his glass and raised it, as did the sisters.

Selina was last to do so. She eyed her glass with a furrowed brow, and Benedict’s chest tightened because he thought for a moment she was going to make a scene. Only then, she smiled and lifted her glass, and together they toasted to their marriage.

The evening should have felt more awkward than it did. He and Selina were treating one another so lovingly, as if they had genuine feelings for each other. No fighting. No bickering. No sexual tension used as a crutch when things became serious. Benedict should have hated every minute of it, and yet... he did not.

Why this was, he could not say. But suddenly, he was not counting down the days until the Dowager Viscountess left so that he and Selina could go back to their old ways. Even if he knew deep down that he should be.

“She is unbelievable!” Selina paced the bedroom as she felt her anger build. “I knew there was a reason she was so eager to come and visit! I knew there was!”

“She wanted to see you,” Benedict said calmly as he sat on the edge of the bed, wearing an amused smile. “Her daughter. That is all.”

“She wanted to ask you for a favor,” Selina continued hotly. “When I invited her, I only expected my sisters to come. When she said yes... well, I thought it was because she wanted to make sure that I was happy. That she wanted to see me!”

“She does.”

“No.” Selina shook her head. “And you heard her tonight. All those questions! As if she cares! She was just prying—testing us so that she could ask you for a favor without being turned down.”

Benedict laughed. “I really think you are reading too much into it.”

“I know my mother,” Selina insisted. “She is a schemer. The very reason she wished for me to marry your brother in the first place was because of Uncle Leopold. And now that I am married to a duke!” She threw her hands in the air.

“I am happy to talk to him,” Benedict explained calmly. “Really, he should not be withholding their allowance. It’s not right.”

“That is not the point!”

“What is the point, then?”

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Selina rounded on him, still fuming, made worse by the fact that her husband was so darn calm! Still sitting on the bed, still smiling at the way she paced back and forth, his apparent amusement at her anger only made things worse!

“Do you mind not being so nice!” she snapped.

“How would you like me to act?”

“As you always do!” she cried. “Get angry! Shout!”

“At your mother?”

“Maybe!”

“Do not tempt me,” he joked.

“Better that than... than... than this!” She waved her hand at him as if to indicate an imposter in place of her husband.

Benedict sighed as he pushed himself to his feet. She braced herself, certain that he was going to snap at her and tell her to calm down, to not talk to him like that, to treat him with respect! That was what she wanted, for she would not mind a chance to release her stress, and there was one surefire way to do it.

Selina readied herself. Body shaking. Palms sweating. Heart racing. He would start on her, she would bite back, and then he would take her in his arms, and they would revert to their most base desires.

“Your mother was acting the way she was tonight because she wanted to make sure that we are not pulling the wool over her eyes, that is all,” he said calmly.

“Excuse me?” She blinked, taken aback.

“What does it matter if she asks me for a favor? Frankly, we should take it as a good sign. It means that she believes that this marriage is a happy one, does it not? And was that not the entire purpose of inviting her here?”

“I... I guess so.”

He smiled as he took her hand. Gently, though. And then, with great care, he led her toward the bed. Often, or always, he dragged her to the bed. There, he would toss her down and have his way with her. But this time... there was none of that.

He sat down and pulled her onto his lap. It was a strange feeling, made more so by how nice it felt. It didn't feel as forced or as awkward as she would have assumed.

“Today has been a success,” Benedict continued gently. “And for that, we should be glad. It means the ball next week will not be the trial we thought it might be.”

She laughed softly. “You were a rather excellent actor, I must admit.”

“As were you,” he said. “Who would have guessed that we, in fact, hate one another?”

She chuckled softly, ignoring the strange stabbing pain in her chest at his words. “Certainly not my mother or sisters. I think they are actually quite jealous of me.”

“As I know Edmund will be of me when he meets you. Well... when he meets you again.” He laughed, and she laughed too.

For a moment, nothing was said because nothing needed to be said. Sitting on his lap, Selina gazed upon her husband in a way she realized she never had before. At least not intentionally.

For these past few days, ever since he had rescued her, they had not dared to speak this softly to one another. Truthfully, they had not wanted to. They had decided that their relationship could only survive through sexual encounters—a means of keeping them together until this marriage came to its agreed-upon end.

It was a perfect solution. It was a fun solution. It was what both of them wanted, as neither saw the other as a romantic option, for surely that was impossible to comprehend! Only...

After how wonderfully today had gone, Selina was beginning to see another side of her husband and, indeed, their relationship. The way they had been able to treat one another civilly without needing to fight. How much they had enjoyed each other's company, as more than just friends.

It was, in every sense, a real marriage.

Could I be falling for him? No... it must be my mind playing tricks on me after having to pretend all day.

“Now, I do not know about you, but I am rather tired,” Benedict sighed, and his body sagged.

“Me too,” she said, suddenly feeling weary.

“It might be unorthodox of us, but would you consider skipping our pre-bed ritual and simply going to sleep? As ghastly as that sounds?”

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She laughed. “Tonight, I think I can manage it. But you owe me...” She widened her eyes jokingly.

“As soon as your sisters and mother leave, I will make it up to you.” He winked. “And I know exactly how I will do it.”

“I cannot wait.”

They slept together that night. Truly, just sleeping. Selina was wrapped in Benedict’s arms, and he was wrapped around her like a blanket, and it was perhaps the best sleep she had ever had. The first time, too, that they had not had sex beforehand, and the following morning was the first they did not indulge in a round of lovemaking upon waking up.

It made their situation infinitely messier. Questions were raised that might one day need answers. As far as Selina was concerned, in a little over one month, she and Benedict would part ways, and they would both be happier for it. But as she snuggled into his arms, and as his soft breaths tickled the back of her neck while the two drifted off to sleep, for the first time ever, she wondered if that was what she wanted.

Would she truly be happier once this marriage was over? Or was there an ending here that saw them stay together and find their happily ever after? A ludicrous notion, she knew. But one that suddenly felt not so strange as it should have.

### Chapter Twenty-One

“Louisa! Isabella! Come back here!” Lady Langham shouted as her daughters

sprinted through the crowd, vanishing from sight. “Oh, where are they going?”

“It is perfectly fine, Mother,” Selina sighed. “It is not as if they are in any danger.”

“It is not their safety that I’m worried about!” Lady Langham snapped. “It is not proper, running about like that. Diana!” She turned to her youngest daughter, whose attention was fixed on a performer who was juggling three balls on fire. “Go and tell your sisters to return immediately.”

“They will not listen to me, Mother,” Diana said absently, only to gasp when the juggler produced another fiery ball seemingly out of nowhere.

“Tell them I told you to tell them to come back at once.”

Diana pulled her gaze away from the juggler and frowned. “Tell them that you told me to tell them to come back? Should I tell them that I told you that to tell them would be fruitless, because they never listen to what I tell them?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Lady Langham threw her hands in the air, evidently giving in to her frustration. Then she snatched Diana by the hand. “Come with me, then.”

“We will be right behind you, Mother.” Selina giggled.

“I will be back in a moment,” Lady Langham sighed as she dragged Diana through the crowd, caring not for the mass of commoners who gathered every which way. But she had a presence about her, one that stood out starkly to those who got in her way, and the sight of her coming made them jump back lest they be trampled.

“And people say that I have a temper,” Benedict drawled as he watched her.

“How do you think I was able to put up with you as effortlessly as I did,” Selina said

with a sly grin. “I have been practicing since I was a little girl.”

A wicked smile curved the right corner of Benedict’s lips. “I assume it is safe to say that the two of you did not solve your fights in the same manner that we do.”

“Oh!” Selina slapped him playfully on the chest. “Behave.”

“Am I not behaving?” he shot back.

She rolled her eyes. “Technically, yes. But keep talking like that, and I might have to reconsider.”

“Reconsider what, exactly?”

“If I wish to be seen in public with you.” She stuck her nose up as if to dismiss him. “I shall announce this entire experiment as a failure and return home with my mother and sisters without delay.”

“Oh, now you are just teasing me.”

She gave him a mischievous look. “Dear husband, you have seen nothing yet.”

They held hands as they walked side-by-side. They smiled at one another’s jokes. They made fun, but not in a way intended to annoy or anger. They spoke sweet words, and they kissed without worrying about how it might look. They acted as any happily married couple should do, as if they were impossibly besotted with one another such that the world might end before their eyes and they would not even notice.

Selina was determined to remind herself that this was still an act. When things became too sweet, when they became too real, she would remind herself that Benedict

was only acting this way because that was what they agreed on. His feelings for her were not real, nor were hers for him!

What Selina needed was for her mother and sisters to leave already so that she could prove it. Surely, once they were alone, the two would go back to their old ways again? They had to.

Lucky then that they were leaving for home in a few hours. Three days spent acting this way for the sake of the charade they wished to keep up and come nightfall, there would be no need to pretend any further. What would happen when they were finally alone? What would change?

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Is it strange that I feel nervous? Stranger that I am not certain if I wish for things to go back to the way they were or for us to continue in this fashion?

“Oh no.” Benedict chuckled.

“What?”

“Your sister, Diana—” He pointed through the crowd. “Should we call out to your mother or sit back and see what happens?”

Selina followed his finger... and then suppressed a giggle when she saw what her husband was pointing at. “Times were that I would say we should warn her, but...” She shrugged. “Three days later and I do not mind seeing my mother deal with this.”

“You are wicked, Selina.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “You sound surprised.”

It was pure coincidence that the village that sat just one hour down the road from Northwick Estate was hosting a festival today. Diana had been the one to learn of it, begging her mother to let them attend before they left.

Funny that it was Selina whom she should have begged, seeing as Selina was only too aware of her husband’s aversion to such things and figured that to say no early, rather than asking her husband later, was the smarter option.

“He does not like crowds,” she had told Diana.

“But... but...”

“Nor do they like him, for that matter,” Selina added. “I am sorry, but I cannot see him agreeing to attend.”

Although Selina knew that her husband was not the monster most seemed to think he was, few others knew it. And in this part of England, this close to his estate, she was certain that the last thing he would wish for was to spend the morning surrounded by villagers who would only gasp and gawk at the sight of him.

Oh, how wrong she was.

“I would love to go,” Benedict had said when asked. “Truly, it is a wonderful idea.”

Selina frowned and leaned back. “Are you certain? It is bound to be a busy affair. And I know how much you hate crowds.”

He took her hand and gave it a kiss. “Your sisters wish it, and I am dedicated to showing them a good time whilst they are here. And I have learned that a happy wife makes for a happy husband, so why not?”

Her frown had deepened at that statement.

He is only pretending, putting on a show for my mother...

“I better go and help her.” Benedict chuckled, releasing her hand as he prepared to wade into the crowd and after her mother. “Before things begin to spiral.”

“And here I was, hoping for a show.” Selina laughed.

“You might still get one.” He winked. “But I will do my best not to snap and murder

anyone. How does that sound?”

She pretended to frown. “You really have changed.”

He laughed as he started ahead. Just like when Lady Langham walked through the crowd, they saw him coming and parted for him. Many gasped. Many gawked. But Benedict ignored them, seemingly unconcerned with the reactions he was receiving.

Selina watched him with that same sense of curiosity that had been building inside her these last few days. His mood should have been foul. Forced to go out in public like this, to feign enjoyment, to not snap at people who had no right to gawk at him the way they were, and it was a wonder he was so composed.

But he was more than composed. He was happy and relaxed, not the stuck-up, cold, dispassionate man she had married all those weeks ago. And now she began to wonder. Was this the real Benedict? Was the cold, callous, angry man whose bed she shared a version of himself that he faked because he did not know any better?

Selina continued to watch as Benedict swept in to save her mother from a fire-breather who had managed to capture Diana’s attention. From the looks of things, he was trying to convince Diana to try for herself, unconcerned about her mother’s scolding. This had given her sisters a chance to run off again, which led to her mother becoming even more flustered.

Benedict was calm as he pulled Diana away. And he laughed as he then swept through the crowd and collected the twins. If this was an act, Selina would learn of it soon enough. But if it was not...

She could not help the way her heart fluttered as she began to wonder if their marriage could truly work. And if she even wanted such a thing.

More importantly, however, did Benedict?

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Benedict stood back and gave Selina space as she said goodbye to her mother and sisters. They hugged and cried beside the carriage, all animosity that had existed between them over the past three days completely forgotten.

As sad as Selina was to see her family leave, Benedict could not be happier about it. Three days was a long time to spend with any in-law, and the Dowager Viscountess was a particularly difficult case. But as promised, Benedict had behaved himself the entire time, not once giving in to his anger or raising his voice. He had been, by his estimation, the perfect husband.

It is over now, which means that things can return to normal. Although that word ‘normal’... I am not entirely sure what it means anymore.

For three days, he and Selina had pretended to be in love. The perfect couple. Proving to themselves that they could behave in public and thus convince the ton that there was nothing scandalous about their marriage or its circumstances.

That was the entire reason for this charade, which was why the implication now was that once left alone, they would go back to how they had been.

Fighting as a means to stir passion. Arguing so that their tempers would flare and Benedict would take such tempers out on his wife... and she would do the same to him. A ravenous, debauched carnal delight that they had put aside for the past three days but would now surely return to.

He was still certain that was what he wanted. This marriage had an end date, and despite how well these past few days had gone, there was no reason that he could see

that it needed to change.

But what if Selina wished for more? That was the fear that rose inside Benedict. He had done so well to play the doting husband these past few days that there was a good chance she might have begun to believe he wished for their marriage to turn into something more.

That, he knew, would be a disaster of the highest order and one he could not allow to happen.

Benedict was not marriage material—it really was that simple.

“Your Grace!” Lady Langham waved him over. “We are leaving now.”

“Coming,” he said with a big smile as he swept toward them. He forced himself to hold the smile too, as this was the last time he would be seeing the Dowager Viscountess and now was not the time to let the mask slip. “Lady Langham, I must say it was a pleasure hosting you and your lovely daughters for these past three days. Truly, an unexpected delight.”

“As it was a pleasure being hosted,” Lady Langham agreed. “Further, I cannot express the happiness I feel at seeing what a fruitful marriage this has become. And to think, my daughter fought me tooth and nail to cancel it.”

“Mother...”

“What? Did you not?”

“It is quite alright.” Benedict chuckled and rested a hand on his wife’s shoulder as he kissed the top of her head. “Truth be told, I was not looking forward to it either. But sometimes, these things have a way of working themselves out, don’t they?”

“It would seem that they do.”

Tonight would be the ultimate test. Alone, finally, and free to fall back into their old habits, Benedict wondered whether Selina would tempt him or if she would continue as they had these past three days.

It has all been an act. Surely the moment we are alone, she will say something to anger me, expecting me to react? And react I will.

As the carriage pulled away and Benedict took his wife’s hand, squeezing it as the two waved the Dowager Viscountess and her daughters off, he smiled and continued to play the doting husband, knowing that this would be the last time he would need to do so.

Tonight, things would go back to the way they were. And that, he repeated to himself, was for the best. For both him and Selina.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“How is everything?” Benedict asked.

“It is lovely,” Selina responded. A beat as she considered the way he was looking at her, expectation written all over his face. “And your own?”

“Oh, the same,” Benedict agreed. “The kitchen staff have outdone themselves.”

“Agreed,” Selina said. She tried for a smile, which Benedict returned. They held it, but it felt awkward and forced, so she looked away. “The wine too,” she added quickly as she picked up her glass and took a sip.

“Yes, I almost forgot.” He laughed nervously, doing the same with his own glass. “It

is lucky we still have some. I worried your mother might have drunk it all.”

“I think Harris hid a few bottles,” she joked. “Just in case.”

“Smart man.” Benedict chuckled.

“Yes,” she said. “Very smart.”

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Again, they looked at one another across the table, both smiling in a way that suggested comfort and companionship, but with a lingering sense of discomfort because they clearly had their minds on everything but the food and wine.

Why is this so awkward? It should not be. Not after everything that has happened.

Selina looked away from Benedict, unable to hold his stare for any longer. Focusing on her plate, she cut into the slab of meat and then took a forkful, determined to look anywhere but at him.

She could feel him watching her. She could sense him wanting to say something. She wished that he would! Wished that he would voice what was clearly on both of their minds so they could get it over with.

“So, I was thinking,” Benedict began. “The Mayfield Ball.”

“Yes?”

“It is in two nights, and considering how these last few days went, I assume that we will still attend?”

“I do not see why we won’t.”

He nodded. “Your mother’s visit was nothing but a success, in my estimation. I mean, if we are able to fool your mother of all people...” He chuckled. “Fooling the rest of the ton should be one of the easiest things to do.”

Her stomach dropped, and her heart sank. The way he spoke just now was indicative of how he must have felt. The facade that they had put on for her mother's sake was indeed an act.

Well... at least that answers the question. Not the answer I expected, but an answer, nonetheless.

“We did fool them, didn't we?” She chuckled, doing her best not to show her disappointment.

It was subtle, but Benedict frowned slightly, almost as if he was confused by her response. But he was quick to mask it with a grin that spoke to his agreement and even his relief.

“We are quite the performers.”

“So, the Mayfield Ball...?” She prompted, needing him to speak because she felt a wave of sadness assail her and did not want him to notice.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “My thinking is that if we leave tomorrow morning, we should be able to reach Timberland Estate by dusk. Lord Timberland is a good friend of mine, and he is currently out of the country—France, in fact.”

“Oh, that sounds lovely.”

“It is,” he agreed.

Again, he let the silence stretch between them. It was heavy and painful, unspoken words existing in it, seeming to batter at them both. Selina had no doubt that he could feel it, that he knew its cause. But while she had spent the last three days wondering

if maybe their relationship was ready to evolve and take the next step, it was clear to her that Benedict was not of the same mind.

She would do well to remind herself that they would separate in less than a month. That, it seemed, was still the plan.

“He allowed me and Edmund to stay there the last time we were down south, and this will be no different,” Benedict continued, swatting away the tense silence as if it did not bother him. “So, we shall arrive before dusk, which will give us time to ready ourselves for the ball that night. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“And the following morning, assuming we leave early enough, we should be able to arrive back here before it is too late. A quick trip south, I know, but I think that is preferable to spending too much time near London.” He sighed and shook his head. “Best that we show our faces, get through the night, and then vanish so as not to risk anything untoward happening. Don’t you agree?”

No, she did not. Not anymore.

It had taken Selina three days to decide what she wanted. Three days of trying to convince herself that the way she and Benedict were behaving was merely an act and not at all real. Three days of lying to herself until the truth became impossible to ignore.

She was starting to fall for her husband.

Perhaps I am even starting to fall in love with him? As insane as that sounds, even to my own ears. A shame that he does not feel the same... not even close to it, considering the way he acts.

“Selina?” Benedict was speaking to her.

She looked up, saw the concern on his face, and realized that he had likely been trying to get her attention for some time.

“Oh. Sorry,” she said. “I... I was distracted.”

“Is something the matter?”

“Does it look as if there is?”

He frowned with concern. “I am not sure. If there is, you know you can tell me. I like to think that by now, you trust me enough to tell me.”

She almost told him the truth. She almost said that she wanted more than the theatrics, more than the performance.

Only... no. Fear held her back. And it was this fear that led her to travel down a path that was wholly predictable and, most importantly, safe.

“I simply forgot how much you love the sound of your own voice, is all,” she said simply. “I had thought that once my mother left, you would return to being that sullen, moody gentleman I married, and that I might get some peace and quiet, but alas...” She shrugged. “It is not to be.”

That was all it took.

Benedict’s eyes flashed with annoyance, and he clenched his jaw. “Excuse me?”

“I think you heard me.” She raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to come for her. “Or should I say it again? I had forgotten how slow you could be.”

His fists clenched on the table. “I would watch what I say if I were you.”

“Is that right? And what are you going to do about it?”

Excitement next. He knew why she was saying such things, and he played into it perfectly. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Then he flattened his palms against the table as he leaned over her, baring his teeth and growling in a way that made the hair at the back of her neck stand on end.

Oh yes, it excited her too. There was no doubt about that. She had not been with Benedict for three nights and days now, and the sight of him bearing down on her was enough to make her blood simmer. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. Only... she also wanted more.

“Do I need to remind you who it is that you are married to?” he growled, his eyes flashing with lust.

“If you think you can,” she shot back, meeting his eyes so that he could see how much she wanted it.

He grinned and then rounded the table. She jumped to her feet and jutted her chin as he swept into her. His hand grabbed her arm and pulled her to his hulking body, and soon they were engaged in a passionate, ravenous kiss that was only the beginning of their night.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

Benedict stood in the doorway as he watched his wife admire herself in the mirror. She did not know that he was there, which was why she felt free to act as she wished.

Her dress was a dark canary yellow, trimmed with golden ribbon and lace. The underskirt was a lighter yellow, while her jewelry was made of emeralds and rubies. It was a tightly fitted gown, strapless and sleeveless with a neckline that sat well

below her collarbone. This showed off most of her back and shoulders, while her arms were bare, save for the white gloves that came up to her elbows.

Has there ever been a more beautiful woman than the one standing before me? Somehow, I very much doubt it.

“I am tempted to stand here all night and stare at you,” Benedict said as he continued to linger in the doorway. “But then we would be late, and I know how much you hate tardiness.”

Selina jumped in shock, spun about, and rolled her eyes at him. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

“Long enough for what?”

He smiled as he sauntered into the room. She stood facing him, but when he reached her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and turned her back to look into the mirror. Then he gazed at her reflection, his arms still around her waist, her body pressed tightly against his own.

“Long enough to realize that I have the most beautiful wife in all of London.”

“Now you go too far.” She giggled.

“Not far enough.”

“Careful, Benedict...” She tilted her head to the side, and he began to kiss down her neck. “Save some of the romancing for when we are in public. I would hate for you to waste it all in private.”

Benedict chuckled at the comment, even though it unnerved him slightly.

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It was the right thing for her to say, and it confirmed that he was right in his assessment. Their charade was just that, an act designed to fool others into believing that they were in love. The reality was that their feelings for one another were superficial, and neither wished for anything more.

Benedict knew this was for the best. This marriage was only ever meant to be temporary, so why risk flirting with feelings that would make things infinitely more difficult?

“I am simply warming myself up,” he purred as he continued to kiss her neck, moving to the shoulders. “I would hate to let the mask fall when we are finally in public.”

“Ah, now I see,” she moaned as his warm breath fanned her delicate skin. “Such is the difficulty of pretending to love me that you fear you cannot last all night.”

“Have you not seen me last night already? The previous evening, for example.”

“That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

He growled as he gently bit her neck. Not enough to break the skin but enough that she could feel it. “So, what I am hearing is that I should stop treating you so delicately...” He bit her again.

She moaned. “I simply wish to ensure that tonight goes as planned, which means...” She spun about and widened her eyes at him in warning. “That you need to behave.”

He chuckled as his hands cupped her backside and squeezed it firmly. “I will behave when there is cause to. But we are alone?—”

“And running late.”

“I am a duke. The concept of running late does not apply because I generally get to do as I wish. And right now, I wish for...” He squeezed her rear as he ground his crotch against her, drinking her in, licking his lips, baring his teeth as if he meant to attack her.

She laughed and leaned back. “Seriously, now is not the time. I said...” She pushed him back and raised both eyebrows. “Behave.”

It had been effortless for them to find their old routine once again. The very night Selina’s mother and sisters left, it was all too simple to go back to the way things had been. The desire the two felt for one another had not died, but if there was a fear that it might have, they made sure to put such fear to bed... so to speak.

And Benedict had breathed a sigh of relief to see that it was still there.

He had worried for a moment that those three days might have changed Selina’s opinion of their relationship. That his acting was so darn good that she may have begun to wonder if their marriage was more than what they had both already agreed to.

Benedict did not want such a thing... or so he told himself. And rightly! Their relationship was a storm in a teacup, set to ruin anything it touched.

So, no sense in prolonging it. That was dangerous... for all involved.

“What then?” he asked, taking her hands instead as he forced himself to behave.

“Does that mean I do not get a chance to ravish you as I would very much like to? I did mention how delicious you look in this dress, did I not?”

Her cheeks reddened. “Later—once we are home and there is no need for the dress, as I assume your intent is to rip it off my body so it will be unwearable afterward.”

“You know me too well.”

“Too dangerous, I am afraid,” she sighed, as if regretful. “As much as I would like that...” She smirked. “We really must get going.”

“Ah yes, the ball.”

“Which means...” She hesitated, looked away as if nervous, but then forced her eyes to meet his. “That it is time we begin to play our roles again.”

“And what roles might those be?”

She rolled her eyes. “You, the loving husband. Me, the doting wife. You did so well the other day that surely you have not forgotten how?”

Benedict almost told her not to bother with that. With her in his arms, with his arousal stirring once more, he wondered if it might just be safer to forget the ball and stay in, instead. He did miss those moments, even more than he did those three days spent in harmony, and already he could not wait for the night to be over so he could get her home.

A growl began to build in his throat, and he very nearly bit her neck. That, he knew, would put to bed any pesky thoughts of romance and happiness because they were not welcome.

“Benedict,” Selina warned and leaned back. “Remember what tonight is about?”

He groaned. This was not about him, nor was it about Selina. It was about fooling the ton and fixing his brother’s reputation. Benedict might have liked to have ignored reality, as he was so good at it, but what was one more night?

“If that is the case...” He squeezed her hands, leaned in, and kissed her softly on the lips. “You do look beautiful, by the way.”

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She blushed further. “And you look very handsome.”

He snorted. “Doubtful. But it is nice to hear. Now...” Again, he turned her around so that they were looking in the mirror. “Are you ready for tonight?”

“Are you?”

“The ton believes that we are a most dishonest pair, hateful and spiteful and will likely be at one another’s throats all evening. It is time that we prove them wrong.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Sounds like a marriage.”

She laughed. “Some, perhaps. Certainly not ours.”

### Chapter Twenty-Four

The whispers started as soon as they walked into the ballroom.

“Is that the Duke of Northwick? No.”

“His Grace?”

“And the Duchess of Northwick. Hiswife.”

“I thought they hated one another.”

“I heard that she lived in a separate estate.”

“I was told that they slept in separate rooms and did not even sup together.”

“It looks as if they do more than simply sup together. Much more...”

They were coming from every direction, the words spoken so loudly and clearly. Eyes followed them. Hands did not even bother covering mouths—no attempts to soften what was said. Many simply gaped as they stepped aside to let the happy couple pass, confusion writ large on their faces because they were too shocked to hide it.

Selina beamed as she walked. She had worried before tonight that she might feel nervous or embarrassed by those who were sure to speak about her. That she would spend the night looking down at her feet, shrinking in on herself, even hiding behind her husband’s large frame so that she might not be seen.

She knew what people said about her husband. She knew what they thought about him. And while her status was concerned, those thoughts would surely vacillate between pity and disbelief. How could she be with someone like him? And what must he have threatened her with to make her act this way?

As things turned out, nothing could have been further from the truth.

“You would think that they would not be so obvious about it,” she spoke out the side of her mouth as she and Benedict walked deeper into the ballroom.

“I am surprised they are being as subtle as they are.”

She laughed and squeezed his hand. “What were you expecting? That they might tar and feather you on sight?”

“At least that way, we would know where we stand.” His eyes darted about nervously—he was clearly having a harder time of this than she was.

“Oh, I know where we stand.”

He frowned. “Care to share it with me? Or do I need to guess?”

She looked at him, her smile as warm as it was genuine. “They are jealous, Benedict. Look at them...” She nodded her head in the direction of a group of ladies who stood huddled together, staring and whispering and sneering. “They cannot believe what we have and are now wondering why they do not have it also.”

“What we have?” He cleared his throat. “You mean... what we are pretending to have.”

“Yes,” she said a little too quickly, cursing under her breath, as she had not given herself a chance to suggest anything else. “Of course, that is what I meant. But they do not need to know it. As far as they are concerned, our marriage is real, and their lives, by comparison, are less than worth living.”

He laughed, seeming to relax. “We do seem to have them fooled, don’t we?”

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Selina's stomach sank, making room for her heart, which dropped just as quickly. She held her smile. She laughed and squeezed her husband's hand lovingly. She made sure that anyone watching would not doubt for a second that the two of them were as in love and infatuated with one another as any couple could dream... but inside, she was breaking.

"We are quite the actors." She shifted her gaze to him and made sure he could see her smile, the hope being that he might see through it. "Now, come. I am thirsty, and you have not even offered to fetch me a drink."

"Shame on me." He chuckled. "What sort of husband am I?"

"Not a very good one. But there is time to fix it," she added with a wink.

They made their way through the ballroom, not letting go of each other's hands for so much as a second. The plan was to stick together tonight as if they were joined at the hip, to be seen as inseparable, utterly infatuated in that way that newlyweds so often were.

It might have been painful if there wasn't a grain of truth behind the facade. But despite the words that the two spoke, Selina was becoming more and more certain that her husband was not being entirely honest with her.

Nor am I with him, for that matter.

"Selina!" she heard her mother's voice cut through the crowd just as they plucked two wine glasses off a passing tray.

“Oh, excellent,” Selina sighed without looking.

“Were you not in tears to see her go just two days ago?” Benedict teased.

“Well... yes, but that was then, and this is now.” Selina smiled as her mother moved through the throng of partygoers, waving her over without bothering to close the distance. “As it turns out, two days is nowhere near long enough.”

Benedict laughed. “Oh, she is not that bad.”

“She is going to ask you for a favor. Just you wait and see.”

“I have no doubt. Now...” He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, and that kiss alone was enough to brighten the sullen mood that was threatening to engulf her. The feel of his lips on her skin made her heart race in ways she was all too familiar with. “Be nice.”

Selina eyed him curiously. He was just playing his role, of course, but there had to be more to it than that. These past two days, putting aside the previous evening, he had been different. She was sure of it.

Is it possible that he and I are of the same mind? And that we are both just too scared to say it? Surely not.

“There you are,” Lady Langham said as she swept toward them. She leaned forward and kissed Selina on the cheek. “I was wondering if you were going to attend.”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Selina asked.

“No reason.” Lady Langham shrugged. “Your Grace,” she then said with an over-the-top smile. “Still treating my daughter well, I hope?”

“Like a queen, as she deserves.”

“Quite.” She giggled. “I must say, the two of you have caused quite the stir here tonight. Quite the stir. Disbelief is one word I would use...” She gestured around the room.

Selina caught a group of lords watching them both.

“It should not be,” she said rightly. “And I would hope that you will tell anyone who asks that this right here is the norm. Benedict and I are...” She swallowed, and her heart began to race again. “In love. Is that not right, dear?”

“Horribly in love,” Benedict confirmed as he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “And horribly happy, too.”

“Nice choice of words.” Selina chuckled.

“You know I am more about action than words, dear,” he spoke loudly, as if hoping those who were standing close might hear. “Speaking of which...” He looked at her, and she frowned as she tried to decipher the look in his eyes.

He pumped his eyebrows, licked his lips, and then, leaned in and kissed her on the cheek as his hand squeezed her waist and pulled her to him.

It was not their first kiss by any stretch of the imagination. It was not even a kiss on the lips! But that did not seem to matter.

Perhaps Selina was just imagining it? Perhaps she was transplanting her feelings and suspicions into her husband’s kiss? Whatever it was... that little kiss on the cheek struck her in a way she had not expected.

There was no burning passion behind it. No ravenous delight, no amorous elicitation, no sense that the two were about to give in to their most base instincts in a way that would see them quickly leaving the ballroom lest they begin to ravage one another in front of everyone.

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Rather, the kiss was soft. It was gentle. It was loving in a way that made Selina's heart flutter and soar. She did not want to tear her husband's shirt off and eat his face. She simply wished to hold him, to wrap her arms around his neck and never let go because the kiss spoke of safety and comfort in ways she had never felt before...

When he pulled away, she followed him, that sense that he was tearing a piece of her to hold on to forever.

"Is everything alright?" Benedict asked, clearly noticing the change in her expression.

"Y-Yes," she stammered, attempting to shake off the thoughts and feelings that were besieging her. "Of course."

He eyed her curiously, and she attempted to look normal... whatever normal was now.

"Yes, yes," Lady Langham said impatiently. "Now, Your Grace, if you remember what we spoke of a few days ago." She widened her eyes. "Lord Langham..."

Selina was still staring at Benedict. Still lost in that kiss. Still gaping stupidly and not caring one whit that she was doing so. The room went quiet. How she was perceived no longer mattered. All she wanted at that moment was her husband, but not for the obvious reason.

"Of course," Benedict said. "Is he here now?"

"He is just over there..." Lady Langham pointed across the room at the Viscount

Langham. “And I know he would love to meet you.”

“Lead the way.” Benedict turned back and took Selina’s hand again. “Are you coming?”

Selina hesitated. “Ah... I need to use the washroom. But I will come find you as soon as I am back.”

He frowned at her, still noticing the bewildered look on her face. But her mother was dragging him toward her uncle, pushing people out of the way as she went. And Benedict, forced to follow, offered Selina a final look of concern before allowing himself to be led.

“What on earth...” Selina muttered to herself.

Her breathing was ragged. Her heart felt like it might burst out of her chest. The room spun. The walls caved in on her. She needed fresh air, a moment to compose herself, a second to think.

Not that there was any question as to what had caused this reaction. It was so darn obvious that Selina could not believe it had taken her this long to finally admit it.

She was falling head over heels for her husband. Strange, perhaps, though it wasn’t that strange at all.

Lord Langham was exactly what Benedict thought him to be—a coward. Short for a man, skinnier than normal, and with a bent back and nose that defied convention, there was nothing remotely appealing about the man. This made it far easier and more enjoyable to walk all over him as if he were a freshly laid rug that needed to be worn in.

“... and again,” he said eagerly, as if worried that Benedict had not heard him. “Thank you so much for bringing this to my attention.”

“It should not have to have been brought to your attention in the first place.”

“Yes, of course. I simply...” The Viscount swallowed nervously, sweat already dripping from his brow. “As I explained, I have been overwhelmed with estate matters, and it slipped my mind.”

“And I am not busy? You speak as if I have no idea what it is like to manage an estate.”

“No!” The Viscount’s eyes went wide. “I did not mean to insinuate anything of the sort, Your Grace. I am just new to it, is all.”

“So, you are not ready for the title that you have inherited. Is that what you’re saying? You’re not deserving of it?”

“No, not at all,” the Viscount blustered.

Benedict raised an eyebrow, and this made Lord Langham panic further.

“And that is not to disagree with you, Your Grace. You know better than I—what I simply meant is that I am still coming to terms with my duties.”

“Rather slowly, I’d say.”

“But I shall rectify the situation, I promise you.”

“See that you do,” Benedict warned him. “As you well know, we are now family, and I like to keep a very close eye on my family. I would hate for there to be a reason for

us to speak about this again.”

“There will not be one, I promise!” Lord Langham cried, his spindly body shaking horribly. “And I must say, congratulations on your marriage, Your Grace. You and my niece look as happy as can be expected.”

“Should we not?”

“Of course not!” His face was turning red. “I simply meant?—”

“Oh, he knows what you meant,” Lady Langham sighed. “And honestly, Leopold, pull yourself together.” She indicated the droplets of sweat at his feet. “Lest we need to call a footman over to clean up the mess you are making.”

“I am sorry, Teresa. Truly, I never meant to?—”

“You did,” she cut him off with a triumphant look. “And the only reason you’re apologizing now is because you were caught. But I shall have my solicitors visit you on the morrow, and I expect them to be made to feel welcome.”

“They will be!”

“Good.” Her smile was vicious, and Benedict could not help but chuckle, for he could see where her daughter got it from. “Have a pleasant evening, Leopold. Always lovely to see you.”

Lord Langham bowed deeply and then made himself scarce.

Benedict sighed as he watched the man scamper away. The cowardice on display was less than pathetic, and sometimes he wondered how some men had managed to secure titles that they were so clearly undeserving of.

“Much better,” Lady Langham said with a sigh of relief. “Your Grace, I thank you.”

“Not a problem at all, I was glad to do it.”

“Selina will be thrilled,” she added.

“I am sure she will be. Speaking of which...” Benedict suddenly realized that he had not seen Selina since he left with her mother, and while he was not worried, he would be remiss not to admit that he missed her. “Have you seen your daughter anywhere?”

“Not for a few minutes. But I am sure she is fine.”

“Yes...” He cast his gaze over the ballroom. “I am sure she is.”

It was a silly thing, but Benedict had become so used to having Selina by his side that without her, he felt somewhat exposed. Naked, in a way. Hyperaware of those watching him. When she was with him, he felt as if he could do anything.

But without her... Suddenly, he wished to be anywhere but at this event. The whispers seemed to grow. The disgusted stares lingered. The looks of horror returned.

“If you see your daughter, let her know I have stepped outside for?”

There was a tap on his shoulder, and Benedict turned around, his heart fluttering and his panic receding to find Selina standing right there, looking up at him. She did not smile. She did not feign enthusiasm. But the look she fixed him with... there was something different about it.

“Selina,” he sighed with relief. “I was just about to look for you.”

“Look no further.”

Still, she watched him curiously. A slight tilt to her lips. A light behind her eyes that

was for him only. It went beyond the looks of adoration she had made sure to give him all evening—they paled in comparison, as if they were mere imitations of how she was looking at him right now.

“Is something the matter?” he asked. “You look... different.”

Her smile widened, but it did not become exaggerated. “Would you care for a dance?”

His stomach dropped. “A dance?”

“Yes.” She laughed. “A dance.”

Benedict did not dance. Not only was he clumsy, but to dance meant to put himself at the center of attention, to invite people to watch him—dare them too. Tonight was about being seen, yes, but dancing before the crowd was a step too far.

“I...” He leaned back. “I am not sure that is such a good idea.”

She did not roll her eyes or poke fun at him. Rather, she gently took his hand and held it. “It will be fine, Benedict. Trust me.”

“But...” He bit his lip. “Is it necessary? Surely, we have done enough to convince these people that we are...” He swallowed. “In love.”

“This is not about that.”

“Oh?”

“No.” She laughed softly. “I just want to dance, is all. More than that, I want to dance with you.”

If it was anybody else, he would have said no. If it was last week, he still would have. But that look she gave him, how soft her hand felt around his, the hold that she had over him that was unlike any he had known before...

Benedict felt as if he was trapped in a spell of sorts, one he had no desire to break.

“As you wish,” he relented. “But be warned, I might embarrass you.”

“You?” Her eyes twinkled. “Impossible.”

She led him toward the dance floor. Benedict thought that he would feel nervous as he walked. And he was certain he would give himself away when he took to the center of the dance floor—sweating, shaking, cursing because he hated the very idea of such a thing as dancing! But strangely, there was none of that.

Those in the room did not matter. He and Selina might have been the only two people there, for how he felt. They stepped onto the dance floor, he took her hand and rested his other on her waist, looked into her eyes, and the entire world melted away as if it did not exist.

“I have enjoyed tonight,” she said softly, earnestly. No sense that this was part of the act.

“As have I.”

“More than I thought I would.”

He smiled. “You took the words out of my mouth.”

“I...” She hesitated and then let out a light chuckle. “I do not wish for it to end.”

“Perhaps you will get lucky, and this dance will go on forever.”

“I hope so.” It sounded as if she meant it too.

The music started, and the two began to waltz.

Perhaps people were watching them? Perhaps people were talking about them? Judging Benedict’s poor dancing skills? Perhaps they were, but Benedict did not notice, nor did he care.

They had spent several days pretending to be in love. Tonight, too, they had done well to fool the ton so that anyone watching might think that they were as happy as a newlywed couple could be. It was all an act, a performance, a show to trick and blind the world to the reality of their marriage.

Benedict had spent this last week convincing himself of that.

His entire life, in fact, he had resigned himself to living alone because men like him did not fall in love and live happily ever after. And he still believed this to be the case. He still needed it to be. Only now, with how Selina felt in his arms as they

danced, that look in her eyes, and the beating of his heart, he began to fear the worst.

Could there be more here than what I have allowed myself to believe?

Benedict was not even certain of what that might mean. Did that mean that he should ask her not to leave come one month? Did that mean that he was falling for her in ways he had previously thought impossible?

No. Certainly not.

It was all very confusing. It was the last thing he wished to think about—what he should have been thinking about instead was getting Selina home so that he could tear her clothes off her body and devour her like a starving wolf that had come across a fresh carcass. That was what he wanted! That was all he should want.

It was thus that as they danced, Benedict reminded himself of who he was and what this marriage was supposed to be. For tonight, he would give Selina the love and the romance and the passion, because that had been the plan. But tomorrow, he was determined to go back to the way things had been.

Just that thought... it settled like a boulder in his stomach, and he nearly stumbled and lost his footing. But Selina was there to guide him, and the smile on her lips made his heart flutter in ways that he did not care for... or so he told himself.

Suddenly, this marriage had become something that Benedict had not seen coming, something that felt all too real.

That, he decided, would need to change.

Chapter Twenty-Five

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The door to Benedict's study was closed, indicating that he was inside. Likely working. Ordinarily not a problem, as he was sure to join her for supper anyway. But Selina needed to speak with him beforehand. She had to.

I cannot continue to put this off. It must be now, for to keep delaying it will only make things all the harder.

She knocked once and waited for his call.

"Come in."

It was as she had expected. Benedict was hunched over his desk, a quill flying back and forth across a piece of parchment as he worked hurriedly. Not so long ago, Selina would not have dared disturb him when he was working like that, as he was moody at the best of times and the last thing she wanted was to find herself on the wrong end of that mood.

Now, however, she knew there was nothing to fear.

"Benedict," she said as she stepped into the study, leaving the door open. "Is now a bad time?"

Benedict looked up and smiled at her. Genuine. Warm and caring. She could see in his eyes that despite his busyness, he was genuinely happy to see her.

"For you, Selina? Such a concept does not exist."

She rolled her eyes but could not hide her smile as she walked to the desk. And then, once she had reached it, she stepped around it and sat on the edge.

“I just wished to make sure that you’re joining me for supper,” she began with a trace of nerves, not wishing to dive right into the subject she had come here for. “It is still an hour away, but I know how you get.”

He laughed. “You know me better than I thought.”

“I am starting to.” She smirked.

“Yes, yes,” he assured her. “I would not miss it. In fact, I am glad to see you. Your timing could not have been better.”

“I would assume that you are always glad to see me,” she shot back. “Or at least that you should be.”

“Careful now,” he warned her playfully. “My temper is far too short to be manipulated by the likes of you.”

“Manipulated?” She touched her chest as if offended. “I would never.”

He scoffed. “You speak as if I do not know you. An hour before supper. Nothing to do. Wandering the halls aimlessly. Do not think I do not know the real reason you are here.”

She could immediately sense the shift in the room. Benedict leaned back in his chair so that he could better admire her. He lifted one hand and rested it on her thigh, giving it a tight squeeze before he began to stroke it. The look in his eyes was one she knew too well... No need to guess what was on his mind.

And Selina very nearly gave in.

That was what she had been doing these last few days. Whenever she thought of broaching that subject, her husband's impossibly high libido would take over and he'd ravish her, effectively driving all rational thought out of her mind.

And while Selina found him as hard to resist today as she did yesterday as she did the day before that—that hand on her thigh had her loins burning—she suppressed her desire. Now was not the time for debauchery.

For three days now, she had thought hard about what she needed to say. A seemingly simple admission, one that she was nearly certain her husband would be happy to hear. But every time she tried, he would redirect and obfuscate, and the next thing she knew, they'd be on their backs, devouring one another.

Not today.

“There is another reason I am here,” Selina began. She reached down and removed Benedict's hand from her thigh. “Beyond the need to make sure that you do not miss supper.”

Benedict frowned. “Oh?”

“Yes...” She took a deep breath as she prepared for that which had troubled her for three whole days. “I wanted to start by saying that these past few days have been wonderful.”

Benedict tilted his head and frowned. “They have been.”

“I was worried,” she continued, “that once the Mayfield Ball ended, things between us would be awkward. But as I am sure you have noticed, that is not the case. If

anything, it is the complete opposite.”

He chuckled and again rested a hand on her thigh. “Making up for lost time, as it was. Surely, you cannot hold that against me?”

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Again, he redirects and makes sure to keep things superficial.

Selina might have been more worried if, beneath it all, she had not sensed a change in him that she was certain even he had noticed. They did not fight as much as they used to. They did not purposefully snap as if that was the only way they could stand to be around each other. It was similar to how they had behaved when her mother and sisters were visiting, only more real than that.

And it was this realness that made Selina understand that the feelings she had developed for him were not forced or fake. There was no need for that anymore.

Selina was falling for her husband. And now, she needed to find out if he was falling for her too.

“I cannot.” She smirked. “But speaking of lost time...” She swallowed. “Lately, I have been considering?—”

“Oh! Before you say anything,” Benedict cut her off. “I very nearly forgot—honestly, it can be hard keeping my thoughts straight when you are around me.” He winked. “How I get any work done is beyond me.”

“Forgot what?” Selina asked, hating that she was almost glad for the interruption. Another chance to delay her question.

“You are probably wondering to whom I am writing.” Benedict indicated the piece of parchment he had been scribbling on.

“I assumed it was to do with work.”

“Not this time,” he said. “It is to Edmund. He wrote to me just this morning, enquiring when he might return, and I was about to tell him that he is free to do so as soon as he wishes.”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Yes, that sounds perfectly acceptable. Not that you need my permission for that.” She laughed. “And somehow, I doubt that you were going to ask for it.”

He chuckled. “After the Mayfield Ball, and how well the two of us performed that night, I thought that our marriage would no longer be under scrutiny and that the scandal would blow over as if it never was.” He looked at her for an answer.

Selina ignored the way her stomach twisted. That word, performed. It was the opposite of what she wanted to hear.

“It... it has,” she forced out. “But what is your point?”

He sighed. “I fear that my brother’s sudden return might cause a few stray tongues to wag—his reputation will demand it. No doubt his absence has been noted, and his appearing out of nowhere means that questions will surely be asked. Questions that I would prefer not having to answer.”

“I... I suppose that is possible.”

“I was thus thinking that it might be prudent if we get ahead of the rumors before they spread, and put them to bed once and for all,” Benedict continued.

She frowned. “Rumors? Surely, his return will matter little?”

“I would like to think not, but seeing as he was the reason we got married in the first place, it is likely that when he does return, people will begin to ask where he has been and, most importantly, why he was not at our wedding.”

“Oh.” Selina frowned as she considered what he was saying, not entirely certain that she agreed with him. “And what are you suggesting?”

“Nothing too brash, I assure you. My thoughts are that we host a dinner party to celebrate his return. Family and close friends only, of course—a little event to imply that he has been away for good reason which has nothing to do with us.”

“Away for good reason? Not that he fled so as not to be forced to marry me, you mean,” she said flatly.

Benedict grimaced. “That is one circumstance that I believe will better not be spoken about—as things stand, nobody knows the real reason why Edmund left. So, rather than let them gossip, I say that we give them a reason and be done with it.”

“And that reason will be...?”

“Nothing too exciting.” He chuckled. “Best to keep these things simple. Perhaps he was traveling when our engagement was announced, hence he could not make it to the wedding ceremony. Perhaps he was searching for a bride of his own—I will come up with something more credible before the dinner party, and I will ensure that Edmund sticks to it.”

“That sounds convoluted, no?”

“That is not all.” Benedict was now looking at Selina in a way that suggested what he was about to say was not a conclusion he had come to lightly. He looked nervous, worried even—so very unlike him.

She swallowed nervously. "I'm listening."

"It concerns you and I, Selina. If we are to host a dinner party, and we are to make ourselves the center of attention once more, it will be prudent that we once again put on airs as we were forced to do at the Mayfield Ball." He made sure that she was looking at him. "That we pretend to be in love again."

She tried not to let the pain show on her face. The disappointment, also. For how hard she had found it to walk in here and broach the topic of their feelings for one another, Benedict apparently had no such concerns.

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Of course, that was because he did not think the way she did. At least he was determined to make her believe as such.

“It will only be for the night,” he hurried to explain, likely misinterpreting the look on her face. “And it will be the last time, I swear it. But we need this, Selina. My brother’s reputation is at stake, as is our own. What is more...” He chuckled lightly as he rested his hand back on her thigh. “I think we have proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are more than capable of feigning civility and, dare I say, love for an evening. We are almost professionals at this point. Surely, it will not be difficult.”

It was not what Selina wanted to hear.

“Is that really necessary?” she asked carefully. “I just mean, all the fakery...” She forced a dismissive chuckle. “I do not think it is warranted.”

Benedict leaned back as if confused. “We are trying to fool the ton into believing that we are in love, Selina. Of course, it is warranted.”

That struck her a little harder than she had expected. “But if we... I just do not think we need to pretend so much, is my meaning. We have come so far these past few days, have we not? Surely, we are able to be ourselves and?—”

“It is too risky,” he cut her off quickly, almost as if he had to stop her from finishing the thought. “Yes, we are not as cantankerous as we once were, I will grant you that. But it is not worth the risk, for you know how we get...” His eyes flashed, and he grinned. “Truly, sometimes I cannot help myself around you...” He gave her thigh a suggestive squeeze. “So, best that we play it safe.”

Selina's chest tightened in a way that was painful as her world, and her reality came crashing down around her.

Her goal, to confess her feelings to Benedict and hope that he felt the same, now felt laughable and absurd. If he felt even remotely the same way as she did, then why would he bother with the subterfuge?

He would not bother, is the answer. He would not see the point.

"I..." She bit her lip, feeling as if her chest was being crushed. "I suppose it makes enough sense."

"Wonderful!" Benedict clapped his hands together. "Trust me, this is for the best. And it will be for the one night only, Selina. After which we can go back to the way things are."

"And how is that, exactly?"

He looked at her with a sense of hunger, shuffling forward and licking his lips. "Shall I show you?"

It had been this way for three days now. Whenever Selina tried to show anything bordering on affection, Benedict would be quick to redirect and return to their most base desires, as if he was making a point. As if he needed her to know that any feelings that she might have developed were not worth pursuing.

As if he needed to prove it to himself, also.

"Right now? I am afraid I don't have the time." Selina was quick to stand up and then step around the desk. "I need to wash before supper."

“Y-You do?” Benedict made to follow her, as if he could not believe she had the self-control to pull away.

“Alas, that is the case. But I shall see you in an hour, yes?”

Benedict looked concerned, even confused. But he nodded his head, nonetheless. “Of course—oh, I nearly forgot. Was there not something you wished to speak about?”

Another chance. A final opportunity to just tell him! But after the conversation they just had, Selina was beginning to wonder whether these feelings she felt were indeed one-sided and whether Benedict did not reciprocate them as she wished. As she needed him to.

Unrequired love. Was there anything worse?

“It is not important,” she assured him as she walked toward the door. “Not anymore, anyhow.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“Edmund!” Benedict held his arms out wide as he approached his younger brother. “There he is!”

Edmund had just dismounted his horse, and the sight of Benedict approaching him had him frowning as if he did not recognize his own brother. He clung to the horse’s reins as if he meant to pull himself back up and ride away.

“Brother...” He did not move to meet Benedict halfway. “It is good to see you.”

Benedict laughed, and when he reached Edmund, he slapped him on the shoulder. “It has been two months since we last spoke, and that is all you have to say to me?”

“What else should I say?”

“I missed you. I am glad to be home. You look well. Any of those would be fine, I am sure.”

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Still, Edmund frowned with a sense of deep confusion. “Forgive me, Brother, but it has been a long ride. Perhaps once I am better rested, I will try for a more congenial welcome.”

Benedict rolled his eyes and gave his brother’s shoulder another squeeze. He was beyond happy that his younger brother had finally returned home, safe and sound. Edmund looked well, healthy, just as Benedict remembered him. That in itself was a reason to be cheerful.

Having said that, Benedict was also not overly surprised by his brother’s somewhat confused, even concerned reaction to the friendly welcome he received. In fact, Benedict might have expected it, for how strange it must have seemed.

Edmund knew Benedict like the back of his hand, and this version that had come outside to greet him was surely as far removed from the man he had always known. Smiling. Cheerful. Darn happy! Certainly not the Benedict he had grown up with.

A lot has changed since we last spoke. Myself included.

“So, I take it that a bath is the first item on the agenda?” Benedict began. He waved to a stablehand who was waiting nearby to collect Edmund’s horse. The stablehand hurried toward them and took the reins from Edmund. “And a meal?”

“That would be most welcome,” Edmund agreed, still eyeing his brother curiously. The two began to walk back toward the manor. “My thighs feel as if they have been whipped bloody, and my back...” He groaned as he stretched out.

“You never were much of a rider.” Benedict chuckled.

“Better than you.”

“That is damning.” Benedict elbowed his brother playfully. “But your point is taken. Now, come...” He threw an arm over Edmund’s shoulder to lead him into the manor. At least he meant to.

Edmund ducked as if Benedict had moved to strike him. When he saw that was not what his brother was doing, he grimaced awkwardly. “Sorry, Benedict. Old habits die hard.”

Benedict scoffed. “When have I ever struck you, Edmund?”

Edmund raised a questioning eyebrow. “Need I read off the list?”

“When you have not deserved it, is my meaning.”

“To that point, when have you ever thrown your arm around my shoulder? Or clapped me on the shoulder? Or looked as if you meant to hug me? A far shorter list than the bruises you have left on my hide, that is for sure.”

Edmund was right to question Benedict. Although Benedict had never beaten Edmund—God no! The two were known to argue often, and those arguments had just as often devolved into brawls. Especially when they were young. Benedict had that temper, and Edmund knew how to bring it out, and this was a recipe for disaster that Edmund knew only too well.

It was strange to think that such a short time had passed and yet so much had changed. That his own brother did not even recognize him! But Benedict supposed that just spoke to how happy he was... which in turn spoke to how miserable his life

was before meeting Selina.

“I am not upset with you if that is why you’re worried,” Benedict said.

Edmund snorted. “Do I need a reason to be worried? It does not take much to set you off, Brother. And my feeling is that fleeing a marriage which you are now trapped in is reason enough.”

“It is not like that. I told you—I would not have invited you to return if I was still upset or if there was a reason to fear.”

“No?” Edmund looked around them as if searching for something. “Then where is that lovely wife of yours? Why is she not here by your side to see me arrive?”

“She is busy.”

Edmund scoffed. “I am sure.”

“She is,” Benedict said, keeping the anger from his voice, even if he very much wished to show it. “But she will be joining us for supper later, I can assure you of that.”

“Is that by choice or by force?”

With the exception of Selina, nobody knew quite how to poke and prod at Benedict’s exposed nerves quite like Edmund did. He clearly knew this was a sensitive topic, and yet he chose to ask the question anyway. Typical younger brother, really.

The truth was that Selina had been acting strangely the past couple of days. Nothing to worry about, Benedict was sure. But whenever Edmund was mentioned in any capacity, she would withdraw into herself and change the subject quickly.

It was hard to tell exactly why this was—especially seeing as she refused to speak of it! But Benedict had his suspicions. Edmund had, after all, spurned her, humiliated her, and made her feel as undesirable as day-old meat. Likely, she had not forgotten this public humiliation and was yet to move past it.

But Edmund was home now. Tomorrow night, they were hosting a dinner party in his honor. And Benedict was certain that by the time this was all said and done and the two had a chance to speak plainly to one another, the past would be left where it belonged, and everything would be fine.

He needed it to be. For Edmund's sake, if nothing else.

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“By choice,” Benedict insisted. “She is busy.”

“Why do I not believe?—”

Benedict came to a stop by the front steps, forcing his brother to halt. “Edmund, I must warn you, that is my wife you’re speaking of.”

He fixed his brother with a warning look, an indication that this topic was to be dropped immediately.

“I did not mean to offend, Brother.” Edmund held up his hands in defense. “I am simply interested in seeing Miss Gouldsmith again. To apologize, of course.”

“That is Her Grace to you,” Benedict said, with a steely edge to his voice. “And I am sure that she will welcome such an apology.”

He raised an eyebrow at his brother, a final effort to warn him off doing or saying anything offensive.

Only then, sensing that the moment was about to spiral, Benedict decided to change tack—it would not have been possible had it not been for his wife’s influence on him.

His expression softened. His lips curled into a smile. And again, he reached out and clapped his brother on the shoulder.

“A lot has changed since we last saw one another, Brother.” He chuckled. “So much so that I doubt an apology is even necessary.”

Edmund frowned. "Is that so?"

"Let us discuss it later. First a wash and a change of clothes for you, I think. And then a drink before supper, just you and I. We have a lot to discuss, and I would like you to be caught up to speed before you meet my lovely wife for the second time."

Edmund seemed about to question Benedict but then thought better of it. He gave a smile of his own, nodded his head in agreement, and together the two brothers walked up the steps and into the manor.

A lot had changed these last few months, and Edmund was about to learn just how much.

"I don't know, Benedict..." Edmund held his glass of whiskey to his chest, the look on his face suggesting that he had no intention of drinking it. "That sounds a little... unbelievable."

"There is no reason it should be."

"And who is this mystery woman I was searching for, exactly? And where is she now?"

"Alas, you were unable to find one. Which is why you have returned to England. Clearly, we cannot claim that you found a willing bride, for that will only raise more questions."

"I think enough questions will be raised without the addition of a fake bride."

"There is no fake bride," Benedict pointed out. "That is the entire point. You left England in search, for you knew that finding one here was going to be difficult. But after months of traveling, you decided that your quest for love was not meant to be

pursued across the ocean but here at home. That is why you have come back.”

Still, Edmund looked unconvinced. “Have you considered the other option?”

“Which is?”

He shrugged. “The truth. I will simply tell them that I panicked and ran and that you, the embodiment of propriety and all things good, stepped in. Surely, that will reflect well on you? Who would not be impressed by a tale like that?”

“It is not my reputation I’m worried about.”

“Ah...” Finally, Edmund took a sip of his whiskey. “So, that is what this is about.”

“Meaning?”

“I do not need you to look out for me, Benedict. I certainly do not need you to lie on my account. I made a mistake, and I will accept the consequences of that mistake, regardless of what they might be.”

“Edmund...” Benedict groaned, running a hand through his hair. “It is not as simple as that.”

“It is,” Edmund asserted. “You are the one complicating it.”

“I am just trying to look out for you.”

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Edmund snorted. “Another lie—you are rather adept at such things, Brother. I forgot how good you are.”

“I am not lying.”

“You do not care about me—do not say otherwise. Oh sure, I believe that deep down, you do worry and that you want what is best. But this entire thing...” Edmund shook his head. “It is about your marriage as much as it is about my reputation.”

“That is not true.” Benedict hesitated. “And the state of my marriage is not your concern.”

“And is that not the point? My actions should have nothing to do with how your marriage is perceived.”

Benedict leveled a glare at his brother. “And as I have been telling you since we were youths, your reputation is linked to my own. How you are perceived reflects on me just as how I am perceived reflects on you. And by extension, if people think less of you for what you did, the same will be said about my marriage.”

“So, it is about your marriage?”

Benedict suppressed a groan, which was as difficult as suppressing the urge to tear his brother’s throat out! Not literally, of course, but in the same way he had been doing since they were boys. A reminder as to who was in charge here and what that meant.

Supper was to be served in a few short minutes, but before they went to the dining room, Benedict had asked Edmund to meet him in the drawing room for a drink and a brief conversation. Not an argument.

Tomorrow night would be the dinner party, and he wished to make sure that Edmund was willing to go along with the lie that he and Selina had decided upon. A final attempt to put the scandal behind them once and for all so it might never be mentioned again.

Yes, a large part of it was due to his desire to protect his brother's reputation, for it was bad enough without adding this to the list. All Benedict had ever tried to do was protect his brother, and this right here was no different.

Why can he not see that?!

On a deeper level, however, Benedict was acutely aware of what such a story might say about his marriage. Scandals like the one that brought them together were hard to escape. Benedict simply wanted it done. He wanted it over with. He wanted to enjoy the last few weeks of what he and Selina had, and that could not be done until this matter was taken care of.

Frustratingly, his brother was being a real pain about it.

But what else is new?

“All I wish for is to avoid questions that people have no right to ask,” Benedict explained carefully, keeping his temper in check. “You have not been here these past few months, so you have not had to endure the consequences of what you did.”

“And as I said, I will accept them as I should?—”

“It is not that simple!” he snapped before he could stop himself. “Why can you not understand that? For years, Edmund, all I have done is cover for you! Look out for you! And for years, you have spat in my face every chance you have gotten.”

“I have done no such?—”

“No longer!” Benedict had not even realized that he was standing. Nor had he realized that he was looming over his brother, his body shaking as if he was keeping himself from grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. “You will do this for me. If anyone asks you, you will lie as I have instructed. And that is the end of the matter!”

He glared warningly at his brother, his teeth bared, a growl rumbling in his chest. God, his brother knew how to frustrate him. Why could he not see that this was for the best?!

Edmund returned his glare. “And your wife?” he asked. “Is she fine with this?”

“Of course she is!”

That was a lie... in a way. Benedict knew that, like his brother, Selina did not entirely agree to this lie. That in itself was a problem he was still struggling to reckon with. Ever since the Mayfield Ball, he had noticed a change in their relationship. It was a change that, to be perfectly honest, terrified him.

Selina was being kinder to him. More caring. No longer looking for reasons to be openly hostile or to argue with him—it was reminiscent of those few days spent with her mother and sisters. And while that was undoubtedly pleasant, and even enjoyable in ways that Benedict had not thought possible, it was also not what he wanted.

So, Benedict had been at pains to keep things as they had been. Fire. Brimstone. Passion. He was doing his best to remind her of what their agreement was,

but whenever he let his guard down, she would inevitably give away her real feelings in a way that had him balking.

He just needed to get through this final ordeal. Once he did, he would sit her down and tell her in no uncertain terms that their agreement to end their marriage was still the plan and that he did not love her. That... that he was incapable of loving her.

“We are not having this conversation,” Benedict said with finality. “You wish to return home, this is what it will take.” He looked down at his brother, daring him to say otherwise. “Do I make myself clear?”

“It looks as if I do,” Edmund muttered. His glare was challenging, but Benedict knew him well enough to know that he would do what he was being told.

Like a petulant child, he would kick and scream, but he would do it. He knew better not to.

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“Good.” Benedict exhaled, forcing himself to relax. “Now, let us eat. I am sure my wife is looking forward to seeing you again.”

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

“... I

could not believe what she was doing.” Benedict chuckled merrily. “I mean, what was I supposed to think? There she was, my wife, swimming through the darn stream to save a puppy of all things!”

He took Selina’s hand and squeezed it. He looked into her eyes, silently urging her to go along with his story.

“How amusing,” Edmund mused as he cut into the shank of rare meat on his plate. “And then what happened?”

“The poor puppy was trapped, of course,” Benedict continued, still holding Selina’s hand. She felt the urge to pull it away but did no such thing, as it would have dramatically undercut the theme of the story that he was selling. “And once Selina had reached it, she became trapped also.”

“Is that so?” Edmund asked simply.

“As for myself? I was on the shore, having begged her not to go in. I was about to go in myself, but Selina...” Benedict clicked his tongue and chuckled further. “She is nothing if not rambunctious. She dived in before I could remove so much as a single

boot, leaving me to scramble in after her.”

“So, you came to the rescue?” Edmund asked dryly as he nibbled on the piece of meat. “How gallant.”

“What choice did I have?” Benedict continued. He kissed the back of Selina’s hand, and it was all she could do not to glare at him. “I waded in after her and the poor little puppy. Then I tucked it under my arms, threw Selina on my back, and swam us back to the shore.”

“And the puppy?”

“Safe and sound, if not a little wet,” Benedict explained with delight. “We gave it to the stablehands, and the last I checked, it is doing well.” He looked to Selina for confirmation.

She forced a smile. “I was playing with him earlier. They named him Charlie.”

“Wonderful,” Benedict said. “Anyhow, it was quite the event. That entire day...” He shook his head with amusement. “We still laugh about it, don’t we, Selina?”

Selina looked at him with a deadpan expression, hoping he could sense in her tone how unhappy she was. “Almost every night.”

Benedict either did not notice her mood or was choosing to ignore it. He laughed further and kissed the back of her hand once more. “All that is to say, it has been an eventful few months. The stories I could tell you, Edmund...” He sighed wistfully as he reached for his wine glass and took a sip.

“It sounds like I have missed much.” Edmund looked between the two, no sense at all that he was buying his brother’s story. “And it sounds like the two of you are very

happy.”

“We are,” Benedict declared. “Is that not right, Selina?”

“Blessed,” Selina uttered in that same deadpan tone. “I count my blessings every day.”

Benedict continued to smile as he released her hand so that he could cut into the meat on his plate. He chuckled to himself as he did so, happy to ignore the strange atmosphere in the room. One that he was very much responsible for creating.

It was all so fake. From the moment Selina had walked into the dining room, everything about this evening had felt orchestrated and performed in a way that went beyond even those three days that her mother and sisters had stayed over.

It was so darn dishonest that it made her feel sick.

At first, Selina had assumed that Benedict was acting that way because he was worried about how she might receive his brother. As if she would still be angry that Edmund had left her the way he had and that she would take it out on him. But she was not angry, and she made sure to let him know that.

“Oh, there he is,” she had joked when she had arrived. “The elusive brother. I hardly recognized you without the hangover. And the bad bedside manner.”

Edmund, to his credit, had laughed it off. “I suppose I owe you an apology. If for no other reason than saddling you with my brother.”

“It would be appreciated.” She had chuckled. “He is not easy to live with, which I am sure you know.”

To this, Edmund had actually looked somewhat impressed, as if he was surprised that she would be so honest. He had smiled and appeared relieved, about to respond with what was likely a joke before Benedict interjected.

“She jests, Edmund. She just jests.” Benedict had then wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in, kissing her on the cheek and beaming more than she had ever seen him do. “The truth is, we should be thanking you in many ways. Your cowardice was our good fortune. Isn’t that right, Selina?”

She had frowned at him in confusion, and he had given her a look that seemed to say, Just go along with it, please. Which she had done, to her regret.

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He seemed at pains to portray their marriage as a perfect union. A purely blissful experience that was all highs and no lows. As if he needed Edmund to believe as much for reasons that Selina could not comprehend.

What on earth is he doing this for?

“I was speaking with Edmund earlier too, Selina, and he has agreed to go along with our little white lie, concerning the circumstances surrounding our marriage.”

“Oh?”

Edmund sighed. “It is no bother.”

Benedict nodded once. “When the subject is broached, it will be no big thing to say that he has been in France these past few months, that he is sorry that he could not make it to the wedding but is glad to see how well we are doing. In fact...” He caught his brother’s eye. “It might not be so bad to say that now that you have seen me and Selina together, you are even more inspired to find a bride among the young ladies of the ton. Why not?”

Edmund did not look as if he liked that idea at all. “That is—I doubt that will be necessary.”

“Only if it comes up,” Benedict assured him. “It will be a good look, Edmund. You are nearing thirty, and if it is believed that you are finally searching for a bride, it will do wonders for your reputation.”

It looked as if Edmund meant to argue, but Selina saw the warning glare that Benedict shot him, and he relented. A shrug and a nod and he went back to his food.

“As you wish, Brother.”

“Good,” Benedict said. “Take it from me, Brother.” Again, he took Selina’s hand. “Marriage is not the prison that you imagine.”

There was just no need for this. That was what Selina found so frustrating.

Ever since the Mayfield Ball, she had begun to sense a change in their relationship that she had hoped might lead them to explore feelings that they had previously denied. And even when Benedict fought her on it, when he insisted on keeping things sexual and amorous, Selina could sense the change in him. The suggestion that he reciprocated her feelings but was just taking a little longer to come round to it.

The way he was behaving tonight was, to put it simply, insulting.

When they had been pretending in front of her mother and then at the Mayfield Ball, there had been a purpose behind it. Back then, the two had been unable to be around one another without devolving into heated arguments and bickering and had thus realized that subterfuge was their only option.

Things were different now. But Benedict, with the way he was acting toward her, either did not think that they were or did not want to admit it.

Selina had thought that she could wait until after the dinner party tomorrow night before telling Benedict how she truly felt. But now, she did not think she could put up with this for one more night. She needed the truth. More than that, she needed Benedict to hear the truth.

Later, when they were alone, she would tell him how she felt about him. And hopefully, Benedict would be true to himself and tell her the same.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Benedict announced happily as he followed Selina into their bedroom. “It can be hard to tell, where Edmund is concerned—you never really know which version of him you are going to get. Sometimes he likes to argue and dig in his heels just for the sake of it.” He chuckled to himself. “Perhaps he has changed these last few months. Let us hope so.”

Selina stayed back as she watched him begin to undress. He removed the jacket first and then loosened his cravat as if it was choking him. His spirits were high at least, which she counted as a good thing, as she guessed that was about to change drastically.

“Benedict,” she began as she closed the door behind her. “We need to talk.”

He looked at her, an amused frown on his face as if he thought she might be joking. “Oh no. I am not in trouble, am I?”

“That depends.” Her expression was flat, as was her tone. And the way she crossed her arms was enough to indicate that she was not in the mood for humor.

Benedict’s frown deepened. “Selina, is something the matter? If it is, you know that you can tell me—anything.”

It was remarkable how far the two had come in such a short amount of time. The very fact that Benedict did not panic at the notion of Selina opening up to him as she was about to was proof enough of that.

It spoke to the place that they were in, the comfort that they felt around one another. Which, ironically enough, was half the reason they needed to have this conversation

in the first place.

“It is about the way you behaved tonight,” she said carefully. “The way you acted in front of Edmund.”

Benedict tilted his head. “The way I acted? And how was that, exactly?”

“Everything that you said tonight was a lie, Benedict. At the very least, it was an exaggeration. I mean, the story you told about how you found me in the spring! I have never heard such a tale as that one. Was I even there for it? Or were you speaking of somebody else?”

“I might have gotten the details a little...” He clicked his tongue. “I may have romanticized them a little, yes—for the sake of the story. Honestly, Selina, I did not think it was that big of a deal.” He laughed and started toward her, a look in his eyes that she knew too well. Hungry. Eager. He hoped to brush this under the rug and move on. “Now, let us not speak of my brother. Especially now that we are finally alone and?—”

“No.”

He had moved to pull her in his arms, but she wriggled free and took a step back.

“It is more than just the story,” she insisted, seeing how hurt he was by her rejection but powering through because this needed to be said. “It is everything about tonight, from the moment I walked into the dining room. The way you spoke—the way you spoke about us—that wasn’t you, Benedict. And it certainly wasn’t us or our marriage. It was just so fake.”

“Of course it was...” He looked at her as if he did not understand what she was saying. As if she was the crazy one! “Is that not the point, Selina? I told you already that we were going to have to pretend for another night or two. And you agreed, I will remind you.”

“Tomorrow night,” she agreed. “When our friends and family are here. That is what you promised. But in front of Edmund? There was no need for us to be anything other than what we are.”

“It was for Edmund’s sake.” Benedict went to her again, this time taking her hands. “You must remember that the last time he saw the two of us, he was the one set to marry you. And no doubt he has spent the last two months imagining a marriage torn from the pages of a nightmare.”

“And so what if he has?”

“The truth is that I do not trust him. Oh, I do not think that he will intentionally say or

do anything to undermine us, but tomorrow night, if he is not one hundred percent convinced that we are happy about what happened, he might accidentally let something slip. He is already not happy with the lie I have asked him to tell for us?—”

“Foryou,” she cut him off. “You are the one who wants him to lie. I do not think it necessary.”

“It is,” he said sharply. “You might wish otherwise, but that is the way of things. And it is not us who I worry about, but Edmund. His reputation is bad enough without adding a deserter to the mix. A little white lie to cover for him is all I ask. One night, and finally we can put all of this behind us.”

Selina hesitated. Now was the time to ask the question. To finally let him know how she felt and find out if he felt the same way.

Her heart began to race with panic. Worry flooded her. But she took a deep breath and forced herself to meet Benedict’s eyes, to let him see that she was through playing games.

“On that point... there is something I must ask you.”

“And that is?”

“I have wanted to ask for some days now. Truthfully, ever since the Mayfield Ball. I have...” She bit her lip. “I have felt something shift between us since then. And I know that you have too.”

“Selina...” He tried to pull his hands away, but she held on tight.

“I know that when this marriage first began, it was never meant to last. That we had

an agreement to end it in... well, less than a month now. Three weeks, by my account. But... but..." She looked at him desperately, hoping that he would pick up on what she was saying.

"But?"

"But lately, I have felt that... that..."

Her body was running so hot that the room seemed to spin around her. The nerves! The panic! Made worse because now that she was speaking, she could see that Benedict was not going to agree with her. Already, before even finishing, she knew the answer.

"That maybe... maybe there is a chance. Maybe we do not have to go through with that agreement. Maybe this marriage does not have to end."

And it is done. Nowhere near as romantic as I had imagined. Certainly, nowhere near as confident or resounding.

Selina tried to meet Benedict's eyes—she needed him to see the look in her own. But he pulled his hands free and took a step back, averting his gaze in a manner that had her heart cracking.

"Selina," He sighed. "I... I understand what you are saying. I do. But you must know, what you are feeling is not what you think. It is not..." He grimaced. "It is not love?—"

"I did not say love," she said quickly, desperate to redefine her words before it was too late. "I have simply felt that we are not where we were. Once, we hated one another. But now, surely that has changed? I do not hate you, Benedict. And I know you do not hate me."

“Of course I do not.” He almost sounded insulted by the prospect, and Selina took this as a good sign. “But that is not the point.”

“Then what is the point? This marriage is not perfect. I am not such a fool to think that it is.” She tried to laugh, but it fell flat. “But when we had agreed to end our marriage, it was because the two of us could not stand to be around each other. It was because we knew that to stay together would only bring pain, and that was something best to be avoided. Now, that is not the case. Not even close. Surely, that much you can agree on?”

“Selina...” The look in his eyes was pained and confused, suggesting that he wished to run out of the room before he did or said anything he might regret.

“I am not saying that I am in love with you,” she pressed further, desperate to assuage his fears. “I am not suggesting that you are in love with me. But this marriage—us. We have changed, Benedict. You know that we have. And if there is a chance that it might work, then surely we owe it to ourselves to try? To see if maybe, one day, the two of us might...” She hesitated, her body shaking violently. “That we might fall in love. If such a thing was possible.”

Benedict did not answer right away. Still standing back, he looked away from her as he considered—as he reckoned with her words. Selina’s heart raced as she waited for his answer, and she replayed what she had said over and over again in her mind.

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It was messy, she realized. It was not even close to what she had wanted to say. If it had been, she might have admitted outright that she was falling in love with him. An ultimatum! One that he could not ignore. But she could sense his hesitation, and she had raced to find a middle ground. But perhaps that was the problem?

“Selina, I understand perfectly well what you are saying.” He spoke to his feet, not looking at her for so much as a second. “And I understand why you believe that you feel this way.”

“It is not a belief, it is a truth?—”

“But I do not feel the same.” His words were cutting, and the way his head snapped up and his eyes landed on her, the detached look in them, was like a knife to the heart. “What you have felt from me is not real, but a deception that you have allowed yourself to believe. One which, I will remind you, I was perfectly honest regarding its intent. Everything I have said and done has been to make this marriage feel real for the sake of my reputation. That is all.”

Selina stumbled back as if he had slapped her. “No, that is not—those three days... that was not an act! That was real.”

“Three days of civility does not equal love.”

“I never said love.”

“But you implied it,” he countered, his tone still sharp. “I will admit that these past few weeks especially have been easier than they might have been. In fact, I might

even go so far as to say that I have enjoyed them. But it has been a means to an end, Selina. That is all.” He was looking at her with a determined expression, but the room spun such that she could hardly tell. “And I will remind you again, I have been honest about my intentions from the start. It is not my fault that you misunderstood them.”

“Benedict...” She stumbled further, her body swaying as her heart cracked down the middle. “I... that is not... no...”

No... what he is saying... he is lying. He must be! It cannot be true.

“I am sorry if you feel deceived,” he continued, his tone still sharp like a razor’s edge, as if he worried that to soften it might bring her hope. “But the fact is that we agreed to end this marriage in what is now less than a month, and come that time, I fully expect to see our agreement through.”

She said nothing, for what could she possibly say? Chin trembling. Tears welling. Body shaking. She could not bring herself to look at him, for she knew if she did, she would break down.

“Again, I am sorry...” Benedict started toward her, and she flinched. Luckily, all he was doing was walking past her to the door. “Perhaps it is best if I sleep in another room tonight.” He reached the door and opened it, but Selina did not turn around to see him off. “And I will remind you that tomorrow night, I expect you to be on your best behavior. What has just occurred is regrettable, but it does not change what is required of us. Is that understood?”

She did not respond.

“Selina,” he growled warningly. “Tomorrow night, you will be on your best behavior. Is that understood?”“

“Y-Yes,” she stammered. “I understand.”

“Good,” he said. A beat. A moment where she dared to dream that he might have a change of heart. “Good.”

The door opened, and the sound of it closing was the exact moment that Selina collapsed to the floor.

And so it is done.

Selina had confessed how she felt. Benedict had rejected her in the most ruthless of ways. And this marriage, for how it had felt to her, was confirmed to be nothing more than a performance in which she had not even realized she was involved.

This marriage would soon come to an end. That had always been the plan, and it should not have hurt as much as it did. But then again, when Selina had made that agreement, she had not been in love. And so the pain came fast, hard, and so very deep.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Benedict was having a surprisingly good time. If not slightly awkward.

Ordinarily, he hated having people in his home. Never one for socializing, and certainly never one for pretending to enjoy such a thing, tonight felt different. It was a necessary evil, a final attempt to present a united front and put all the rumors to bed once and for all. It was everything that he hated about the ton, used against them this time, manipulating their tendency toward gossip for his own benefit.

The fact that it seemed to be working was the only reason his mood had remained so buoyant all evening. It had to.

“Your Grace!” Lord Chesterton motioned for Benedict to join him and the few others he was standing with. “We were just saying what a serene home you have here.”

“Thank you, Lord Chesterton,” Benedict returned with a smile as he joined the group of four. “I am pleased to find that it is to your liking.”

“I confess, never in a million years would I have imagined I would find myself standing inside of it.” Lord Chesterton chuckled. “All this time, I thought you hated dinner parties.”

“Perhaps I still do,” Benedict responded coolly, which had Lord Chesterton and the others frowning, even leaning back as if worried he might snap. “But my lovely wife loves them, and there is little I would not do to please her.”

“Ah! Good show.” Lord Chesterton nodded.

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“I was speaking with her earlier,” Lady Chesterton mused. “She does seem rather taken with you.”

“You sound surprised.” Benedict chuckled.

“Just an observation,” she responded in a way that made it impossible to tell how exactly she felt. “I heard that the two of you were quite infatuated with one another, and it is nice to see that for once, the rumors are true.”

“You were not at the Mayfield Ball last week?” Lord Burrow asked.

“I was not.”

“Ah, well, if you were, it would not have surprised you.” Lord Burrow nodded proudly, as if there was something to gain from being in the know. “I know young love when I see it, and His Grace’s marriage smacks of it.”

“Which raises the question, Lord Burrow. When will you marry?” Lord Abrams joked. “Perhaps Her Grace can introduce you to one of her sisters.” He nodded across the room, to where the twins stood in the corner, looking a little out of place.

“Perhaps.” Benedict chuckled. “I am sure I can ask my wife to make introductions. Lord Abrams is right, it is high time that you wed.”

“I am afraid that perpetual bachelorhood is my calling,” Lord Burrow declared. “Your brother and I have that in common.”

“Oh, do not be so sure of that.” Benedict pounced on the chance, as he had been doing all evening. “No doubt you heard where my brother has been these past few months.” He looked at each of them, making sure they were listening. “Scouring Europe for a bride worth the Northwick name.”

“Is that so?” Lady Chesterton asked incredulously. “I would not have thought him the type. At least not from what I have heard.”

“This time, the gossip is not worth the tongue that it wags from,” Benedict assured her. “Yes, my brother has a bit of a history where women are concerned, but this last year has changed him—he is now ready to settle down.”

“The reason for his return?” Lord Abrams made sure to ask.

“Exactly. Sadly, there was not much on offer in Europe, but I assured him that once he returned to England, we would find him a bride. So...” Benedict again made sure that they were all listening attentively. “If any of you know of a young lady who might be interested, do not hesitate.”

“How fascinating,” Lord Chesterton murmured. “I admit, I do not know your brother well, but I remember just last year, he told me that he never intended to?—”

“And I am telling you that things have changed,” Benedict cut him off sharply, anger lacing his voice. He also shot him a warning glare.

That, naturally, had the elderly Lord Chesterton’s eyes going wide and his face paling as his mouth opened and closed as if he was struck speechless.

Benedict, sensing that he had gone too far, and reminding himself that he needed to control his temper if he wanted tonight to be a success, acted quickly. “But that is life, is it not?” He chuckled and elbowed Lord Abrams beside him.

“Y-Yes,” Lord Chesterton agreed with a sigh of relief. “And forgive me for questioning you, Your Grace.”

“Not at all. The truth is—and I do not mean to sound too bold—I think that I am to blame. I have been writing to Edmund since he left, singing my wife’s sweet praises the whole while, and I have no doubt that has helped change his mind where wedded bliss is concerned.”

“Of course.”

“And although he returned just yesterday,” Benedict continued merrily, “I feel somewhat bad, rubbing how happy myself and Selina are in his face. Although not too bad!” He laughed and slapped Lord Burrow on the back, which had the others chuckling along like the sheep that they were.

Despite the niceties and the pleasant conversation, Benedict was under no illusion that the people he was speaking with were his friends—or anything close to that, for that matter. Social leeches, was how he thought of them. Here because of his name only and what associating with that name would do for their reputations.

That was the way of it for most of the guests here tonight.

There were over twenty people in the ballroom, most of whom Benedict had no interest in, other than a desire to see them swallow the stories he fed them so that they might be spread about the ton like wildfire. Consumed and taken as fact because that was how Society worked.

As he stood with these four, he cast his gaze further, smiling to see that his guests were mingling merrily as they shared drinks and nibbles. Across the room, he caught the eye of Selina, who was standing with her mother and Lord and Lady Fryer. She was not looking at him, and although it was likely that she hadn’t seen him watching

her, it felt purposeful.

Not that I can blame her. If she were to storm over here and slap me across the face, I dare say that I would deserve it.

He was still struggling to reckon with what had occurred between them last night. Her confession was, in every sense, wholly predictable, and the more he thought about it, the less it surprised him. The timing might not have been perfect, but he had sensed it coming for days, and his only regret was that he had not been better prepared.

Even if he had been, however, he still was not certain that things would have gone any differently. Benedict had convinced himself by this point that what they felt for each other was irrelevant. Their marriage was never meant to turn into something more meaningful, and he'd locked himself into that mode of thinking without a chance of changing his mind.

Did he have feelings for Selina? Of course, he did! Did he enjoy hurting her? Of course not! He only wished that he had been more delicate with her because when he thought of that look in her eyes after he had rejected her, it made him sick to his core.

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“Your Grace.” Lord Burrow was speaking again. “I heard a rather amusing story earlier about a puppy or something of that nature—one that you kept from drowning.”

Benedict looked away from his wife and went back to the circle. “Oh no,” he groaned. “And where did you hear that tale from?”

“I will never tell.” Lord Burrow chuckled.

“A puppy?” Lady Chesterton asked. “What is this?”

“A story that I had no idea was common knowledge,” Benedict said as if he wasn’t the one who was spreading it. “But, seeing as you have asked...”

The night was going according to plan, and for that, Benedict could not be happier. He made a mental note to speak with Selina soon, however, worried that her sour mood might come out and raise questions.

What they needed to do was have a proper conversation. He needed to make her understand why this marriage could never work. It was not her fault but his own, and she had to see that. She had to understand.

But that would be for later. Once this night was over. A few more hours and all of this would finally be over, and then, hopefully, they could reconcile. Or at the very least, come to an understanding that did not risk hurting her any more than he already did.

Benedict might be a monster, but he still cared for Selina. Perhaps the only person in

the world he could say such a thing about.

“... he has been behaving strangely all evening,” Lady Langham was saying. “I do not like it one little bit. What do you think, Selina? Should I have a word with him?”

Selina was not paying her mother any attention. She was watching the party, the guests—her husband, especially. Taking note of their faces, the way they were all behaving, and how jovial the atmosphere seemed to be, in general. And as should have been expected, she did not care about it one little bit.

Really, it was all she could do not to make a scene.

The previous night still played out in her head. The harsh words Benedict had spoken to her. His denouncement of her feelings. His callousness. She had put herself out there in a way she still could not believe that she had, and he had turned her down.

It was funny that last night, Selina had believed that she loved her husband, whereas now she hated the man. Such hate radiated from her very core that she was finding it harder and harder to pretend that they were happy and that this marriage was a wonderful thing, as he demanded of her. What was even the point?

“Selina!” Lady Langham snapped. “Are you listening?”

“Hhmm?” Selina turned back to find her mother scowling at her. “Oh, sorry, Mother. I was distracted.”

“Clearly.” Lady Langham eyed her warningly as she took a sip of her wine. “As I was saying, Leopold has been acting strangely all evening. He is up to something!”

“Uncle Leopold?” Selina looked across the room, where she spotted her uncle speaking with a small group of men she did not know. “What do you mean? I thought

you said that he had heeded Benedict's warning and started paying you as promised?"

"Not that." Lady Langham hesitated, looked around to make sure they were not being overheard, and then dropped her voice. "Of all the guests here, he is one of the few who know the true story behind your marriage."

"And...?"

Lady Langham sighed. "His ego is as fragile as a porcelain vase, dear. And you did not see how effortlessly His Grace intimidated him. No doubt, Leopold is feeling insulted, and no doubt he is looking for a chance to seek his revenge."

"Mother..." Selina shook her head. "I really don't think?—"

"Trust me," Lady Langham hissed. "He is up to something."

"Say that he is. What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Tell His Grace," Lady Langham insisted. "Warn him. Let him know what is afoot so that he might intervene before it is too late."

"And so what if he does say something?" Selina scoffed, finding it very hard to care right now. "What does it matter? Honestly, this whole thing is?—"

"Necessary," Lady Langham cut her off. "And I would expect you to understand that."

It was all becoming too much. The lies on top of lies on top of deception. Benedict was insistent on it. Her mother, frustratingly, was of the same mind and only too happy to perpetuate the 'mistruths,' as she had called them. Her sisters did as their mother told them. And as for Edmund?

Selina spotted Edmund across the room, standing alone as he drank wine and glared sullenly at the party that was thrown in his honor. He saw her watching him and smiled, and she shot him a rueful look.

“I am going to speak with him,” Lady Langham said.

“Speak with who?”

“Leopold,” she huffed. “And you can speak with your husband.”

“Mother...” Selina groaned. “I do not think?—”

“Please do not ruin this, Selina!” Lady Langham hissed. “After everything you have put me through, and everything you have been through yourself, surely you can see the benefit of what your husband is trying to do? He is saving you the embarrassment. That is all this is. He is doing this for you.”

Selina opened her mouth to tell her mother that she could not be more wrong. Oh, how she wished to ruin this party by setting it ablaze. She didn’t care what people thought. She didn’t care about her reputation! That was Benedict! And seeing as he didn’t care about her, why should she care about him?

The only thing stopping her was her mother. And Selina reminded herself that this marriage was as much for her as it was for her sisters.

Just get through tonight. Once I do, I can put this marriage behind me, where it belongs.

“Here he comes,” Lady Langham said suddenly. She stood tall and plastered a pleasant smile on her face. “I shall speak with Leopold, and you shall speak to your husband.”

She swept through the crowd before Selina could say anything, and Benedict was on

her before she could even think what she might want to say to him if anything at all.

“Ah, there she is!” he announced loudly. Far too loudly. “My gorgeous wife.” He slipped a hand around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss on the cheek.

The kiss brought back memories of the wrong kind. Selina was reminded of the kiss they had shared at the Mayfield Ball, how real it had felt, how it had told her without the need for words that she and Benedict were falling for one another in ways they had tried to ignore.

This kiss was lifeless. It was devoid of passion. It was like kissing a statue, and Selina had to force herself not to pull away because she knew that most of the guests were watching.

“How are you, beautiful wife?” Benedict asked, with a huge smile once he released her. “Is everything going well?”

She looked over his shoulder, where she saw her mother whispering to Leopold. Her uncle wore a scowl on his face, looking properly chastised and utterly demoralized. Now would be the time to warn Benedict of what her mother suspected, only Selina could not bring herself to do it.

“I said, how are you, beautiful wife?” he repeated.

“Well enough,” she replied with a forced smile. “I was just wondering when supper is due to start.”

“Any moment,” he said as he tugged her to his side. “And I must say...” He dropped his voice so only she could hear. “Thank you for behaving tonight. Everything is going even better than I had hoped.”

To that, she gave no answer. Truly, it did not matter what she said because her husband would not care about it either way. All she had to do was get through supper... An easy enough task, even if she was dreading it to her very core.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

“A toast!” Benedict tapped his glass with his knife as he rose to his feet. “If you will all do me the tremendous favor of giving me your attention for a few short moments.”

He stood at the head of the table, a position which allowed him to see down its entire length so that he might speak directly to each guest. As there were so many of them, the table had been moved to the grand hall, which was barely large enough to accommodate so many people.

To his immediate right sat Selina, and to his immediate left sat his brother. He made sure to smile at them both, a show of thanks for how well-behaved they had been tonight.

Not that he needed to have worried, he now realized. This was for them as much as it was for him, and surely by now, they both understood that implicitly.

“I want to start by thanking you all for coming,” he began, making sure to raise his voice so that it carried down the length of the table. “For some, it was an easy journey here. For others, it was a far longer journey, and the fact that you made it means the world to me. That is not to discourage those who live nearby,” he joked. “And again, I feel blessed that each of you has seen fit to grace me and my lovely wife with your presence”

Benedict smiled at Selina, who did not return his smile. She looked morose, which had his jaw clenching as he resisted the urge to widen his eyes at her in warning. Not now. Not when so many people were watching them.

“As to why we are here...” He held his glass out to his brother, who looked equally as bored as Selina. “After many months abroad, my younger brother has finally returned. We missed you, Edmund. More than you are willing to believe,” he joked, which had a few others laughing. “It occurred to me earlier that this was the longest that you and I have ever spent apart.” He grinned. “Which in itself is reason enough to celebrate.”

A joke that made those down the table laugh.

Edmund did not laugh. He forced a smile and raised his glass, shifting awkwardly as he took a sip and bowed his head in thanks.

Again, Benedict had to suppress the urge to give him a warning glare because of all those watching.

“But you were gone for good reason,” he continued. “As many of you have surely heard, my brother was searching for a wife abroad. An unsuccessful venture, sadly, but a worthy one. It was for that reason that I was not saddened when he missed my wedding, for I knew he wished me well, as I now wish him well. Edmund...” He raised his glass higher, signaling for the table to do the same. “Welcome back, and may your quest for love and happiness be as fruitful as mine has turned out to be. Hear hear!”

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The guests echoed the sentiment as they raised their glasses and then drank from them. Edmund, once again, looked bored as he mimicked the gesture and took a sip. And Selina, frustratingly, did not even bother with that. She looked glum, sulky, as if she wished to be anywhere else but there.

“Is everything alright?” Benedict asked out the side of his mouth as he sat back down.

“Why would it not be?” she responded dryly.

He looked at her flatly. “Please, Selina. This night is almost over. If you could please refrain from?—”

“From what? From causing a scene?”

“Yes.”

She laughed bitterly. “Do not worry, dear husband, I would not do anything like that. As you have made sure to point out so many times, this is as much for me as it is for Edmund. If anything, I should be laying myself at your feet in thanks.”

He pretended to smile, just in case they were being watched. “Please, do not start.”

“I was not planning to.”

“Edmund is behaving himself. I had hoped that of the two of you, you would be the mature one.”

She snorted. “Is he now? It looks to me like he is having an even worse time than I am.”

Benedict could feel his temper rising. It was as if she wanted it! His leg began to bounce, and he took a deep breath for the sake of self-control. He was about to tell her that he would not be baited when her mother interrupted.

“Your Grace,” Lady Langham purred as she leaned in. “A lovely speech.”

“Thank you, Lady Langham.”

“And a lovely evening.” She widened her eyes warningly at Selina. “I know my daughter thinks so.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“I could not agree more,” Lord Chesterton chimed in from down the table. He appeared drunk, from the way he swayed in his seat. “And Your Grace, you must tell me your secret!”

“What secret is that?”

“How you have been able to keep your wife so happy!” He laughed as he took Lady Chesterton’s hand. She glared at him, and he chortled. “I know I could use the advice!”

“Oh, do not be silly.” Lady Chesterton pulled her hand free.

“I’m jesting, dear. I’m just jesting. Although he is clearly doing something right. Is that not so, Your Grace!”

Lord Chesterton was looking at Selina now, his eyes wide and eager for her to agree.

She looked at him plainly. “Oh, it is no big secret. He beats me, is how. Makes sure to keep me in line that way?—”

“Selina!” Lady Langham cried.

“She is just joking,” Benedict hurried to explain, laughing awkwardly as he reached for Selina’s hand. She did not give it, and he laughed that off too. “Just a joke, My Lord.”

Lord Chesterton appeared perplexed, before laughing hysterically. “Ah! Yes. Good show!”

“Just a joke,” Selina spoke up. “The truth is, he does not beat me, My Lord.” She smiled at Benedict and fluttered her eyelashes. “The threat of a beating is more than?—”

“How is the wine!” Benedict barked in a panic. “A delicious vintage, no?”

This end of the table was looking at him curiously now, unable to discern if Selina was joking or if there was some truth behind it.

“It is a wonderful choice,” Lady Langham agreed, thankfully. “Lord Edmund.” She turned to Edmund. “I have not been to France in some time, but I have heard the wine there is splendid.”

“How should I know?”

“You were just there.” Benedict laughed. “Obviously, Edmund. But what he means is, he was not drinking while abroad. So, he did not have time to sample the vintages. Is that not right, Brother?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Edmund sighed.

“You were in Paris, yes?” Lord Burrow jumped into the conversation. “I was there just last year. Tell me, have they finally finished the construction of the eastern wing of Notre Dame? I was so upset when I was there, for I had been told it would be completed by that time.”

Edmund shrugged. “I did not see it.”

“Oh.” Lord Burrow blinked. “You did not visit Notre Dame, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Do not bother him with such questions,” Benedict interjected. “I have been at him all day already, and surely he is sick to death of answering them.”

He was becoming flustered, for it felt as if he was trying to stamp out a million little fires, each one sparking faster than he was able to put it out. The evening was almost over, they were nearly there, but this constant pestering of his brother, not to mention his brother’s sullen attitude, was threatening to undo the entire ruse!

“Let us speak of something else,” Benedict announced with a chuckle. “My brother has traveled long and hard these last few days.” He widened his eyes at him in warning. “And I am beginning to suspect that all this travel has caught up with him.”

“I have a question.” It was Lord Langham, who was sitting halfway down the table, leaning forward and holding up his hand as if waiting for permission to speak. “If you do not mind, Your Grace.”

Benedict could sense that something was not right. And the way the Dowager Viscountess caught her breath confirmed it. But half the table was watching, and he could not dismiss him, for that would appear even more bizarre.

“Of course, Lord Langham.” He made sure to stare the man down as if to warn him off. “This is a dinner party. You do not need permission.”

His eyes flicked to Selina, who, for the first time, was sitting up, apparently intrigued by what her uncle may or may not ask.

“I was just curious—and please, correct me if I am wrong here,” Lord Langham began, making sure to pitch his voice so that the entire table could hear. “Your brother was overseas at the time of your wedding?”

“That is correct.”

“I find that most interesting, Your Grace, because I have a dear friend who claims that he saw your brother in Manchester after the wedding ceremony. Surely, that is a mistake?”

Benedict balked, feeling his stomach drop as he scrambled for a response. “Not at all, Lord Langham. In fact, I am not surprised in the least by what your friend claims to have seen.”

“Oh?”

“Edmund had indeed traveled overseas...” He forced out a laugh and shook his head in his brother’s direction. “But he was a little tardy in leaving. It would have been a week after that he left properly. Is that not right, Edmund?”

Edmund did not respond. He curled his lip in apparent disgust and shook his head at Benedict.

“Most curious,” Lord Langham continued with a wicked smile. “And still, he did not attend the wedding ceremony.”

“As I have explained, he was supposed to have left for France, and had I known that he had not, I would have insisted that he return.” Benedict grimaced apologetically. “Forgive me, but I thought it an easier explanation than the truth.”

“And yet another friend of mine claims to have seen him the following week, this time in Bath. Your brother certainly enjoys traveling. Everywhere but France, that is.”

Benedict’s jaw tightened. “Your friend is mistaken.”

“Perhaps.” Lord Langham shrugged. “I was merely asking the question.”

“Well, don’t,” Benedict snapped angrily, his temper finally flaring. “And I do not appreciate the implication.”

“No implication, Your Grace. I was just curious.”

“Oh, will you stop with the questions, Leopold,” Lady Langham sighed. “His Grace has explained the matter, and that should be enough.”

“I wonder if he even traveled to France at all,” Lord Langham continued. “Surely, that is the truth, at least.”

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“It is,” Benedict growled, clenching his hands into fists. “Edmund, tell him.” He waited, expecting his brother to speak up. “Edmund!” he barked.

“It is as my brother says,” Edmund said plainly. “I was in France, seeking a...” He grimaced. “Seeking a bride.”

“There. That settles the?—”

“So, the other rumors are not true?” Lord Longham interjected, his smile widening. He looked down the table. “For we have all heard them, even if nobody here is willing to speak of them.”

“Careful, Lord Langham...” Benedict bared his teeth in warning, his body shaking now. “I do not appreciate where this is going, and I will remind you that you are my guest.”

“And as your guest, I do not appreciate being lied to. We all heard the rumor that you were forced into marriage after your brother ducked out the window on the night of?—”

“That is enough!” Benedict was on his feet, even if he did not remember standing. Leaning over the table, he felt like he might charge down its length and tear the Viscount into pieces. “I have told you what happened, and my word should seal the matter! I do not tolerate gossip-mongering, and neither should you!”

The room fell silent. All eyes were on Benedict, a combination of shock and fear written all over the faces of his guests. He had worked so hard to convince them

tonight, to lure them into a false sense of safety and security, and in this one glorious moment, he had ruined everything.

“You do not believe me?” he growled. “Ask my wife! For she will tell you the truth as I have.” He spun around and glared at Selina. “Well! Tell them!”

Benedict knew the moment he spoke that he had made a mistake. First, his sudden outburst caught her by surprise. That surprise then turned into annoyance, which quickly turned into defiance.

“Oh, what does it matter, Benedict?” she sighed, waving her hand dismissively down the table. “Who cares if they learn the truth.”

That elicited a series of gasps.

His eyes widened. “Selina! What did we talk about?”

“I don’t care,” she said. “It’s a lie. All of it! Edmund was not in France. He fled the night of the announcement of our engagement, and you married me in his stead. What does it matter!”

“Selina!” Lady Langham cried. “Do not listen to her. She has had too much to drink?—”

“I am not drunk!” Selina was on her feet. “And I object to all these lies! Do you want the truth?” She looked down the table. “Benedict and I married because we had no choice! We were forced into it. And for over a month now, we have been living a lie because we worried about what people would think if they found out! Well...” Her eyes shot fire at Benedict. “I am sick and tired of pretending! I do not love Benedict, and he certainly does not love me! In fact, sometimes I wish that it had been Lord Edmund who I had wed instead, for surely that would not have been the nightmare

this marriage has turned into.”

She sat back down and crossed her arms over her chest.

Silence then followed.

How to describe how Benedict felt at that moment? It was impossible. Red flashed before his eyes. His blood ran so hot that he thought he might explode. The walls seemed to close in on him, and the shocked whispers of those down the table grew louder and began to beat at him as if from every direction.

To make matters even worse, Selina could not have looked more defiant. She raised an eyebrow at him as if daring him to say something—to snap at her. Her lips curled into a proud smirk.

A fight was in store for the two of them. This one, however, would not end as the others so often did. This one, Benedict suspected, would come to define their marriage and their relationship in ways that would finally see its end.

And with how he was feeling, he was not entirely certain that was a bad thing.

## Chapter Thirty

“I am not going to apologize.” Selina stormed through the foyer, her back purposefully to Benedict. Just in case he wasn’t already aware of how little she thought of him right now.

“Do not walk away from me!” he roared. “Get back here!”

“I am through being told what to do.”

“Selina!” She heard his footsteps pounding against the marble floor as he charged after her. “I said get back here!”

The sound of her husband coming for her elicited a sense of fear the likes of which she had never known. There was no flirtation behind his anger. There was no indication that he wanted her to push back, to stoke the flames of his rage so that the two might spiral into their usual state of induced eroticism—their standard method for ending a fight.

Benedict was angry with her, and this time there would be no talking her way out of it. More than that, Selina did not want to.

He might be angry, but so was she! All evening, her anger had slowly bubbled beneath the surface, growing hotter and more untamed the further Benedict pushed the lie upon her and their guests. His speech was the final straw, and when Leopold decided to poke holes in it, she was thrilled.

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Perhaps she had gone too far? Perhaps she should have waited until they were alone before she finally told him how she felt. Perhaps... well, it was too late for that now. Much too late.

“Selina!”

She reached the main staircase, taking the first step before turning back and fixing him with a glare. She needed the height advantage, anything she could do to even the odds.

“I did what I thought was right,” she said angrily. “You cannot blame me for speaking the truth.”

“The truth! The truth was exactly what I was trying to avoid!” He reached the staircase and stopped less than three feet away from her. Even with that distance, he still stood taller than her. “As I explained to you?—”

“You have explained nothing!” she cried. “Nothing that I believe. It has been lies on top of lies, Benedict! I am sick to death of them!”

“You deliberately disobeyed me.”

“I am not yours to be led on a leash like some whipped puppy! I told you I did not want to do this! I told you?—”

“And I told you that you had no choice!” he thundered, his voice drowning out her words.

For a brief second, Selina felt a tingle in her loins that she recognized only too well. But she was quick to dismiss that sensation.

“One more night. That was all I asked. And you could not give me even that!”

“It is not about that.”

“Do you have any idea what you have done? What they might say now? The gossip this is likely going to cause?”

“I do not care!”

“I do!”

“Why?!” she shouted. “Why do you care what others think? Why do you care for them more than you care for me!”

“I told you,” he spoke through a clenched jaw, his body shaking, refusing to look at her as if to do so would end him, “it is for my brother and his reputation?—”

“To hell with his reputation!” she cut him off. “And to hell with you!”

His body turned stiff at being interrupted. Again, he spoke slowly, to his feet, refusing to look at her. “My entire life, I have done nothing but look out for Edmund. That is all I have done! And all I wanted was to spare him the embarrassment that might result if the truth was revealed! That was, as you well know, the entire point of all of this!”

“And us?”

“What of us?”

She tried not to wince at the harshness of his voice. Instead, she rose on her tiptoes, looming over him. “So, that is how it is going to be, is it? This marriage... what we had... it did not mean anything to you. Nothing at all?”

“It was never meant to. We agreed?—”

“This is not two weeks ago, Benedict. There is no need to lie about what we are anymore. I am not ashamed of it. Unlike you, I am through with the lies! But are you? Can you continue to lie to yourself? For I know that is what you are doing! I know deep down exactly how you feel.”

“And how is it that I feel? You know me so well. Why don’t you say it?”

“You care for me,” she hissed.

There was no time for subtlety. Not anymore. Last night, she had tried that, and it had failed. All that was left for them was an all-out assault. Consequences be damned.

“And this marriage of ours, the one you seem so insistent on pretending is just for show, has become real! And that terrifies you!”

It was subtle, but she thought she saw Benedict balk. She thought she saw the shadow pass behind his eyes as if he agreed with her and was fighting back that impulse to say it. She thought, for the briefest of moments, that he might have finally given in because she knew deep down that he wished it.

But this was Benedict, and a more stubborn man did not exist. Not to mention an angrier one.

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“Is that what you think?” he scoffed. “Why not finish the thought? You think I am in love with you. Is that it?”

Her eyes flashed with anger, and her body shook. “I might have if I did not think you incapable of such a thing.”

“At least you will not be disappointed to learn that you are right! I do not love you, Selina.”

He glared angrily at her, and she did her best not to react to his words, which cut deeper than any knife. Instead, she matched the intensity of his glare, and fire erupted between them.

“As for this marriage, despite what you might think, nothing has changed since its beginning.”

“You are such a coward?—”

“I am exactly the same man you married over a month ago,” he snarled. “That is who I am. Yes, I have learned to deal with you,” he scoffed again. “Your temperamental nature. And I have taken liberties with you. But do not mistake that for anything other than what it was.”

“And what was that?”

“Convenience and nothing more.” He took a step closer, so tall that even though she stood on the stairwell, they were at eye level. They held that stare... the tension

mounted. Selina felt it build, but she refused to give in. “As for the way you behaved tonight, you should know that it will not go unpunished.”

“Ha!” She made sure to return his rueful stare, their faces inches apart. “And what could you possibly do that has not already been done?”

“Do not test me.”

“Do not insult me by thinking that I fear you. You may be a terrifying man to look at. A beast in every respect,” she spat. “But to fear you? I would sooner fear my own shadow.”

It was dangerous to fight like this. Stupid too.

When the fight had begun, Selina had not considered the possible repercussions. She had known that it would be the end of them. She had known that once they were finished, this marriage would be finished as well. But that was not what worried her at that moment.

Standing over him as she was, their faces inches apart, the heat and fury building between them... it was a sensation that she knew so very well. One that had not reared its ugly head in a while. One which they used to fall back on daily because they both knew exactly where it would lead.

As things currently stood, Selina hated Benedict with all her soul. She had given him her heart, and he had crushed it, and for that, she could never forgive him. And yet... as they glared daggers at each other, as they dared each other to push that little bit harder, she knew that if he took her, she would not have it in herself to resist.

Dammit, a part of her wanted it, knowing that it would be the last time he touched her. And she hated that she did.

“You are a coward,” she snarled in his face. “And to think that I ever considered that I might have feelings for you beyond revulsion...” She cackled. “I would sooner die.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” he growled. “For my patience is running thin, Selina. You would do well to remember that.”

“And as I said before, I am through being told what to do by you.” She got in his face, so close that she could feel his breath. “In fact, once I turn around and walk up these steps, I never want to see you again.”

“Then go,” he said, his voice low. “It will not be a moment too soon.”

“Do not tell me what to do!”

“You are my wife, and for as long as you are, you will do as I say.”

“Never!”

She glared at him. He did the same. She could see the hunger in his eyes. She could see his hand opening and closing as if he meant to grab her. Her body flushed. It shook from adrenaline. And the way her thighs tingled...

“Now, if you do not mind...” A final derisive look and she turned to leave.

“Do not walk away from me!”

“Try and stop me!”

And that was what he did.

His hand shot out and grabbed her by the arm. She tried to pull away, but he was too

strong, too powerful. He leaped up the steps, pulled her to him, and before she knew what was happening, he was on her.

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Their lips met in a fiery clash of tongues and saliva and teeth. She grabbed him by the hair and held him, and he wrapped his hands around her face and kept it there as they devoured one another. There was no emotion in the kiss, other than hate and fury, and they bathed in it because they both seemed to understand what this meant.

Her teeth locked onto his lips and bit down. He roared and pulled back, grabbing a hold of the back of her hair, yanking her head back to expose her neck, and then latching on with his lips and teeth and sucking and biting all at once.

“Let me go!” she moaned. “I said?—”

Benedict pulled back, grabbed a hold of her waist, spun her around, and pushed her against the banister. Then he stepped closer to her so that his hulking frame loomed over her. One arm wrapped around her chest, the other still on her waist, he put his lips right to her ear and nipped it before pulling back, as if trying to tear it.

“And I said, don’t tell me what to do,” he growled.

Selina gasped as she tried to wiggle free. He refused to allow her, kissing and nibbling down her neck as he held her in place. Her hips were pressed against his crotch, and she could feel his manhood growing hard, so she ground her hips against it, which had him groaning.

“I hate you,” she moaned as she felt him thicken.

“Not as much as I hate myself.”

Her hand reached down and found its way to the front of his pants. She gripped his throbbing member as if it belonged to her, squeezing it so hard that he roared as if from pain but she knew it to be pleasure.

He pressed her harder against the banister as he wiggled free from his pants. Then he reached down and lifted her skirt, holding her steady with one hand as the other forced her legs apart.

“This marriage is over,” she snarled over her shoulder, while at the same time lifting her leg and allowing him to position himself between her legs.

“Selina, as far as I am concerned, it never began,” he said as he thrust into her.

She felt him slide inside her, inch by inch, until she was full of him. Both his hands were now on her waist, and she was powerless to stop him as he began to thrust. She held on to the banister. She gripped it so tight that her hands began to ache. But she barely felt it compared to the spikes of pleasure that radiated through her body with each thrust.

They were hard and fast thrusts, as if Benedict was trying to expel all his feelings, all his desires, every thought he’d ever had of her. As if he hated her and needed her to know it. Or rather, as if hated himself, which was more likely.

He held her as he continued to thrust and pound and punish. His hands gripped her waist tighter. She threw her head back, and he latched onto her neck again. Harder and faster he thrust, and she wiggled her hips as she felt his legs begin to shake. She let go of the banister and fell back. His arms wrapped around her chest as he pulled her back against him and bit her neck, finishing inside her.

She felt him throb and then fill her. She felt his body stiffen, the way he roared and then exhaled, and then stumbled back. She felt him leave her, a sensation akin to him

tearing a piece of her that she knew she would never get back.

And once he stumbled away and she was free from his embrace, the spell was broken and she could not bear to so much as look at him. For how disgusted she was by him, she was just as disgusted by herself.

Selina smoothed down her dress and powered up the steps, leaving her husband there, his pants still around his ankles, his breathing ragged and heavy as he tried to reckon with what had just happened. She made sure to walk heavily so he could hear her footsteps. And she made sure to slam the door to her bedroom shut so the sound would echo through the house.

It was not until she was alone, pacing the room, trying to keep that anger present because it was the only thing keeping her from breaking down, that she was forced to consider what had just happened... what it might mean... and where she went from here.

Her marriage was over. It really was that simple.

It had lasted for close to two months, longer than they had thought possible, but nowhere near long enough. For a moment, she had wondered if it could be more than she had dared to dream, but no. Now she knew that was impossible.

She had loved Benedict. He had rejected her love. And from that, there could be no going back. So, finally, with that realization, Selina collapsed on the floor and wept.

It felt like the first smart decision she had made all day.

## Chapter Thirty-One

The soft knock at the door snapped Benedict back into the room. He was sitting in his

study, not working, but sequestered there because he had nowhere else to go. He could not return to his bedroom, for Selina was there, and the prospect of facing her was not one he relished. And to sleep in a spare room tonight felt like an admission of defeat.

I have done nothing wrong! She is the one who... I was only... This is all because of her!

Still, when he heard that knock, his heart leaped because he hoped it might be her. Here to apologize. Perhaps here to demand an apology from him. Either way, he wanted it to be Selina because after the fight they had just had, the things they said, the decision they reached...

Could this really be how it ends?

“Benedict?” Edmund’s voice spoke as the door cracked open. “Are you decent?”

Benedict’s stomach dropped, and he sank down in his chair. “I suppose that depends. Although the word decent feels about as far removed from my current state as could be possible.”

Edmund poked his head around the door. He wore a concerned frown, and the way he lingered without walking inside was indicative of that concern. “I heard what happened.”

Benedict scoffed. “Did you, now?”

“To be fair, I think the entire manor heard it. And the neighboring estate. Perhaps a few keen ears in London, too.”

“She does have a temper on her, doesn’t she?”

“I meant you, Brother.” Edmund finally stepped into the study and closed the door softly behind him. “Do you wish to speak about it?”

“I do not see the point.”

“It might help?”

“I am well beyond help.”

“Perhaps it is not me who you should speak to.” Edmund raised an eyebrow at him. “If you catch my meaning?”

Benedict’s lip curled. “That is not an option—and please, Edmund, do me a favor and do not choose this moment to suddenly transform into a bastion of brotherly love and support. Twenty-eight years of being the one to look out for you and I do not need you to attempt to return the favor. Not now. Not for this.”

Edmund lingered in the middle of the study, his hands folded behind his back, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. His expression was hard-set, contemplative in a way that told Benedict that this conversation was far from being over.

“Perhaps that is the problem,” he said. “Twenty-eight years and it is high time that someone looks after you for a change.”

Benedict scoffed. “I do not need to be looked after. What I need is to be left alone.”

“Forever, if what I heard just now is how you chose to leave things.”

“And why wouldn’t I?” Benedict glared warningly at his brother, even though his heart was not in it.

He wished to be resolved in what had just happened. To be glad for it, as if it was what he had wanted all along. Yet, the way his stomach churned was all the proof he needed to confirm his true feelings.

Benedict had made a tremendous mistake.

A shame that I am too stubborn and proud to do anything about it.

“I appreciate what you tried to do for me,” Edmund continued solemnly. “But you need to realize, Benedict, there is no need. We are not children anymore, and the fact that you still choose to behave as if we are is?—”

“That is not what I am doing!” Benedict snapped.

Edmund paused, ensuring that his brother would allow him to finish speaking. “It is no reason to throw away a relationship that, to be quite honest with you, is beyond

anything I might have imagined possible.”

Benedict felt his chest tighten and looked away as if his brother’s advice angered him. “That has nothing to do with it. The simple fact is that mine and Selina’s relationship reached its natural end...” His chest tightened even further, and he continued to look away. “We never intended to remain together, and although I do regret how things ended, it has nothing to do with you.” He then forced himself to look at his brother, a determined gaze to put a final point on the matter. “Nothing.”

“Is that so?” Edmund did not sound as if he believed it.

“It is.” Benedict nodded once. “And I will thank you to drop this... whatever it is you are doing. I do not need you to look out for me, Edmund. That is not how this relationship works.”

“Ah, because you are the one who looks out for me.”

Benedict glared warningly at his brother, desperate for him to drop this brotherly charade because he was not in the mood!

Why was it so hard for Edmund to understand that he was only doing this for him? And while Benedict might not admit it out loud, that included what had happened between him and Selina.

That was how it had always been, ever since they were children... ever since the accident that had killed their parents. Before the accident, things had been different, and Benedict had never imagined the kind of man he would become, but a near-death experience and being thrust unexpectedly into adulthood changed that.

It was a carriage accident. Benedict, his mother, and his father had been riding one night when one of the horses had a fright and bolted suddenly. This made the carriage

lurch forward and tip over, and the oil lantern that was inside shattered and set the carriage on fire.

The scars that Benedict bore now were the result of that accident, as was his changed persona.

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He remembered little of his parents, but what he did remember was that his father often spoke about the importance of their name and standing, what this honor meant to not just their family but to all of England, and how imperative it was that they lived up to it, no matter what.

Benedict had been twelve when the accident occurred, but that did not stop him from dedicating his life to proving himself worthy of the legacy his deceased parents left him. His brother, eight at the time, was a different case, which was why Benedict was so determined to guide and help him in any way that he could.

Edmund might not have seen the importance of being treated this way, but that did not negate the importance that Benedict felt. He would do anything for his brother... even abandon the only woman he had ever loved.

“Now, if you do not mind...” He waved his brother away. “I have much work to do if we are to rebound from tonight’s events with some semblance of dignity.”

Still, his brother did not leave. “Dignity? Is that all you care about?”

“What else is there?”

“You know, I do not remember much of our parents, Benedict. You are the one with that privilege. But do you know what I do remember?”

Benedict sighed. “If you tell me, will you then leave me alone?”

“That they were happy,” Edmund stated matter-of-factly. “That was their legacy. Not

this—” He indicated the room, the manor—everything. “A happy marriage is what they left behind, and everything else...” He shrugged. “I don’t think they cared for it.”

“It is a good thing that you cannot remember them then,” Benedict said coolly, ignoring the pang in his chest. “Because I can assure you that was not the case.”

Edmund shrugged again. “If you say so.” He turned and started back toward the door. “Oh, and one more question.”

Benedict groaned. “Do I have a choice?”

“Say this little scandal does blow over. That people forget about it. Heck, that I fall in love with a fine lady and get married.” Edmund looked right at him. “What will you do?”

Benedict blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I asked. What will you do, come next year? Or the year after that? Or ten years from now, when nobody can remember anything of tonight? Save convincing yourself over and over again that you have lived up to our parents’ legacy and honored their good name, that is.” Edmund raised an eyebrow, let the question sink in, and then popped open the door and walked out.

Benedict stared at the space his brother had just occupied, wanting to dismiss the question as unimportant, but unable to ignore the crushing reality of its truth.

Was it possible that he had been wrong this entire time? That his entire life and everything he had worked toward was a lie? He had truly believed that it was his duty to look after his brother and protect him, that doing so was what his parents would have wanted. That nothing else mattered so long as he honored their legacy and

proved himself worthy.

Truthfully, he had not thought much of the other side of that coin. His marriage. Whether or not he and Selina were happy. How important that happiness had been.

He had equated his reputation to his name only, thinking that would be his legacy. But was it possible that his actual legacy might come from finding someone to share his life with? That falling in love, being happy for a damn change, was the real prize his parents wanted for him?

A shame it is too late now. Even if I wanted to apologize, my pride would not let me. Besides, after the way I treated Selina, I do not expect her to forgive me. I do not deserve such grace as that.

Theirs was not a relationship built on communication, and thus he knew that the chances of them talking this through were unlikely. It was not too late to say something... but then Benedict came to realize that one truth above all had been spoken in earnest earlier tonight.

He was a coward. And for that reason, he stayed in his study, lamenting what had happened, knowing that while something could be done, he was not going to do it. And thus, his ambition to live up to his parents' legacy was yet another failure in a very long list of failures that would come to define him for the rest of his days.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Selina sat over her desk, staring at the blank piece of parchment as she tried to decide what she wanted to say. To keep it vague and lie? Or to tell the truth because not doing so was what caused this mess in the first place?

She was saved from having to come to a decision when a soft knock sounded at the

door. The sound of it had her head snapping up, but it did not send her heart racing or have her stomach knotting, for she did not think for one moment it might be her husband.

She knew him better than that.

“Your Grace,” a male voice spoke as the door creaked open.

“Ah, Lord Edmund.” She smiled as she pushed her chair back. “Good morning.”

“Please, call me Edmund.”

“Only if you promise to call me Selina,” she said as she stood up.

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Edmund chuckled as he approached her. “I am sorry to disturb you, but I wished to check on you after last night.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. I—” Her voice cracked as her mind went back to the previous evening. “There is no need to check on me, however. If anything, I should be the one coming to see you so that I might apologize.”

Edmund frowned. “What on earth do you have to apologize for?”

“Last night,” she sighed. “I did not mean to put you on the spot like that. Revealing that you...” She clicked her tongue. “That you chose to run. It was not right that I said those things.”

“But they were true.” He chuckled.

“I should not have said them, nonetheless.”

“It is fine,” he assured her gently. “Truly. And if it is any consolation, I think it is for the best that the truth is known. Unlike Benedict, I do not care what people think of me.”

She scoffed. “Perhaps he could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Do not hate him for it,” Edmund urged. “Although it might not excuse what he did, he only acted in the way that he thought was right. That is all he has ever done.”

“Oh, I know,” she sighed. “And I want you to know that what happened between me

and your brother had nothing to do with you. You were simply caught in the middle, and for that..." She chuckled softly. "I apologize."

He smiled softly. "Either way, I am glad that you are doing well." He hesitated, seeming to consider what to say next. "If it is any consolation, you are doing far better than Benedict."

She rolled her eyes. "Ah, so that is why you are here." Then, she turned around and walked back to her desk. She had a letter to write, and she suddenly felt more inspired to write it.

"Not at all." He hurried behind her. "The truth is, he does not know I am speaking with you."

"Wonderful," she muttered as she sat down.

"I simply wished to?—"

"Edmund, I appreciate your coming by." Sitting down, she looked over her shoulder at him and raised an eyebrow so he would know she was speaking plainly. "But what happened last night was a long time coming. Perhaps I had not thought so, but the more I think about it..." She exhaled as if to expel the pain welling up in her chest. "It was always going to be this way."

Edmund frowned. "Is that so?"

She nodded. "It is. Your brother has made his feelings toward me clear—truthfully, he did so two months ago. And it is as I said..." She made sure to look him right in the eyes. "I am perfectly fine. Truly, there is no need to worry."

The look that Edmund fixed her with told her that he did not believe a word of what

she said. Which was to be expected, as Selina did not believe her words either.

Oh sure, she spoke them well enough. She forced them out of her mouth because she had little choice and knew that it was better to accept reality than wallow in self-pity. What had happened may have hurt, but misery would not erode the pain. If anything, it would only worsen it.

So, waking up this morning, realizing that her husband was unlikely going to come to her and apologize—why would he? This was what he had wanted from the beginning—Selina made a choice. Resilience. Independence. And, as the piece of parchment before her indicated, a fresh start.

Edmund took note of the piece of parchment. “What is that, if you do not mind my asking?”

“It is nothing,” she sighed as she turned back in her chair. “I am writing a letter to my cousin, the Duchess of Thorne. It occurred to me this morning that I might need a place to stay until we decide what is to be done, and my cousin has always?—”

“W-What?” Edmund sputtered. “A place to stay? You are leaving?”

“I think it is for the best.”

“But that is... do you not think that to be a tad preemptive? You and Benedict fought, yes. From what the staff tell me, that is not so uncommon.” He laughed awkwardly. “Surely, if you both take a moment and talk about?—”

“I am afraid that we are well past that. Yes, Benedict and I have been known to...” She could not help but smile. “Argue, from time to time. But this is different.”

“Still...” Edmund bit his lip. “Have you told Benedict of your plan? I refuse to

believe that he would agree.”

She scoffed bitterly. “This was his idea, Edmund.”

He balked. “No?”

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“Now, please...” She picked up the quill and pretended to focus. “I do not mean to be rude, but this letter will not write itself.”

“Selina—”

“Good day, Edmund,” she spoke without looking at him.

She thought Edmund might speak again, but she was glad when he chose not to. His eyes lingered on the back of her head—she could feel the pity in them—before she heard him turn around and walk out of the room.

Alone once more, the quill still in hand, the tip hovered over the piece of parchment, but she found herself unwilling to put ink to paper.

Has it really come to this? Although why I am surprised, I do not know.

This had always been the plan.

It was last night as Selina lay crying in bed that she remembered the conversation she and Benedict had two months ago, when he had suggested that when the time was right, they might part ways amicably. They would be married in name only, and she would be free to live where she chose without having to stomach sleeping under the same roof as him.

For a time there, it had looked as if that plan might not come to fruition. She had truly believed that there was no need for it. She had even begun to wonder if their marriage, which had come about under such strange circumstances, might transform

into one of happiness and joy and... and love.

She knew now that Benedict had never wanted any of that. And if he did, it would be up to him to tell her so. She had done all that she could, and she wouldn't beg.

Pride was what brought her here. A lack of communication which was, ironically, the cornerstone of their marriage.

A single tear fell from Selina's eye and landed on the page. She wiped it away, dipped her quill in the inkpot, and then began writing. It would take a few days for this letter to reach her cousin and a few days to receive a response. Long days, she suspected. More than enough time to fix everything, but...

No. There would be no fixing it. That, she now knew, was a certainty.

"Yes, I am more than aware of the circumstances, Edmund. As I was yesterday when you asked me. And the day before, when you first brought it to my attention."

"And you are certain that you understand?" Edmund implored his brother. "Because from what I can tell, you have not fully grasped the situation."

"I have," Benedict responded simply. "And as you can see, I have made my decision."

"To do nothing?"

"I am not doing nothing." Benedict frowned. "I am playing with Charlie, after which I plan on getting some work done."

Indeed, the puppy that Benedict had once helped save ran about his feet as it tried to bite a ball of twine that was far too big for its mouth.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Edmund cried. “That is not what I meant, and you know it.”

Benedict scoffed. “Did you consider that my sarcastic response might be attributed to how little I think of this conversation? And how quickly I wish for it to end?”

Edmund pursed his lips in frustration. Arms crossed. Glare hardened. It was a look that Benedict recognized well, for it was one that he used often. Whenever Edmund refused to listen to him or was doing something that he did not agree with, Benedict would fix him with that look before commanding him to obey.

Benedict felt a little like Edmund right now. Rather than working as he ought to, he was outside, in the stables, playing with a puppy because he could not concentrate and thought this a better option than sitting in his study and staring at his desk.

He was also shirking his responsibilities and running away from his problems rather than facing them, acting as if they did not exist because it was easier to do.

And Edmund, for reasons that he could not fathom, was doing a wonderful impression of Benedict. Perfect, right down to the self-righteous temperament, as if he was morally superior and for that reason alone his word should be heeded.

Bravo.

“So, that is it then?” Edmund asked. “She is going to leave, and you are perfectly fine with it?”

Benedict bent down and scooped Charlie onto his lap. “And as I have explained time and time again, this was always part of the plan. I do not understand why you are having such a hard time understanding it.”

“Because I do not believe you, is why! I do not believe for a second that you are glad

to see her leave.”

Benedict made sure to focus on petting Charlie because he did not want to see the pain that was surely present in his eyes. “I am,” he lied. “As I am sure she is.”

“You are impossible!”

He had found out three days ago what Selina was planning. It had hurt him to learn. Truly, it had felt like a knife plunging into his chest, only to find his heart not there because it had been ripped out days earlier.

To make matters all the worse, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that all of this was his fault.

If Benedict did not care for Selina, then he would not care that she had decided to leave. He might even welcome it. Their marriage had failed, as had its purpose, so what did it matter if she stayed or left? Best that she be gone so he could put the past two months behind him.

But he did not think that way. He tried to make it so. He forced those thoughts and beliefs into his conscience. But they fell flat and left a bitter taste in his mouth.

This might have been the plan from the beginning, but that does not change how wrong it feels. And how much I hate myself for seeing it through.

“Your Grace?” Mr. Harris suddenly appeared in the doorway.

“Harris!” Benedict said cheerfully. “What brings you here?”

“I have come to check on you, Your Grace, to make sure that?—”

“That is enough!” Benedict’s anger spiked suddenly, and he let it flare, for there was

no good reason to keep it contained. “I will say this one last time to the both of you, is that understood?!” He looked warningly at his butler and his brother. “I am perfectly fine with Selina leaving. I have made my peace with it. And I will not be badgered or cajoled or made to feel as if I am doing something wrong! Do you hear me?!”

Mr. Harris blinked. “Ah... Your Grace. I was simply going to check if you’ll be having supper in the dining room or your study.”

“Oh...” Benedict’s face dropped.

Edmund snorted. “Yes, it seems as if you truly have made peace with it, Brother.” He walked past Benedict. “Harris, I shall be having supper in the dining room.”

“Very good, My Lord.”

“Oh, and Benedict...” Edmund reached where Mr. Harris was standing and then turned back around to face his brother. “You might be wondering why I have been pestering you like this. One would think, with my history, I should be the last person who cares one way or the other about your romantic life.”

Benedict looked at him flatly. “I simply assumed you enjoy torturing me.”

“The opposite, in fact.” Edmund’s smile was soft and caring and, most of all, genuine. “When I saw you the other day, upon my arrival—when you walked out to greet me, arms held out, smiling from ear to ear, do you know what I thought to myself?”

“That you should turn around and run?”

He chuckled. “Close. I thought, who is this man and what has he done with my

brother? It was shortly after when I came to realize that your wife was the reason for it, that she had managed to do what no one has since our parents died.”

“Which is?”

“Make you happy,” Edmund said simply. “And call me idealistic, but I suppose I thought that was something worth fighting for. Silly me.” He shrugged, fixed Benedict with a final pitiful look, and then walked away, with Mr. Harris in tow.

Which left Benedict alone, the puppy still on his lap, feeling about as rotten and foolish as he ever had. For three days now, he had desperately tried to convince himself that this was the right thing and that he did not care for Selina. That he was happy his marriage was over!

And while he spoke the words, the very fact that he was out here right now, playing with a puppy that reminded him only of his wife and that day by the stream, should have been enough to tell him where his heart truly lay.

Selina was leaving him. And once she did, she would not come back. And Benedict, the coward and the fool that he was, still refused to do the only thing that might save him and his marriage—admit that he was wrong, put his heart on the line, and give love a final chance.

Was it truly too late, or would he see the error of his ways before Selina left him once and for all? If only he knew.

## Epilogue

The day had finally come, and nothing had changed. Not in the way Selina might have liked, anyhow.

“Your Grace.” Mr. Harris stood in the doorway. “Your carriage is ready and waiting.”

“Thank you, Harris.”

She could see it through her bedroom window. Her trunks were packed. The horses were saddled. The coachman was seated and waiting. There would be no more delaying the inevitable.

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She sighed as she started toward the bedroom door. The room behind her was bare, as if she had never been there, and that was how she liked it. No sense in leaving anything behind—best to scrub any sign of her presence from this manor entirely, as she was certain that was what her husband would want.

“And His Grace?” she asked in vain, feeling that she should—that it was right to do, even if there was no point.

“He is in his study, Your Grace. But he has been alerted that you are leaving today. Shall I speak with him? Perhaps he has lost track of time.”

Selina stepped into the hallway and cast her glance down its length, looking in the direction of her husband’s study. She had no doubt that Benedict was aware of her departure today and that if he wished it, he would come and see her off. Or better than that...

No. He has had a week to say something, yet he has avoided me like the plague. His decision is clear, and there will be no changing it.

“It is perfectly fine, Harris.” She smiled at the butler. “Do not waste your time disturbing him. I am sure that he is hard at work.”

Mr. Harris’ weathered face looked pained, and Selina was certain that he at least would miss her. As she would miss him.

“It has been a pleasure to serve you, Your Grace,” he said. “Truly, an honor.”

“As it has been to be served by you,” she responded with a genuine smile. “Now, shall we?”

She kept that smile as she walked down the hallway for what would be the final time.

Selina had wondered if Benedict might change his mind and try to stop her. And she had wondered what she would do and say if he did. A small part of her wished to remain spiteful, claiming that if he came for her, she would still deny him because of what he had put her through this past week. As if she might find some sort of pleasure in being the one to turn him down a final time.

As she walked down the steps and into the foyer, casting a glance back toward the hall, her heart racing because there was still a chance... No. She knew deep down that if Benedict came for her, she would accept him with open arms.

It had taken her a week to admit it fully, but it seemed that Selina was not over her husband in the way that she had wished. She loved him, and her heart broke because he did not love her back.

How had it come to this, she did not know.

Benedict sat in his study, alone. The curtains were drawn. The door was closed. A single candle was lit, shrouding him in darkness in a way that matched his mood perfectly.

A few more minutes. That is all I must wait for. A few more minutes and this will finally be over...

He knew what day it was. And he knew what was happening right now, just beyond where he sat. His wife was leaving him once and for all. Likely, he would never see her again. Out of sight, out of mind, and then he would finally be able to put her

behind him, where she belonged.

That was what he wanted. He told himself this again and again. If he did not want it, then he would have done something. He would have gone to her. He would have laid his pride down and told her how he felt. He would have apologized, begged for her forgiveness, admitted that he was wrong and asked what he needed to do to change her mind.

But he did not want such things. More than that, she did not want them. So, what was even the point in thinking about it?

He had no idea what time it was, but surely she would be gone soon? Perhaps she was already? That thought alone had his chest tightening and his stomach sinking, and he very nearly rose from his desk and left his study to confirm.

Feeling a need to distract himself, he turned to a mound of letters that sat on the desk. They had piled up quickly this week, but he had not been in the mood to read them. Really, he had not been in the mood for much of anything. Unable to concentrate. Unable to eat. He told himself it was anger that did it, fury at being treated this way. But deep down, he knew the truth...

Benedict opened the first letter, groaning as he read its contents. It was an invitation to a dinner party next week. He scoffed and dropped the letter to the floor.

Do not waste my time.

The next letter he opened was an invitation to a garden party, also next week. Again, he dropped that letter to the floor.

A waste of ink as much as it was a waste of valuable seconds of my life.

By the third letter, he was beginning to sense a theme. Another social invite, another lord he did not care for wishing to curry favor by having him at a party or a gathering. A lord who, just two months ago, would not have dared to invite him to such an event, for it had been known that Benedict did not waste time on trivial matters like parties and dinners and promenades.

His marriage to Selina had clearly changed the ton's perception of him.

He could not help but chuckle at that notion. Was that not the entire point in the first place? Was that not what he wanted? For the ton to be fooled into thinking that he and Selina were happily wed so that they would not gossip about him behind his back?

Funny that before he got married, Benedict cared so much about other people's opinions. He wanted their respect. He felt that desire to live up to his parents' legacy. But he did not care about other people, and he was happy that they more often than not chose to pretend that he did not exist. It was an easier state of being.

Now that he and Selina had parted ways, he would be able to return to that same state of being—living alone, isolated from the world, falling into ignominy...

“Huh...”

Is that really what I want?

His fight with Selina was predicated on the fact that he did not love her as she claimed she loved him. Benedict was not capable of love—he did not want such a thing—and in the face of what he knew to be true, he denied his feelings because that was all he had ever known.

Deep down, this was a result of his upbringing. Alone from the age of twelve. Thrust into a world he did not understand. Having nobody to open up to or be honest with. Caring more about people’s opinions of him than the truth.

Even the way he treated his brother was driven by his desire to see him find love and happiness, which he would never be able to. His entire life had been focused on a single goal which he now knew to not be necessary in the slightest.

He knew that he loved Selina. He had known that for a long time now. But he had denied it. Ignored it. Refused to believe it because he did not think himself worthy. But was he wrong to do so? And if he threw this away, would he spend the rest of his life regretting it?

Benedict’s leg began to bounce under the desk. Sweat began to bead on his forehead. He glanced at the closed door as he began to wonder.

Have I made a terrible mistake? Was our fight... Has this entire marriage been for nothing?

It was a strange thing to find oneself in the middle of a revelation. Like a veil was being lifted and the truth was finally being revealed.

Benedict did not want a typical marriage. He did not want the ton's esteem, the people's blessings, the acceptance of the very people he had spent most of his life avoiding. He had never wanted it, so why would he wish for such a thing with his wife? What he wanted was exactly what he and Selina had, before the fight. Before everything came crashing down.

Suddenly, the door to the study opened.

"Selina!" Benedict cried before he could stop himself, already on his feet as if to go to his wife.

"Your Grace." It was Mr. Harris. "I would like to inform you that Her Grace's carriage is leaving now."

"What? Already!" Benedict had rounded his desk before he had time to think.

"But it's moving at a slow pace, Your Grace." Mr. Harris smirked knowingly. "And I am certain that there is still plenty of time to?—"

Benedict did not catch the rest of what his butler was saying, as he was already out the door and sprinting down the hallway.

For the first time in two months, he finally understood what he wanted. Perhaps it was the first time he had in his entire life. He had grown up thinking that he needed to honor his parents' legacy, but he had not come close to doing it until the day he and Selina got married.

He knew now that the only way to honor their legacy, to pay homage to them, and to

be truly happy for the first time in his life, was to go after the one person who made that possible. The one person he cared about more than anything else. The one person, dare he say it, he loved.

Benedict just hoped it wasn't too late.

Selina did what she could to keep herself from crying. In fact, she allowed herself to smile as she waved goodbye to Edmund, the only person who had come to see her off. He smiled also, but it was sad, as if he too knew the significance of this moment and the heartache it was causing her.

The carriage moved slowly down the driveway, and Selina tore her eyes away from the window and focused ahead.

He did not come. I thought he might. I held out hope, clinging to it like a life raft, and yet...

She sniffed and wiped her nose. She refused to let the tears come. She had known this day was coming, and she had known that this was how it would end. She had tried for love. She had failed. Sadly, there was nothing more she could do.

As the carriage slowly trundled down the drive, and as she stared ahead, she thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. At first, she figured it to be Edmund, likely walking back inside. But the movement was rushed, and it seemed to be coming closer.

Still, she looked ahead. Still, she refused to allow herself any hope. It was nothing. It was her mind playing tricks on her. It was?—

“Selina!” Benedict's voice cried out. “Selina! Wait!”

“Edmund?” She turned in the carriage and looked out the window in time to see Benedict sprinting down the driveway as if his life depended on it. He waved his arms frantically, and the look on his face was unmistakable. “Benedict!”

“Selina!” he shouted as he ran. “Please! Stop the carriage! Stop the carriage!”

“Driver!” Selina leaned forward and pounded on the roof. “Stop!”

The carriage came to a grinding halt. Yet, even before the wheels stopped, Selina was throwing the door open and flying outside.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:39 am*

Benedict quickened his pace, and a smile spread across his face when he saw her exit. Selina returned his smile, her eyes twinkling as she ran to meet him halfway.

She could not believe what she was seeing. Nor could she believe what she was doing. For a week now, the two had ignored one another, basking in their antipathy, happy to pretend that the other did not exist and that their marriage had reached its end.

For a week now, Selina had tried in vain to convince herself that she did not care for Benedict and that he did not care for her. And yet the way they ran toward one another suggested otherwise.

“Selina!” Benedict reached her, holding out his hands for her to take. “I am sorry! God, how I am sorry!”

She took his hands, their warmth spreading up her arms in a way that made her feel as if she might fly. “You came for me. I can’t believe that you?—”

“The things that I said,” he cut her off. “I take them all back. I hate that I said such awful, cruel words?—”

“I know you did not mean them,” she spoke over him, the words tumbling out of her mouth faster than she could think.

“And to accuse you of anything other than what I felt myself,” he said. “For everything you said was true, and I?—”

“I know how you feel,” she cut him off again. “I have always known it. And I am sorry that I pushed you before you were ready?—”

“Do not apologize! You did nothing wrong. I am the one who?—”

“Who is here! Now!”

“I love that you challenge me,” he continued, speaking so fast that he stumbled over his words. “I love that we do not have a traditional marriage. And I love?—”

“The way we fight,” she blurted out. “The way we argue. The way I can say anything to you. The fact that I can be with you when I am with you.”

“I love your fire,” he said, still holding her hands as he looked into her eyes.

“I love your passion.”

“I love your smart mouth and ability to annoy me, no matter what I say or do.”

“I love how stubborn you are,” she countered. “Even if I hate it at the same time.”

“I love?—”

“Just say it!” she cried joyously.

“Selina!” he snapped suddenly, widening his eyes at her as if in warning. “For once, will you just let me say what I need to, without speaking over me!”

She leaned back as if from shock... only to feel a delicious shiver run down her spine as his grip on her hands tightened. “That depends, are you able to for once say what is needed? Or do I have to do it for you?”

He shook his head as if in anger, but he could not hide his smile. “Why do you frustrate me so! I am here to apologize, and still, you antagonize me.”

“I would not need to if you had the courage to say what is on your mind, rather than waiting until the very last second to?”

“At least I found the courage! You were about to leave.”

“And I still might.” She raised a challenging eyebrow at him. “If you do not speak already! For I am sick of waiting to hear it.”

He laughed. It was a deep, rumbling laughter that she could feel in her chest. She had forgotten how big he was. How dominating. How strong. She had forgotten how she felt when he became frustrated, when he was on the verge of snapping at her. She had long since given up on the notion that she might once again find herself trapped in his thrall as he tried to keep his temper in check.

Benedict raised an eyebrow back at her in warning. She smirked, and he glared at her, ensuring that she would not speak.

“Are you finished?” he growled.

“Hard to do, when you have not even begun.”

“You are—” He sucked air through his teeth. “You frustrate me.”

“I know I do.”

“You anger me.”

“It is so easy.”

“But you also excite me,” he said shortly. “You make me feel alive. When we fight, it is unlike any sensation I have ever known. But when we are not fighting, that sensation remains because this marriage, whatever the heck it is...” He laughed again. “It is real, Selina. It has always been real. I have tried to pretend otherwise. I have tried to lie to myself. I have tried... I have tried desperately to escape its hold on me, but there is no escaping it. I have?—”

“Oh, will you just say it already!” she cried.

“I love you,” he said as he met her eyes.

The anger was gone. The humor, too. He looked into her eyes in a way she recognized perfectly, for she had seen it a hundred times. It was only now that she knew its meaning.

“I love you—I always have. And I do not want you to go.”

“Is that right?” she asked with a smirk, her heart pounding so hard that she thought it might explode.

“This marriage is unhinged. It is devoid of reason. It is the strangest union to have

ever existed. But it is also perfect. So perfect that I do not care what others think because so long as I am with you..." He chuckled and shook his head. "To hell with others' opinions. Your opinion is all that matters to me."

And so it was, the words that Selina had longed to hear, finally spoken. No lies. No exaggerations. The truth, as she had always known it.

Selina thought to say the same. She thought of telling him how she felt, what she wanted from him and this marriage going forward, that she loved him as he loved her and that was all that mattered.

But at that moment, words simply would not do her justice. There was but one thing that might.

Selina smiled knowingly at him. And then, she leaned in, her lips puckered, and kissed him full on the mouth.

And Benedict returned it in kind. His hands cupped her face. His body pressed against hers. Their lips parted, their tongues danced, and sparks seemed to fly between them. It was not their first kiss. It certainly would not be their last. But it was in a way their most important kiss.

It spoke of the past, and where they had come from.

It spoke of the present, and how they felt.

Most of all, it spoke of the future. A kiss that told of a marriage that was only just beginning, that would grow like a flower under the sun, that was strong and right and all things good, that existed because of the love they had for one another.

It was a kiss that confirmed what they had both known but had been too scared to say until right now—Selina and Benedict were in love. They always had been. They

always would be.

Eternal happiness was theirs for the taking.

The End?